

# **SUB REGIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN SAARC COUNTRIES FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Introduction**

Cooperative association between the states is a 19th century phenomenon. It is usually an effort of few geographically contiguous states, having interdependent potentials for security, mutual development and prosperity. In the international language it is commonly known as Regionalism or Sub Regionalism. UN, NATO, Warsaw Pact, African Union are the examples of international association of security needs whereas, European Union (EU), Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN), Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS) etc. are the center of economic excellence. In South Asia (SA), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the youngest association which was dreamt for the well being of the people of this region, but yet we haven't seen any considerable progress. Reasons of failure are nothing but the lack of ideological parity among its member states which is a core need for regionalism. Usually the term 'Region' and 'Sub Region' refers to the continental and sub-continental context. In this study, SA as a whole will be termed as "Region" and any other smaller groupings will be termed as "Sub Region".

If we look at Asia, no much of regionalism was seen in SA in contrast to the East and Southeast Asia and it was obviously for historical perspective. Most of the Asian states that attained their independence from colonial rule between 1947-50, and they were deeply committed to matters of self sovereignty and territorial integrity instead of peace, development and developing bilateral relations. However, despite all these limitations, SAARC was launched in 1985 with India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan (included later). An Assessment of three long decades of its existence is viewed not to be quite discouraging, whereas one cannot be highly optimistic also, if it is compared with ASEAN and other regional associations in proximity. In spite of the existence of SAARC, India and Pakistan, the two of its large members, collided in limited wars in the recent past. Presently, they are also the possessors of nuclear weapons and often experience acrimony in bilateral relations. This resulted into further suspicion, economic deprivation and ultimately increased

sufferings of the people. In the economic front, having a market of 1.7 billion in the region, SAARC practices the least possible intra regional trade which is less than 5% of the total trade of member states.

Given this scenario in SA and in particular to SAARC, an alternative to promote collective development and peace is a reality. Though SAARC as a complete entity, failed to meet the demand of prosperity until now, but constitutionally it is possible to venture for an alternative thought like “Sub Regionalism” for desired development involving limited countries having ideological parity and the concept exist in the SAARC Charter but never explored. There can be many models of Sub Regionalism within SAARC, but in reality, those exercises cannot include India and Pakistan in the same grouping considering their track record. One of the potential and much-talked-about models of Sub Regionalism in SA includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) from the perspective of geo-politics, geo-economy and the geographical contiguity. The idea was floated in 1996 from Bangladesh, but for many reasons it was not explored too. Presently, the concept is revitalized and remarkable changes are also seen in the foreign policy of India towards BBIN and multilateral agencies are also patronizing the concept.

SA is a significant region of the world order from historical, geopolitical and economic perspective. The proposed Sub Region of SA i.e. BBIN, is presently economically booming with stable GDP growth. All these four countries are important stake holders in the world trade. Besides, abundance of natural resources makes BBIN a potential region for rapid development. In light of the current political environment of SAARC, smaller states of the association are the sufferers in the long run. So, what should be their next step? Is it just waiting and see the future of SAARC? Or should they strive for acceptable alternatives? Therefore, it is very significant to test the BBIN Sub Regional platform as a development association with respect to its all the potentials. To find an acceptable answer, this paper firstly would analyze conceptual viability of BBIN to form a Sub Region. Having found the degree of viability, the paper would focus on the opportunities and vulnerabilities of the Sub Region and would suggest a framework for sustainable peace and economic development of the Sub region. The discussion of the paper is based on a research hypothesis i.e. “Only a tangible and trustworthy relationship between BBIN can sustain sub regionalism in SA to promote peace and development”.

## **Qualification of BBIN Sub Region from Conceptual Perspective**

**Theoretical Significance.** Regionness is conceptually analyzed based on some commonly accepted theories. This paper adopted a contemporary theory known as 'New Regionalism Theory' given by two Swedish social scientists Bjorn Hattne and Fredric Soderbuam. Their theories are based on social science and political economy. According to them, social constructivism is the first building block of conceptualizing regionness. Primarily, regionalism is a political intent and regionalization is the process of materializing the intent. Regionness demands; limited number of states linked on geographical relationship, with some degree of interdependence between the states. The theory does not demand the complete entity of any state, a part of the state may form part of any region. People living in the community control a set of resources and united through certain set of cultural and historical links. Often market behavior influences the degree of regionness. Non state actors contribute a lot in making transnational regional economy and civil society.

