

# ASEAN-Bangladesh Relation in Changing Geopolitical Setting

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Bangladesh has long-standing relations with all South-East Asian countries which date back to ancient times when Buddhist culture and traditions were spreading to the South-East Asia from ancient Bengal that had vibrant economic, cultural and political ties with kingdoms in South-East Asia. However, such vibrant relations between the two sides gradually diminished after decolonisation. Bangladesh, along with the rest Indian sub-continent was severed from the trade centres and supply chains of South-East Asia. On the other hand, South-East Asia experienced its own regionalisation through the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Today, the ASEAN has grown into a multilateral trade, security and political platform of the South-East Asian countries. Bangladesh has nascent relations with the ASEAN. The country became a partner of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2006. However, the relation with the ASEAN suffers from limited trade, scant regional connectivity, and inadequate investment through both sides have a lot of opportunities to develop an extensive trade and economic partnership on a win-win basis. Besides, in many ways, both Bangladesh and the ASEAN are facing a new geo-political reality in their

respective region. The great power rivalry in the integrated region of 'Indo-Pacific' is altering the strategic status quo when regional and global powers are vying for influence in the region. Similar to Bangladesh, the ASEAN is also in the cross-roads of such geo-political conundrum. The ASEAN and Bangladesh have extensive economic relations with competing sides. Therefore, Bangladesh and ASEAN nations have much to lose if the rising geo-political tensions threaten the fragile peace in the Indo-pacific.

## **Bangladesh-ASEAN Connectivity and Trade Relations**

Being an adjacent region of ASEAN, geographically Bangladesh sits on the border of South Asia and South-East Asia, and the country has limited connectivity with the ASEAN nations. Although Bangladesh and ASEAN member states are part of the 'Asian Highway network' which aims to connect the entire Asia through roads and transportation infrastructures-, the connectivity framework could not be materialised into reality due to complex geo-political factors. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor is also a major connectivity framework which was conceptualised to enhance connectivity between South Asia and

South-East Asia. However, the BCIM corridor fell into emerging geo-strategic competition between Beijing and New Delhi. The lack of trust between the two competing sides failed to realise the trade corridor. As of now, no connectivity initiative between Bangladesh and South East-Asia has taken off due to complex geo-political dynamics.

The lack of connectivity has also affected the trade relations between Bangladesh and ASEAN nations. Today, Bangladesh's trade with the ASEAN stands at a mere \$USD 6.4 billion, of which, export from Bangladesh to ASEAN countries amounts to \$USD 476 million. Bangladesh's trade with the ASEAN is minuscule compared to Chinese and Indian annual trade with the ASEAN. In 2019, the amount of trade stood at \$USD 644 billion and \$USD 142 billion, respectively. The massive trade of India and China is bolstered by the ASEAN—China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and ASEAN—India Free Trade Area (AIFTA). These treaties have given China and India advantages in trading with the ASEAN by eliminating or minimising tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Though the country is a large market of 160 million people, Bangladesh has not been able to pursue such trade treaties with ASEAN yet. The economy of the country is growing at a rate of 7-8% per year. South-East Asia, which is a large market for Bangladeshi labour, could also be a large trade market for Bangladeshi exports and vice versa. However, the relation of Bangladesh with ASEAN suffers heavily from limited diplomatic and political initiatives. The lack of focus on developing meaningful and strong diplomatic relations with ASEAN can be detrimental to Bangladesh's economic prospects.

### **Maritime Security and Strategic Co-operation**

Maritime security is one of the emerging issues for both Bangladesh and ASEAN nations. The geo-strategic competition between China and the United States in

the Pacific Ocean is shaking up the geo-strategic status quo of the entire maritime security paradigm of the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh and ASEAN nations are participants of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing is the largest trade partner of both Dhaka and the South-East Asian trade bloc. Chinese investments and infrastructure projects are increasing in Bangladesh and as well as in South-East Asia. However, Bangladesh and ASEAN sides maintain important security partnership with 'Quad' nations. But both Bangladesh and ASEAN prioritise 'economic development' and 'regional co-operation' over 'regional competition'. In this context, Bangladesh has mutual interests with ASEAN nations as two sides are caught between the growing geo-political competitions. Dhaka has a common cause with ASEAN to develop 'inclusive and value-based' regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Rohingya Crisis- is it a Challenge for Bangladesh-ASEAN Relation?**

Rohingya crisis has become a critical humanitarian issue in the Bay of Bengal region. Almost a million Rohingya have fled from Myanmar's Rakhine state to Bangladesh due to the systematic genocide against Rohingyas at the hand of Myanmar military. Most of the Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh, but many of them have fled to ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The Rohingya refugees have put a lot of pressure on resources and economy of Bangladesh, although the conflict has a security dimension as well. The oppressed Rohingyas are under threat of being radicalised by foreign and international terrorist groups to expand their base and proxy operations inside South-East Asia which could jeopardise the security of Bangladesh and ASEAN member states alike. Thus, the peaceful resolution to the 'Rohingya crisis' is essential for the wider region.

The ASEAN nominally agrees with Bangladesh on the repatriation of the

Rohingya refugees. However, it has failed so far to take a leading position in resolving the Rohingya problem. Though ASEAN put forward a joint statement on the Rohingya crisis during the 34<sup>th</sup> annual summit, it was vague and inadvertent in nature. The joint statement basically reiterated the points of past ASEAN statement with no clear framework for resolving the crisis. It even failed to mention the term 'Rohingya' to characterise the stateless Muslims of Rakhine state. The organisation has also shown a lack of interest in engaging into the Refugee repatriation process directly as it called on Bangladesh and Myanmar to work towards a timeline for refugee repatriation without committing any involvement in the process. ASEAN's 'consensus-based modus operandi' has prevented a unified response to the Rohingya crisis. However, ASEAN is still best positioned to pressure Myanmar into initiating a repatriation process. Other major regional powers have either sided with Myanmar or have maintained silence on the matter due to their economic and strategic partnership with Naypyidaw. Bangladesh has to take swift and careful diplomatic actions to pursue its agenda vis-a-vis Rohingya issue with the ASEAN.

Bangladesh and the ASEAN have a common interest in maintaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region in light of new geo-strategic dynamics. Bangladesh has taken a pro-active stance of 'Look East' policy to enhance co-operation with South-East Asia and East Asia. However, Bangladesh has not been able to take full advantage of its relations with ASEAN. Bangladesh has seen limited success with the regional integration initiatives in South Asia due to myriad political and economic issues. The ASEAN presents Bangladesh an opportunity to integrate itself with the global value chain and emerging markets. Bangladesh should take pro-active measures to build up strong economic and security ties with the ASEAN. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) can provide Bangladesh with the opportunity to enhance co-operation with nearest ASEAN member states like Myanmar and Thailand. A BIMSTEC free trade agreement could be the first step for Bangladesh to fully integrate with South-East Asian value chain in future.

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