



China–Bangladesh Geopolitical Relations: A Study of Some Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Issues in the Context of the Bay of Bengal

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Abstract

Geopolitically, the Bay of Bengal is very important because it is connected with Andaman Sea and Malacca Straits. Moreover, the Bay of Bengal has direct links with South Asia and South East Asia including the Indian Ocean. Particularly, both China and India are very interested in the Bay of Bengal for mineral resources. Through the Bay of Bengal, China wants a direct connectivity between China and Indian Ocean through either South East Bangladesh or Rakhine state of Myanmar. This study has dealt with the importance of the Bay of Bengal in the light of China's geopolitical desire, trade and investment, oil and gas, and regional connectivity. Many geopolitical issues of China and Bangladesh have been discussed in this study. The main objective of this study is to focus on strengthening the relationship between China and Bangladesh, so that these two neighboring countries can be beneficiaries through trade and investment, regional connectivity, expanding the exports and imports. And these two friendly countries can be also beneficiaries through constructing the deep seaports along the Eastern Coastal Zone of Bangladesh, particularly Southeast Cox's Bazar. The findings of this study are that, the relationship Between China and Bangladesh in the light of the geopolitics and geo-economic issues is, of course, pivotal for both countries for trade and investment, and for economic cooperation and development. Methodologically it is a qualitative study, which is based on both primary and secondary data.

Keywords: China, Bangladesh, Geopolitical Relations, Bay of Bengal

Introduction

In relation to the study of geopolitical relations between China and Bangladesh, it is necessary to discuss subfields of geopolitics such as geo-strategy and geo-economics. Usually, political geographers have described the term “geo-economics” in three ways: first, the natural resources contained in a particular area should be controlled and exploited by the political authority. Secondly, it is closely related to the economic necessities of the global economy, and thirdly, it discusses about the movements of trade and investment, and finance and capital at global level; and it considers the political aspects of such movements (Leonard, 2015). This definition is quite related to the study of Sino–Bangladesh geopolitical relations. China–Bangladesh relations are connected with trade and investment and regional connectivity along with the plan of the construction of deep seaports for commercial purposes.

Many scholars developed the theory and practice of geopolitics as a struggle for power (Leonard, 2015). However, the geopolitical relations between China and Bangladesh are not intertwined with the war, tensions and competitions; rather the relationship is on the basis of mutual cooperation in both strategic and economic aspects. However, regarding the geopolitical importance of the Bay of Bengal and China–Bangladesh relations, it may be explained that geostrategic position has both positive and negative implications on the relationship between the



two countries (Buzan, 2009; Islam, 2018). Bangladesh's geopolitical relations with Myanmar are not so good because of the Myanmar's military-backed rule, and persecution of the Rohingya ethnic people, where China can be of enormous help to Bangladesh in dealing with the Rohingya crisis.

Sometimes, Bangladesh's security is threatened by India such as Indian security forces are killing hundreds of Bangladesh's innocent people along Bangladesh-India borders where China can act as buffer state; and even in any future conflicts between India and Bangladesh, China may come forward to provide its helping hand to Bangladesh. In South Asian countries, India has been showing her muscle power against its small neighbors in which China, being a close neighbor of South Asia, having strategic and economic interests in both Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, may come ahead to strengthen her relations with South Asian countries including Bangladesh.

Methodology of the Study

This study is descriptive in methodology. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Authors of this study have visited some important ports of Bangladesh adjacent to the Bay of Bengal to collect primary data on the significance of the Bay of Bengal in relation to the geopolitical and geo-economic importance. One of the authors of this research visited some Bay of Bengal countries: India, Thailand and Myanmar, to exchange views, and to collect primary data. During his visit, the researcher collected the required primary data, exchanged views with the different people, and conducted some focus group discussions. Moreover, apart from the primary data, secondary data such as books, journals, research monographs, daily newspapers, video channels, and maps of the Bay of Bengal, China and Bangladesh have been used to carry out this study.