**Asian Profile of Regionness.** In context of the above mentioned principles, Asia experienced emergence of 10 very significant transnational regional entities. Concurrently, more 25 functional Sub Regional platforms have also emerged and these are mostly growth centric. Interestingly, some of the entities are seen to be the combination of two or more factions of different Sub Regional bodies and these are based on development opportunities. Despite having enormous opportunities in SA, SAARC is virtually stalled. Countries in the SA, have joined in isolation or in small groups with China and some ASEAN countries to form different development platforms, but potentials of SAARC still remained unutilized. That is why, a smaller Sub Regional entity named BBINSC within SAARC is also a valid subject of discussion in SA which needs a deliberate research before taking shape.

**Historical and Demographic Platform.** Geographically, BBIN Sub Region is located very advantageously with respect to geopolitics and geo-economics due to the very proximity of China, Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean. Historically, Bangladesh and India shares the common history till 1947 as united Indian Subcontinent. The history of 200 years was the history of fighting against the East Indian Company and the British in particular. There are historical evidences of a peaceful and rich Bengal where people were happy with wealth and trade. The area was very attractive for trade on very precious products. It is still recalled

that 20% of the intra state trade of the undivided British-India used to generate from West Bengal, Assam and East Bengal. Nepal and Bhutan was never ruled by any other nation. The East India Company and later the British Army had several attempts to conquer this country, but was unsuccessful. Never the less, both the nations demonstrated a sense of peaceful co-existence in the sub continent with a treaty of amity with the British. There also exists a good demographic similarity between the states in the Sub Region in terms of population growth rate, average working age, mortality state and level of poverty. Therefore, from the historical and demographic perspective, BBIN displays enormous positivity for regionness.

**Economic Platform.** Economically the sub Region had vibrancy since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when undivided India was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy in the world after China. According to United Nations, among BBIN, India is a developing country and rest are Least Developed Countries who are striving well to attain the Millennium Development Goal of UN. All the countries are agriculturally more or less sound, but all in the Sub Region are affected by poverty and unemployment, which raises a natural economic and social demand for improvement through interactive development. BBIN possess abundance of natural resources like oil, coal, gas, stones, diamond, timber, water and the unlimited resources of the Indian Ocean. The Sub Region has a significant potential of hydro electricity amounting approximately 140000 Mega Watt. Three common major rivers like Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna are the backbones of BBIN.

**Viability of Regionness.** Therefore in light of the above, BBIN holds a strong possibility for Sub Regionalism. Geographically, BBIN is an ideal example for any kind of collective cooperation. Countries in this Sub Region are naturally connected by land and rivers. Language and cultures are deep rooted in the hearts and minds of people. Demographically, people of BBIN are similar from the perspective of quality of life, needs, education and level of poverty. There exist a strong potential of interactive development among these four states. Historical linkage of all the four countries further reassures success of any future collective platform for the good of mankind. Therefore, theoretically the region fulfills all prerequisites to form a Sub Regional entity for peace and economic development.

## **Opportunities of BBIN Sub Region with Respect to Peace and Economic Development**

Peace and development are complementary and reciprocal to each other. Peace alone is mostly meaningless in this environment of BBIN without development

approach. BBIN Sub Region has potential space for interactive development for which a peaceful environment is essentially needed. All countries in the Sub Region have unique realities, which strengthen or impede their desired peace and development. Following are the snapshots on BBIN:

- **Bangladesh.** According to UNDP, Bangladesh will turn in to a developing nation leaving its long history of LDC by 2017. The success is mostly due to the improved food situation, boom of the garments sector and most importantly the huge remittance from the overseas Bangladeshi workers. Significant development limitations as Bangladesh is facing for peace and development are; energy crisis, poor and insufficient connectivity, internal security situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts, domestic politics, share of river water and border demarcation with India. In the field of energy, Bangladesh has natural gas but with deficit of 1478 million cubic eet. In the electricity sector she has deficit of 3000 Mega Watt. Overall surface and water communication system of Bangladesh is not dependable to take regional load for its quality concerned. The Indo-Bangla border situation concerning demarcation and killings by BSF is a major source for social disturbance. Besides, the heart breaking issue of sharing river water adversely affected trust and confidence.
- **Nepal and Bhutan.** Bhutan is a country with less of internal problems whereas Nepal faces low level insurgency and disturbed political situation. Though very thinly populated, both the countries are yet to achieve considerable economic standard. Significant limitations to their development are; the trade limitation due to route and lack of diversity, poor road infrastructure with in Bhutan is a barrier to its economic growth, higher product cost due land locked and dependency on India for access to sea. They have abundance potential of hydropower caused but not capable to produce which impedes industrialization. Trouble from insurgents and refugee causes security problem in both countries.
- **India.** India is the largest country in the SA. Being the largest in size, economy and military, she is considered as a “The Factor” of SA. This large country also has enormous diversity of problems affecting its unity, development and peace. Significant ones within the Sub Regional proximity are; firstly the constricted and challenge of unusually long (1645 km between Agartala to Kolkata) connectivity between the Northeast India and its main land. This is a strategic disadvantage and economic impediment for

development as it abruptly rises cost in all fronts. The ongoing separatist movement complicated this natural threat to a greater extent. This is further compounded due to energy deficit and illegal migration. Chinese intimacy with Bangladesh and Nepal in economic and military dimension keeps India under constant discomfort.

