

BANGLADESH-BHUTAN-INDIA-NEPAL

DOSSIER OF CATALYTIC MULTIMODAL CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES



Joining Dots • Connecting People • Shared Prosperity

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BANGLADESH

Imagining a different South Asia with Bangabandhu

As we look back on Bangabandhu's life and struggle, I ask myself, [what could our subcontinent have looked like](#), had this modern-day giant not been assassinated?'-PM Narendra Modi

CUTS Comments

Impact on Multimodal connectivity

The robust pace of friendship between India and Bangladesh is primarily a result of the deepening cross-border trade and transport connectivity. Joint infrastructure and institutional connectivity initiatives across roads, railways and waterways have broadened the scope and scale of multimodal transport and logistics activities between the two countries that are beneficial in view of improving the resilience of trade and transit linkages for Bhutan and Nepal, as well.

Impact in the BBIN sub-region

The bilateral initiatives for inter-modal trade and transport connectivity are fundamental to facilitating resilient trade, investment, and people-to-people linkages between the two as well as among the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-region. Nepal and Bhutan will gain tremendously by expeditiously aligning their trade and transport connectivity policies with India and Bangladesh to facilitate green, resilient and inclusive recovery during and post COVID-19.

Food for Thought

The outstanding political will that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman demonstrated for Bangladesh's connectivity with India is desperately needed in today's time to have seamless and resilient multimodal connectivity for the entire BBIN sub-region. Could the Father of the Nation direct the implementation of his vision, then people and goods from Bangladesh would have freely moved into Nepal and Bhutan through India, even at an earlier stage. Similar would have been the case for India, Nepal and Bhutan. It is not too late and there is still an opportunity to expedite the implementation of mechanisms such as the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement that help realise such a vision.

Bhutan

Bangladesh wants enhanced connectivity with Bhutan

Bhutan and Bangladesh focus on [enhancing air connectivity](#) for both countries to reap economic benefits.

CUTS Comments

Impact on Multimodal Connectivity

Air connectivity in Bhutan needs adequate and seamless transformation. Until recently, Paro International Airport (PIA) located in the capital city Thimphu in the western region, was the country's only operating airport. Also, it is the only airport with international access. Bhutan started developing three domestic airports [to address such an imbalance in accessibility and development](#), upgrading the existing airfield at Yonphula in the east and constructing new airfields at Bumthang in the center and Gelephu in the south. Domestic flights started operating at Bumthang and Yonphula and Gelephu in December 2011 and 2012, respectively. With Bangladesh's intent to diversify connectivity with Bhutan, expediting the development and accelerating the integration of air connectivity linkages with other modes of transportation within and outside Bhutan, particularly in the BBIN sub-region, can be of tremendous gains.

Impact in the BBIN sub-region

Seamless integration of air connectivity linkages of Bhutan with [other cross-border trade and transport connectivity initiatives](#) can boost the country's trade and tourism with Bangladesh and India. With that, the Himalayan Kingdom can have integrated access and participation in sub-regional, regional and global markets and value-chains. Agreements, such as for Bhutan to utilise Chattogram and Mongla ports, are the right step in that direction.

Food for Thought

Exploring sub-regional connectivity initiatives could lead to higher volumes of trade and people-to-people linkages among the BBIN countries and strengthen the sub-regional construct. Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina has urged India to develop road and rail links with Bhutan and Nepal](#) for higher connectivity in the sub-region on the country's 50th Independence Day. All the efforts put together could give fresh impetus to faster implementation of the BBIN MVA and build a strong foundation for regional cooperation under the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), as well.

India

India's longest Bridge to bring NE closer to rest of India, Bhutan, Bangladesh

P M Narendra Modi laid the [foundation stone](#) for building the country's longest Bridge-Dhubri (Assam)-Phulbari (Meghalaya) over the Brahmaputra river on February 18, 2021.

CUTS Comments

Impact on Multimodal connectivity

The Bridge will reduce travel distance from 205 km to only 19 km and travel time from six hours to 20 minutes. It will provide an alternative link to the Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Barak valley region of Assam. The Bridge with a 100 km design speed will be earthquake resistant and have solar grip lighting. There will be a [control room](#) for Emergency Response System and Flood Monitoring System and FAST tag tolling with 24*7 CCTV cameras on the gantry to track vehicles. The Bridge will decongest the Northeast's saturated roads as the traffic will shift and the route will help in connecting the states to mainland India via different modes of transportation.

Impact in the BBIN sub-region

The Bridge will improve regional connectivity and connect Bangladesh and Bhutan through Dalu in Meghalaya on the India-Bangladesh border and Hatisar in Assam on the India-Bhutan border via Tura, Phulbari, Dhubri, Srirampur and Samthaibari. The improved connectivity will enhance the reach and export of perishable [farm goods from Meghalaya](#) and Assam to these two neighbouring countries. Once the Bridge is complete, it is likely to serve more than [20 lakh commuters](#) every year and have a substantial socio-economic relief on the two regions.

Food for Thought

Dhubri and Phulbari lie on either bank of the extensive Brahmaputra just before it flows into Bangladesh. The demand for a bridge between Dhubri and Phulbari is 10 years old. It will enhance connectivity and interactions between the rural and urban populations and improve access to higher education facilities and modern health facilities. The project includes connecting this Bridge to various other strategic locations, including those in the India-Bangladesh protocol route. The alignment will bridge the existing missing link of NH-127B. This Bridge will also provide a "flood-free route" as an alternative to the existing ferry route, which can become unstable and dangerous in the monsoon season, therefore [providing resilience](#) to the region's connectivity.

Nepal

ECTS: Revolutionising Nepal's trade

Advantages that have been brought about since the implementation of Electronic Cargo Tracking System (ECTS) between India and Nepal make their benefits self-evident.

CUTS Comments

Impact of Multimodal Connectivity

Cumbersome and expensive procedural formalities often lead to unnecessary delays in deliveries of goods. However, the implementation of ECTS on selected routes between India and Nepal on a trial basis has substantially eliminated these requirements. Additionally, GPS tracking allows enhanced security which can also help monitor certain derailing aspects that hinder the seamless transportation of goods from origin to destination. The electronic cargo tracking seal also facilitated Nepal's access to global markets through the Indian ports of Kolkata and Visakhapatnam (also known as Vizag) amid the COVID-19 induced restrictions.

Impact in the BBIN sub-region

It was bilaterally agreed, between India and Nepal, in 2017 to launch a pilot project facilitating transit traffic through (ECTS). The automated procedure is now operational in Kolkata and Vizag in India for Nepal's goods-in-transit. The new system has brought Nepal and Indian customs to monitor such movements through a robust and common digital platform. This has waived the unnecessary transit procedures, including insurance policy and clearance guarantee for time-sensitive goods.

Food for Thought

All the countries in the sub-region can contemplate implementing a common platform that enables the use of ECTS for cargo tracking in the entire sub-region. Like India and Nepal, the countries of the BBIN sub-region can essentially benefit from executing an automated procedural system that will make the trade and transit seamless, cost-effective and resilient. More importantly, it should be done while keeping in mind that awareness of the cost of service is a must to negotiate charges with the shipping lines as specific instances of overcharging in the name of ECTS have been cited by the importers.