The Bay of Bengal in the Context of China-Bangladesh Relations

Geopolitically, geo-strategically and geo-economically, the Bay of Bengal is very significant, it has direct access to Indian Ocean which is currently a hotspot of regional competition in the light of natural resources, navigation, oil, gas and Maritime Silk Road. It is also very rich in hydrocarbons and mineral resources. Regional and Global powers are competing one another in the Bay of Bengal to ensure their presence in the region (Scott, 2006; Islam, 2018). The Bay of Bengal is located in the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean, surrounded on the west and northwest by India, on the north by Bangladesh, and on the east by Myanmar and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India. Its southern boundary is a line between Sangaman Kanda, Sri Lanka and the north westernmost point of Sumatra (Indonesia). It is the major water region called a bay in the world. There are some countries of South Asia and South East Asia which are dependent on the Bay of Bengal. The size of the Bay of Bengal is 2,172,000 square kilometers (839,000 sq mi). Some big rivers flow into the Bay of Bengal: the Ganges, Hooghly, Meghna, the Padma, Jamuna, the Brahmaputra, Surma, the Barak, the Irrawaddy, the Mahanadi, the Godavari, the Baitarani, the Brahmani, the Krishna and the Kaveri (Scott, 2006; Islam, 2018).

Among the important ports are Chittagong, Mongla, Chennai, Ennore, Colombo, Kolkata, Haldia, Paradip, Thoothukudi, Port Blair, Dhamra and Visakhapatnam. Among the smaller ports are Payra, Gopalpur Port and Kakinada.

Many scholars think that the Bay of Bengal is an important geostrategic and geo-economic part of Bangladesh, India, China, Myanmar and Thailand. That is why; these countries are trying to ensure their geo-strategic and economic influence in the region. India has a long coastal zone along the Bay of Bengal. But,



China does not share any maritime border with the Bay (Scott, 2006; Islam, 2018). Therefore, China desires to connect herself with the Bay of Bengal either through Bangladesh or Myanmar.

China-Bangladesh Geostrategic and Geo-economic Relations

BIMSTEC, (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) emphasizes on the importance of free trade globally around the Bay of Bengal countries like Bangladesh, Thailand, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. The Sethusamudram Shipping Project, which would link India from east to west that does not require going to Sri Lanka. Geographically and geo-strategically, the origin of Bay of Bengal is Bangladesh, and this Bay has become an intersection of geo-strategic interest of China, India, the US, Japan; and even Australia is keenly interested in the Bay. Because, Australia is an Indian Ocean country; and it has an access to the Indian Ocean (Noor, 2019).

Moreover, in the context of China-Bangladesh geopolitical relations, it should be mentioned here that China wants to be connected with the Bay of Bengal by constructing deep seaports in Sonadia, Cox's Bazar, South East of Bangladesh, for business, geo-strategic and geo-economic purposes. Besides, Bay of Bengal is so important for China for various reasons particularly for expansion of her trade through BRI, BCIM and MSR. The main aim of this study is to emphasize on the significance of the Sino-Bangladesh relations in the context of the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh is a developing country which needs huge investments; where China can be a potential source of investments in Bangladesh through trade and investment, connectivity and through building some deep seaports in Cox's Bazar. China is also keenly interested in the countries of the Bay of Bengal for her exports and imports purposes. Therefore, carrying out a research on Sino-Bangladesh relations is immensely important for both South Asian and South East Asian countries. This study has been carried out based on both primary and secondary data.