**Opportunities of Economic Development and Peace in BBIN Area.** The very geographical pattern of the Sub Region offers a development friendly layout for collaborative economic activities. Enormous economic opportunities prevail in the BBIN Sub Region which needs to be explored and utilized. Significant ones are as following:

- **Sub Regional Trade Profile and Need for a Multimodal Connectivity.** The overall trade scenario in the SAARC is the base to comprehend future trends. SAARC intraregional trade is only 5% of the member's world trade. In the market of 1.7 billion people it is not an acceptable. Diversified trade barriers are the main reason for this situation where poor road network and weakness of port handling is a major reason. There is shortage of multimodal transportation system involving road, rail and water ways in all the four countries. A potential SA intraregional market is a great opportunity for the BBIN Sub Region to have better growth. Therefore, multimodal connectivity is a necessity in BBIN.
- **Sub Regional Energy Project.** BBIN altogether can collaborate to utilize the potential of hydroelectricity of Bhutan, Nepal and India. Collectively, it is quite easily possible to produce large quantity of power in cheaper cost in India, Nepal and Bhutan what they are not capable in isolation. Renovation of transmission lines and a regional load controlling arrangement can benefit all the countries.
- **Sub Regional Water Resource Management.** The three great rivers of the world the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna (GBM) have connected the countries of BBIN Sub Region. The GBM basin is the home to approximately 700 million people which is 10% of the world's population. Share of transnational rivers was always a contentious issue in the world. Bangladesh being in the lower riparian, suffered the maximum and her bilateral relation with India had affected repeatedly in this connection. Therefore, the vast opportunities of the GBM basin can be exploited by BBIN Sub Region equitably for human development and peace in the Sub Region.

- **Sub Regional Trade Facilitation.** Politics and economy are reciprocal to each other. It is presumable that, possibility of any direct or indirect threat to the sovereignty can never foster economic relation in the world and following the same theory, South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) virtually failed. The relation dynamics between India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka was never conducive for advancement of SAFTA and it did not flourish at all. In the eastern SAARC, except Bangladesh the relation between India and other countries was quite good. Currently the politics have taken the lead role to shape the desired environment both in Bangladesh and India. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for all the countries in the Sub Region to take the lessons from SAFTA for implementing a functional business environment.
- **Anti Terrorism and Transnational Crime Prevention.** The BBIN Sub Regional area is highly affected with terrorism, drug and arms trade, illegal trafficking of human and harboring of terrorist. In many cases, the local politics is also getting affected by inviting violence, destruction of life and properties in the democratic movements. All these acts are paying heavy toll on the peace and economic development of the Sub Region. SAARC failed to address this issue. Deficit of trust and an anti Indian syndrome among the smaller member states appeared to be the number one impediment behind such failure. BBIN Sub Regional cooperation can be a good tool to implement the strength purposefully.

**Opportunities and Possibilities.** In view of the above context, BBIN stands out very positively to form a Sub Regional entity for economic development and sustainable peace. Economic potentials are very explicit specially, in the field of energy, intra state trade and transportation of goods and passenger. The Sub Region is likely to have economic boost through extra Sub Regional linkage with China and ASEAN countries. However, the political reconciliation is a must to make it happen. The current political symptoms are very encouraging and BBIN should be proactive to take the best out of it. It is to be noted very clearly that, economic development can improve peace in the area, and political amity can ensure a sustainable peace and development.

