



## **BBIN: Sub-Regionalism in the SAARC**

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India's agenda of regionalism is now set to gain momentum with the help of sub-regionalism. Looking beyond the old idea of 'consensus', SAARC countries are stepping ahead to embrace sub-regionalism in the region. On January 30-31 at New Delhi, India hosted a meeting of the members of Joint Working Group (JWG) of the sub-regional grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) on Water Resources Management, Power/Hydropower and Connectivity and Transit to review the existing arrangement of cooperation and find out the way to enhance cooperation among the four countries. BBIN has now agreed to work out and explore the modalities of power trade, inter grid connectivity, transit facilities and multi-modal transport in the region.

This was the second meeting of BBIN's JWG, but this was the first time when all the four member countries were participating. Nepal did not participate in the first meeting, which was held at Dhaka in 2013. According to the joint press release issued by Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, the JWG on Water Resources Management and Power/Hydropower reviewed the existing cooperation in this sector; discussed the scope for power trade and inter-grid connectivity and potential for closer cooperation in future power projects. In fact, all four nations are looking forward to engage in such a way that the interests of all members are considered.

Nepal and Bhutan have significant untapped hydropower potential, while Bangladesh and India are two energy starved countries, which can provide huge market for the electricity produced in Bhutan and Nepal. So far, Bhutan has been able to generate about 1500 MW hydropower; only five per cent of the estimated potential of 30,000 MW. Nepal has been successful to exploit a little more than 700 MW, about 16 per cent of estimated feasible potential of 4300 MW. Although, the Government of India is cooperating with the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal for hydropower generation as well as development of associated cross border transmission infrastructure at bilateral level, but, despite the signing of Framework of Agreement on Energy Cooperation during the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit at Kathmandu, the SAARC countries are still waiting to establish proper coordination at the regional or sub-regional levels.

According to the joint press release, the JWG on connectivity and transit reviewed the existing arrangements, exchanged ideas on potential cargo and bus routes, and also decided to explore the possibility of using multi-modal transport for commercial as well as tourist needs. Freer movement of goods and services- an essential requirement of regional integration- is much required to boost the South Asian economy. In Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Northeast India, road density is poor; even many existing roads are in dilapidated condition. They are still dependent on Kolkata and Haldia ports for their external trade. Even most of the cities of Northeast India are not connected to nearest ports, Kolkata and Haldia, via rail. The distance between Agartala and Chittagong port is about 200 km only, but for external trade, goods from Tripura are required to be sent to Kolkata port- about 1600 kms away from Agartala. Realising the importance of Chittagong port in the development of Northeast India, New Delhi is now keen to finalise the deal with Bangladesh to access the port. In fact, regarding this, proposal has already been forwarded to the Government of Bangladesh.

'Seamless connectivity' in South Asia is a priority for the new government in India. During the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit at Kathmandu in 2014, New Delhi proposed the Motor Vehicles and Regional Railways Agreements, but these were blocked by Pakistan. The proposed agreements aimed to allow seamless movement of cargo, passengers and

personnel vehicles across the borders. The Regional Railways Agreement, initially outlined by India in 2008 and finalised in the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of Inter-Governmental Group on Transport (IGGT) in New Delhi on September 30, 2014, aspired to strengthen the railways network in the SAARC region not only to enhance regional economic growth, but to promote tourism as well as assimilation of cultural and social contacts. The agreement also aimed to support the initiative of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar transport corridor through the planned Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railways projects. In fact, this was an ambitious plan to connect South Asian countries with South East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. As it has not been successful to implement the agreement at the SAARC level, India is now trying to replicate similar type of proposal on sub-regional front to further integrate its economy with Nepal and Bangladesh and develop Northeast India. It could be seen as an attempt towards greater South Asian economic integration. In near future, hopefully, Pakistan will be part of it and seamless connectivity between Chittagong and Central Asian capitals will soon be a reality.

BBIN initiatives clearly reflect Prime Minister Narendra Modi's desire to integrate the South Asian economy. The message is clear; if the SAARC route is clogged-up, impediments are dragged up, then, India will not hesitate to encourage sub-regionalism in the region. New Delhi's endeavour to sub-regionalism is not restricted to BBIN, it is also looking forward to set up similar sub-regional group with Sri Lanka and Maldives and despite Pakistan's obstructionist approach, India is waiting to engage Afghanistan and Pakistan on western sub-regional front.

Focused agenda and greater political will are must for the success of the BBIN initiatives or any other sub-regional grouping in the region. BBIN also needs to collaborate and delineate workable agenda with some other existing sub-regional groupings in the region, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), whose memberships extend beyond South Asia.

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