China-Bangladesh Relations and India's Border Security Policy

India's foreign policy is anti-Muslims, and most of the times, India has tried to undermine Bangladesh's geo-strategic and economic interests through its aggressive foreign policy. Many Bangladesh's people have been killed along the border by the Indian security forces. Very recently India has tried to push in many Indian Muslim nationals to Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh's electronic and print media, their country was intentionally made target because, in the incident of an all-India National Register of Citizens (NRC), India would not expel anybody to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal or any other country. Though Prime Minister, Narendra Modi had guaranteed the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina that NRC of Assam would not deteriorate the relationship between India and Bangladesh, but his statement cannot be believed that the current extremist Hindu BJP government is seriously anti-Muslims (Katoch, 2020). In this case, if any military conflicts arise between India and Bangladesh along the Bangladesh-India border, China can play a strong role in protesting India's aggressive attitude towards Bangladesh. Bangladesh has long border with India, where many citizens of Bangladesh have been killed unlawfully by the Indian security forces. And even there is a probability of big fight in future between the two bordering nations. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to strengthen strategic and military ties with China to maintain a strategic balance between Bangladesh and India. Pakistan's military ties with China are a result of the India's geopolitical dominance in South Asia including Bangladesh. Now, Pakistan is being considered by India as a potential country in terms of geo-strategic and military position in South Asia. But, India does not care about



Bangladesh's security, foreign policy and its people on ground of weak strategic and military position. That is why, China is so important for Bangladesh's security, and sovereign foreign policy. Many development projects and foreign direct investments in Bangladesh have been barred by India, on account of security issues in the region. Many observers think that in this circumstance, China may come ahead to invest in and can provide strategic supports to Bangladesh in case of any future conflicts between Bangladesh and China.

China's Naval Presence in the Bay of Bengal

The security relations between Bangladesh and China are good, and China has long been supplying military equipment, and training to the Bangladesh's armed forces; and Dhaka has a plan to acquire two Chinese submarines, which have caused huge heartburn for the Indian armed forces. Apart from this, Bangladesh announced that it would purchase two Russian made submarines as part of a bigger defense agreement with Russian Federation. Moscow is firmly committed to return to South Asia as an important strategic player; and she is also targeting Bangladesh as a key strategic partner (Brewster, 2014). Defense relations of Bangladesh with China is comparatively safe than that of India, because China does not have direct border with Bangladesh. Bangladesh's direct borders with India have resulted into a huge death of Bangladesh's citizens by the Indian border security forces. Thus, Bangladesh needs strong military cooperation with China to counter India's aggression along the border areas.

Geostrategic Interests of China in the Bay of Bengal in the Context of US and India

The presence of the USA in the Bay of Bengal, and South Asia is posing a geo-strategic threat to China, and China is well-informed about the British influence in region as well. When British were ruling the South Asia, they were involved in opium trade, and the British East India Company supplied opium from Bengal to China, where the British government collected a huge amount of revenues. However, that opium trade caused a tremendous health problem and social unrest in China (Aoyama, 2016; Islam, 2018). There were held two wars between the British and China for opium trade in the region. However, many Bangladesh's scholars think that Bangladesh has geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic interests in the region, and the country wants to counter the Indian hegemony. In that case, Bangladesh strongly wants to develop a cordial relationship with China (Das, 2009; Islam, 2018). India has always put barriers to the independent foreign policy of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, now the country really desires to come out of the Indian influence in the context of foreign policy issues (Barbhuiya, 2009; Islam, 2018).

Many observers think that Bangladesh has been under tremendous pressure due to Indo-US strategic partnership in the region. During the Khaleda Zia's regime between 2001 and 2006, the government was closely engaged with China in the case of many strategic and diplomatic issues. For that reason, the Indo-US alliance criticized the then government of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Begum, 2015; Islam, 2018).

In the elections held in 2008, the Indo-US alliance played a role in changing the then military-backed government of Bangladesh by providing with the necessary supports. Nonetheless, the Indian government was worried that the Chinese government would influence Bangladesh to change foreign policy, and China might suggest Bangladesh to come out of the Indian influence (Uddin & Bhuiyan, 2011; Islam, 2018). It is important to mention that China is very much interested in the Bay of Bengal, for safe navigation, exports and imports, and for strategic and military presence in this region, to make a balance with Indo-US strategic alliance in the region.