### **Vulnerabilities and Challenges of BBIN Sub Region with Respect to Development and Sustainable Peace**

The evolution of SAARC and the reasons behind of its current efficiency signals the future impediments for BBIN Sub Regional initiative. The future of this new

platform is also quite vulnerable following the historical legacy of South Asia. Significant vulnerabilities and challenges are as following:

- **Historical Impact on Sub Regionalism.** The colonial rulers embedded a sense of mistrust among the people of SA, especially in the politics through the technique of divide and rule. This made a conceptual shift of among the generations developing mistrust and suspicion. BBIN are the worst sufferers in this connection. This is not a healthy political indicator for developing regionness in economic front. To be specific, the bilateral relation between India and Pakistan could not be normalized over last 68 years and by now they have already involved in two wars. Therefore, historical legacy is a source of contention in developing effective regionness in SA and BBIN Sub Regional initiative will have to face this challenge to reach its destination.
- **Trust and Security Issues.** Historical legacy and the disproportionately big India develop a question of trust among the smaller states of the Sub Region. Muscle flexing attitude of Indian, in dealing with border management, share of common river water and huge trade deficit added fuel to that dilemma. Besides, the ongoing insurgency in the Sub Region has developed transnational connections and further compounded the security situation and dilemma of trust. In the ASEAN context, similar situations were managed through a “Treaty of Amity” ensuring equitable judgment in all dimensions and no territorial, cultural, religious aggression from the member states. India being the largest in all aspects and ‘the factor’ will have to play the main role to build confidence of BBIN to keep them onboard.
- **China Factor.** China being the important stake holder of global economy and the closest neighbour of SA, always had her influence in Asian geo-politics. This was always a concern for India, because China is the development partner in almost all states in the SAARC. China successfully implemented her “String of Pearls’ in SA. More so, India is no match to China in term of offering big stakes to any association and that is why inclusion or connection of China in the BBIN will be also very rewarding in future. India is realizing this very slowly but, yet to make a transformation of her thoughts over China from potential enemy to a development partner in a win-win situation. Therefore, China factor will be a challenge for India to accommodate herself in the BBIN environment with other china friendly countries.
- **SAARC Vs BBIN.** As we have observed some reservation among some member states on the proposal of Sub Regionalism, the initiative is likely to

appear simply like a rejection or throwing challenge to the SAARC unless a very conducive environment is created. BBIN Sub Regional initiative therefore, should never be superior to SAARC; rather it should be acting as a catalyst for further acceleration of SAARC through citing examples. In the economic dimension, failure of SAFTA will be great challenge to reinvigorate the trade connectivity. It is to note that public trust and confidence cannot be achieved unless a conducive trade environment is created by BBIN.

- **BBIN Leadership.** For a stable move forward, BBIN need to have premiere leadership to overcome all hurdles. In case of SAARC, there was a big vacuum in this regard. India being the largest in all respect is expected to lead any SA association which was missing for SAARC. Absence of leadership or any question to it, will undoubtedly put BBIN initiative into a vulnerable situation.

Therefore, it will be difficult to keep the BBIN Sub Regional entity effective through only the economic agenda. Rather, to promote trust and confidence, subjects like bi lateral issues; territorial concerns; common resources; security issues etc. that created mistrust and misunderstanding in the past should be included in Sub Regional agenda. The corner stone of BBIN Sub Regional Cooperation should be to override all vulnerabilities with the strength of possibilities.

## **A Sustainable Framework and Action Plan for BBIN Sub Regional Cooperation**

A suitable framework is a necessity along with an action plan to consolidate the concept, thoughts and activities. We have many examples of successful action plans in the South East Asia and even in the Far East. Many scholars also complemented by suggesting models of effective action plans in this connection. However, whatever plan is made it should be definite, visible and measurable.

**Framework Analysis.** Thinking BBIN as an independent entity is quite logical. BBIN has all the prerequisites to form a regional association from the conceptual, social, economical and political perspective. In comparison to SAARC, it will be more homogenous and contiguity. Though it appears numerically very small in size, but will represent a region with 1.5 billion people with vast economic potential. It can generate a new regional identity of progressive SA in the world. The association will enjoy some kind of more liberty to dream, think, plan and execute, resulting in to desired product and services for the people. On the other

hand, promoting an independent entity remaining within SAARC is theoretically not possible. Even if an attempt is made to form such entity, remaining as the members of SAARC, it may become useless as happened in case of SAARC and is likely to affect both the institutions. BBIN initiative as a Sub Regional organ of SAARC is an alternative and safer option to bring the issue to the SAARC forum, because of its acceptance through the SAARC charter. Therefore, in context of the reality, the initiative should be brought into surface as a Sub Regional entity. It should form like a miniature form of SAARC, focusing the development and promoting peace. By all motives, it can be titled as “BBIN Sub Regional Cooperation, in short as ‘BBINSC’.

**BBINSC Vision and Mission.** The vision of BBINSC should be “To create a prosperous and peaceful Sub Region in the SAARC”. The mission should be “Explore major avenues of economic development to improve the quality of life with a view to ensuring freedom from want and fear in BBINSC.

