PROBLEMS OF SAARC PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY

RESEARCH

Introduction: It is the aim or debate to bring to light some of the argumentative issues of SAARC physical connectivity. It is not however our meaning to oppose the national policies of our government or the governments of SAARC countries but to criticize constructively some of the obstructing factors contained in the policy decisions and action programs of SAARC country governments which inhibit the fair capitalization of SAARC physical connectivity opportunities.

We know that the SAARC country area possess tremendous potentiality to integrate commercially and politically to further the cause of globalization of trade for this region as well as for adjoining countries creating jobs and trading opportunities for the billion hardworking young population and to turn the area into an economic powerhouse.

It is not however possible to attend to all the difficulties or contentious issues of the SAARC region. Our issue today is SAARC physical connectivity problems that deter the opportunities. Broadly we may categorize the physical connectivity issues as below.

01. Inter-regional road transportation problems.
02. Inter-regional railway transportation problems.
03. Inter-regional inland river transportation problems.
04. Inter-regional pipeline for fuel and power.

In addition to the development of inter-regional trade the SAARC countries have obligation to co-operate with one another in fostering global trade and bring about overall economic development for the entire region.

We wish to discuss in this conference the opportunities that exist and the inhibiting factors that are making the physical connectivity a dream instead of a reality.

Transportation System: An efficient transportation system is essential to facilitate economic growth in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. These countries’ economy needs to grow at a sustained rate of 8 percent or more per year to achieve the goal of becoming MDC’s from LDC’s. Half of the population in these regions lives with income under US$ 800.00 per year. This needs to grow to at least US$ 1050 per year. Also it is needless to say that, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri-Lanka also need to avail the opportunity of this growth potential.

Due to limitation in time and opportunity we may concentrate more on the additional transportation infrastructure opportunities in the region adjoining India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan through Asian Highway (AH) and Trans Asian Railway (TAR) to the rest of the world.
INTER-REGIONAL ROAD TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS.

In addition to individual state owned roads, bridges and highways network to develop regional trade opportunity there also exists opportunities to make use of the Asian Highway to foster global trade as well as maintaining the interregional trade more successfully.
AH1 is the longest route of the Asian Highway Network, running 12,845 miles from Tokyo, Japan via Korea, China, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran to the border between Turkey and Bulgaria west of Istanbul where it joins end-on with European route E80.

This route is of utmost significance to Bangladesh since it could provide a much need road connection with Burma. Instead the road entered Bangladesh from India and exits in India and then enters Burma thus depriving Bangladesh a much needed direct link with Burma.
Again in AH-2 we see that Bangladesh’s direct link opportunity with Burma is denied. It is an implied law that we cannot do cross border trade with any country without first paying stamp duty and customs duty to India, and after obtaining their approval for doing trade with countries that lie in the westward direction. This is a gross violation of an individual country’s right to cross border trade. In other words the restricted trade of Bangladesh with Nepal and Bhutan is repeated here for all other countries where opportunity existed. In essence the AH-1 and AH-2 road connectivity for regional trade lies at India’s kindness. And so is the case for Bhutan and Nepal. Calcutta harbor is being promoted at the expense of Chittagong port.

INTER REGION RAILWAY TRANSPORTATION PROBLEM.

The southern corridor is of paramount importance to Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Again here we see that TAR enter Bangladesh from India and again exit to India, giving Bangladesh dismal opportunity to make use of Chittagong port and trading opportunity with its eastern neighboring countries. It has primarily a linkage between India’s eastern states with Calcutta harbor. A strategic military move which will benefit only India.
**The Northern Corridor**: China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula.

**The Southern Corridor** will go from Europe to Southeast Asia, connecting Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand, with links to China’s Yunnan Province.

**A Southeast Asian network**, this primarily consists of the Kunming-Singapore railway.

**The North-South Corridor** linking Northern Europe to the Persian Gulf through the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

In essence Bangladesh’s railway inter-connectivity with neighboring countries lies at Indiankindness. And so is the case for Bhutan and Nepal. Regional supremacy ambition is the inhibiting factor.