Geo-economic Interests of China in the Bay of Bengal

The below map shows that South China is very close to South East Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar, where China has taken a plan to build a deep seaport in Sonadia. Even, the port of Cox's Bazar would be more nearer for China than the port which has been built in the Rakhine state. Thus, geo-strategically and geo-economically the construction of deep seaports in Cox's Bazar is so crucial for China.



Figure 1 Bangladesh, Myanmar and China Map with the Bay of Bengal

Source: Reid (2020)

However, it has been observed by many strategic scholars that the Bay of Bengal is now becoming a geopolitical and geo-strategic hub, which has direct connectivity with the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean including the Arab sea, and hormuz canal. India's talk on trans-national corridors has been ineffective. India's plan of rail and road connectivity between the mainland India and North East India, including the South East Asia, Bangladesh and China has not yet been come into effect (Rahman, 2015). A friendly cooperation is strongly required for ensuring a stable order in the Bay of Bengal. It is very important to maintain a cordial relationship among the Bay countries to ensure security, building infrastructures for economic development, exploration of marine resources including oil and gas (Rahman, 2015). Moreover, the BIMSTEC is also very crucial in relation to the economic development, regional cooperation and connectivity amid South Asia and South East Asia.



Figure 2 BCIM Corridor and China's Economic Cooperation with Bangladesh

Source: Belt & Road News (2019)



The map shows that the regional connectivity is through the BCIM economic corridor and that Chittagong is very close to China geographically. Cox's Bazar is closer to China geographically as well. Thus, establishment of a port in Cox's Bazar is very crucial for both Bangladesh, and China considers the geo-strategic and economic possibilities. This kind of deep sea port, will be certainly effective in achieving rapid economic growth for Bangladesh, and the plan is also important for the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, the plan of building a deep sea port in Cox's Bazar deserves distinctive regional and global attention. The above-mentioned ongoing initiatives and activities clearly show that the construction of proposed deep seaport in Cox's Bazar, in terms of security and strategic issues, will not have negative effect on India, Bay of Bengal, and South Asia. Rather the construction of deep sea port will create huge economic probabilities for the entire region including Bangladesh (Islam, 2017).

The below map shows that the geo-strategic location of Cox's Bazar is very attractive to China that the district is very close to South China, which, China can use for business, and oil imports purposes. North East Indian region and Tibet of China can also be connected with the Bay of Bengal through building a deep sea port in Cox's Bazar. Even Myanmar and Thailand will be able to use the projected deep seaport of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, for connectivity, and exports and imports purposes. Many countries of the world are highly interested in building deep seaports in Cox's Bazar such as China, USA, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, UAE and Thailand. Even India is herself interested in constructing the deep seaport in Cox's Bazar to connect its North East India with the Bay of Bengal.



Figure 3 The Map Shows the Location of Sonadia Deep Seaport in Cox's Bazar

Source: Islam (2017)

Conclusion

In this situation, Bangladesh and China should come forward to cooperate in constructing deep seaport in Cox's Bazar along with the infrastructural development, and construction of roads and highways. If the deep seaports are built in Cox's Bazar, it will, of course, be a milestone for Bangladesh's economic progress; the country will be able to collect a huge amount of revenues. Besides, a large number of Bangladesh's citizen could be employed in the deep seaports and Asian highway projects. On the other hand, China's exports and imports can be done very easily through the deep seaports, where their time and billions of dollars of foreign currencies



could be saved. Therefore, China–Bangladesh geostrategic and economic relations are very important for both China and Bangladesh. India, being a poor nation with very weak infrastructure, and low foreign currency reserves will not be able to establish deep seaport in Sonadia. Rather, India is creating barriers to the Bangladesh’s development and to the foreign investment. The government of Bangladesh and her people should realize India’s very poor economic capacity compared to China. Here, it should be mentioned that Bangladesh government should try to come out of the Indian influence like Pakistan, Srilanka, Nepal and other small countries, for the greater political and economic interests of Bangladesh. Bangladesh can move forward with her own foreign policy, where China can be considered as a friendly country in terms of geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

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