**BBINSC Centre of Gravity.** From the evaluation of cooperative initiative, it was repeatedly observed that, it is the “Trust” which made SAARC ineffective and slow. BBINSC is also no exception from the SA legacy. It will definitely face the same fate as of SAARC unless this ‘Trust’ is honestly guaranteed in the BBINSC framework. Trust cannot be ensured by paper agreement; rather it has to be proactively proved by all member states. To be very specific, the India fear possessed by all the small countries in the Sub Region need to be removed by India for the existence of BBINSC. Therefore “Trust” is the centre of gravity of BBINSC.

**Suggested Action Plan.** BBINSC has to have a well set action plan based on its Vision and Mission. It should be pro people and ratified by the respective government to avoid inconsistency. Following is a suggested action plan for the BBINSC:

Phase	Time Frame	G2G Mechanism	Task	People to People Initiative	Comment
1	1996-2014	Head of States	Regionalism Foundation		Done
2	2015-2020	Head of States and Ministerial Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elimination of outstanding bilateral issues</li> <li>• Activate Connectivity</li> <li>• Enforcement of law and policies</li> </ul>	Orientation and familiarity through contacts	Partially done and some in the process
3	2015-2016	Working Groups and Multilateral Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine and recommend projects of experts through feasibility study</li> <li>• National level infrastructural development</li> </ul>	Chamber level dialogues and exploring FDI and joint venture	ADB has already progressed
4	2017	Steering Committee and Head of States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommendation of Priority Projects</li> <li>• Coordinated National level infrastructural development</li> </ul>		
5	2018-2028	Action Committee	Implementation phase	Regular trade	Sequential implementation

## Recommendation and Conclusion

SA will be leading the world economy in a foreseeable future. All development indicators are very positive in this regard. It is due to its geopolitical significance, abundance of natural resources, strong human resources and cheap labour. Countries of SA could have a better and faster growth provided they could

be united strongly and purposefully for complementing each other through interactive development. The first attempt in SA on regionalism was through SAARC which could not become effective and productive even by last three decades due to many limitations. Major limitation in this regard was lack of trust and historical legacy of India Pakistan relation.

Latest conceptualization of BBINC is new light in the SA horizon. Though many says that it is the same wine in the new bottle, but there are differences which makes it quite encouraging. Significant ones are; standard contiguity, common history and culture, huge market and most importantly the absence of indo-pak dilemma. The ongoing efforts of developing bilateral relations between India and other three small countries of the Sub Region have given a boost to this intended collaboration. Theoretically, the initiative is also quite prospective and by now many multilateral agencies have come forward to be the development partner of the Sub Region. The major task in front of the BBINSC is to promote connectivity and remove all kinds of barriers those are impeding people to people connectivity, trade and commerce. BBINSC has also further potential of being connected with China and ASEAN countries which will make it a real vibrant growth platform.

BBINSC should not possess only the development agenda; rather all other factors which contributed to ineffectiveness to SAARC. For example; bilateral issues of security, land boundary and border management, water sharing etc. Unless these are addressed or having the scope to address in the forum, the initiative may stall and it was proved in the history of SAARC. To be conclusive, any issue which can develop mistrust among BBIN has to be addressed with highest priority, may it be bilateral or multilateral. It is to be remembered although that Sub regionalism within SAARC is possible and BBINSC can prove it as a model provided it is established on the basis of mutual trust and it is driven by a strong hand for the well being of the people.

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Brigadier General Quazi Shamsul Islam, ndc, psc was born on 26 February 1967. He was commissioned in the corps of Infantry on 25 December 1987. The officer assumed almost all regimental appointments through serving in five Infantry battalions. Besides regimental employments, Brigadier General Shams served as Instructor in Army School of Physical Training and Sports, School of Infantry and Tactics and as Platoon Commander in Bangladesh Military Academy. As Staff he served as General Staff Officer-2 in Armed Forces Division, Brigade Major of an Infantry Brigade, General Staff Officer-1(Operations) and Colonel Staff of two different Infantry Divisions. In the field of Command, he commanded one infantry battalion, one training battalion and one of the operational brigades of Bangladesh Army deployed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. He attended a number of courses and seminar/symposiums at home and abroad. He obtained Masters in Defence Studies from National University of Bangladesh and Executive Masters on Business Administration from Asian University of Bangladesh. Under the blue helmet, he served as a contingent member in United Nations Mission in Mozambique and United Nations Guards Contingent in Iraq. Brigadier General Shams is a second generation officer in Bangladesh Army. He is a proud father of two sons. His elder son also joined the Military Academy as cadet and likely to introduce himself as the third generation officer of Bangladesh Army. The younger son is a student. His wife, Mrs Farhana Islam is a 'housewife'. His hobbies include travelling and playing Tennis and Golf.