The question remains why, would a country like India which had whole heartedly supported Bangladesh during its liberation war would play such a damaging role in the regional integration process. India as the most powerful nation in the area would like to maintain its supremacy and guardian role in the region. Their principal fear is that a regional integration like SAARC and free connectivity may cause some of its constituent states may gain extra benefit and forge new alliance with other countries. Unfounded though, India as the strongest nation in the region, enjoys greater hold and diplomatic supremacy over the United Nations and its offshoot organizations such as ESCAP. Countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka are not in equal footing with India to negotiate deals which may equally benefit all member countries.

The inclusion of China and Burma that has already expressed their willingness to join the SAARC regional integration may ease this situation. But in order to gain footing in the SAARC region,
cross border physical connectivity is essential. This can only be achieved through Bangladesh-Burma-China physical connectivity. This has now become absolutely essential.

INTER REGIONAL INLAND RIVER TRANSPORTATION PROBLEM

The current situation of inland river transportation system is even more dismal.

Bangladesh is a naturally endowed inland water transportation hub. The above map shows all the major rivers and their tributaries concentrated over the Landmass of Bangladesh. The principal rivers are Ganges, Brahmaputra and Tista. The red circles show the location of the major barrages. These rivers used to be navigable throughout the year for commodity

transportation by large vessels from India, Nepal and Bhutan. In addition, the river tributaries and canals used to be navigable for smaller vessels round the year. **Therefore transportation cost for commodities from India, Nepal and Bhutan could be one of the lowest in the region and being a deltaic state Bangladesh had the potentiality to become a river transport hub for the entire region.** However this natural endowment of Bangladesh which existed for centuries was curtailed by India by building barrages just in the entry route of these rivers into Bangladesh. These dams have completely destroyed the natural environment of round the year in-land navigability of the rivers in Bangladesh and the adjoining country. The below map will show more clearly the tremendous inland waterway navigable opportunities of the SAARC region.

![Map of South Asia showing river transport]

The **Tipaimukh Barrage** is shown below which controls the flow of the river Brahmaputra inhibiting navigation. The vibrant River Surma inside Bangladesh territory does not exist anymore.
The below map will show the location of the **Teesta Barrage** which has destroyed the inland water transportation opportunity between Nepal and Bhutan along with India itself.
The map also shows the water diversion canals inside Indian Territory.

The location of Farakka Barrage just before its entry into Bangladesh is shown below.

The stranglehold is complete on the waterway and only the tightening of the noose would vary as and when Bangladesh may attempt to seek regional physical connectivity beyond or for any other matter that may displease the Indian guardians. This is not a realistic policy.

Despite all these facts India would like to use Bangladeshi land for free transit between its East and West regions by using Bangladesh’s inland transport networks while denying the same for regional transport with Nepal and Bhutan.

Despite all the control mechanisms adopted by the Indian government, Bangladesh still hopes that the old friendship that existed in the liberation period would be revitalized and continues to expand all out co-operation. Bangladesh government needs a similar gesture from the Indian government.
China’s trans-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines

Pipeline’s will bring 12 million tonnes of crude oil and 12 billion cubic metres of gas a year into China
A gesture of friendship and fraternity from the Bangladeshi policymakers is laudable when the Trans Bangladesh gas pipeline from Myanmar to India was agreed upon and also when Bangladesh policy makers extended trans Bangladesh Road and Railway communication between Indian East and West.
CRY OF THE HOUR: FREE THE RIVER BARRIERS

The state of SAARC physical connectivity is dismal unless the stranglehold is removed and India as the stronger nation in the region may decide to change the situation. It is highly unlikely unless Bangladesh policymakers raise their voice beyond bilateral arena and seek available internationally acceptable dispute settlement approach such as the third party arbitration, conciliation or through the International court of justice.

It will be good for Bangladesh policy makers if they may advocate the inclusion of Burma and China as full members in SAARC.