INTRODUCTION

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Despite the geographical proximity and the close cultural ties between South Asia and Southeast Asia in the past, the relations between these two regions seem to have withered away over the years. The priority attached to economic development by the Southeast Asian countries has led them primarily to foster relations with the major economies of the world that can provide financial aid, loans, investment, technological assistance as well as markets for their exports. Nevertheless, individual countries in South Asia had maintained bilateral relations with countries in Southeast Asia. Bangladesh is one such country that has kept alive the age-old ties with the countries of Southeast Asia.

If we turn the pages of history we find that it was through the eastern region of South Asia - the area that now comprises Bangladesh - that Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia. The way of life of the peoples of Bangladesh and Southeast Asian countries shows many cultural similarities. Hundreds of years ago people from this region used to visit Siam for trade and commerce by sea route. Many Sanskrit and Bengali words can be found in the dialects of Thailand. With Malaysia and Indonesia, Bangladesh shares the Islamic heritage. As well as being members of Non-aligned Movement (NAM) and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia have found a common ground in a new economic bloc called the D-8. Among the Muslim countries, Malaysia and Indonesia were the first to accord
formal recognition to Bangladesh, virtually within two months after independence, on 16 February 1972. Besides the affinity stemming from a shared religion and culture, the convergence of their views on most of the international political and economic issues brought them still closer. Myanmar is the other immediate neighbour of Bangladesh, besides India, with which it shares a common border of 271 km. As a bordering state, Myanmar has a long tradition of historical linkage with Bangladesh. It is through Myanmar that Bangladesh provides the bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh-Myanmar relations officially began since 13 January 1972 with Myanmar's recognition to Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Since then the two countries have signed several agreements on boundary demarcation, trade, air transport, and prevention of trafficking in narcotics. However, in the course of time, some irritating issues like Rohingya refugee issue, land mine issue, border skirmishes, influx of small arms have cropped up in the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. At the moment, there are two main contending issues in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations i.e., Maritime boundary and Rohingya problem. In the early part of 2001, a situation of uneasiness was created between the two countries following Myanmar's decision to construct a dam on the Naf River.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh's relations with the countries of Southeast Asia were always good and strengthened by exchange of visits at the level of heads of government and foreign ministers. The recent visits of the Vice Foreign Minister of Vietnam Mr. Le Cong Phung to Bangladesh in March 2002, and the Thai Prime Minister Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra in July 2002 reaffirmed the historic ties between Bangladesh and their countries. In
the year 2002, transition of East Timor to full independence and the launching of Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) were the two major developments taking place in the region of Southeast Asia in which Bangladesh participated.

Yet, despite these close historical and cultural ties, economic interaction between Bangladesh and Southeast Asia as a whole has been limited. As gathered from various sources in the press, the prevailing trade relations between the countries of Southeast Asia and Bangladesh are largely casual and ineffective. Existing level of trade and investment are still below their potential. The trade volume between Bangladesh and Vietnam has been fluctuating in the range of US$8-18 million. Bangladesh’s trade with Myanmar remains very low and Myanmar enjoys a relative trade surplus with Bangladesh. It may be mentioned here that the two-way trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar during 1996-1997 stood over US$9 million - Bangladeshi goods to Myanmar worth about US$3.4 million and Myanmar goods to Bangladesh over US$5 million.

There are so many things in common between Bangladesh and the countries of Southeast Asia, yet much remains to be desired in terms of moving into newer horizons of friendship and co-operation building a bridge thereby between Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. In the era of globalisation and WTO, the economic realities in Asia are quite pronounced and more difficult days are apprehended when the forces of globalisation and WTO may set more conditions for entry of Asian goods into world market. It is thus a matter of high urgency that Bangladesh should exploit its locational advantage for reaping the best dividends out of this for increased all round co-operation, trade and investment flows in a wider
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regional perspective. The bilateral talks at the heads of government level between Bangladesh and Thailand during the three-day visit of the Thai Premier to Bangladesh have dealt with matters in several areas of importance covering road network, increased private investment and joint business co-operation. The proposal of Asian Highway was also discussed which would link directly by road Bangladesh via Myanmar with Thailand, Malaysia and beyond that. It can be hoped that co-operation in trade and investment areas between Bangladesh and the relatively more prosperous economies of Southeast Asia will certainly receive a new boost when the proposed Asian highway connecting Dhaka, Chittagong, Yangon, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur would be a reality. Besides, both Bangladesh and Myanmar are members of the sub-regional grouping called BIMST-EC which is considered to be a platform that will provide a missing link and a valuable bridge to expand trade, investment and joint development between South and Southeast Asia.

Myanmar's admittance to the ASEAN has great significance for Bangladesh, as it has brought the Southeast Asian nations' grouping just next to the border, opening a new vista of unfolding opportunities for Bangladesh. Myanmar could be a prospective associate in confronting the onslaught of globalisation by redesigning its foreign and economic policies. It is felt that the two neighbours should not lose any time and the opportunity to link their economies and act as a land-bridge between two strategic parts of Asia sandwiched by the two most populous nations of the world - China and India. Furthermore, in a region that is embedded with suspicion and mistrust, it is a positive signal to have a complimentary relationship with Myanmar.
To promote co-operation between Bangladesh and Southeast Asia in areas such as trade and investment, socio-cultural and technology, there should be exchange of trade, cultural and business delegation on a regular basis. Joint business council should be set up for bringing their economies within a desirable level. The prospect of joint venture investment in industries that may produce goods that are in demand in both Bangladesh and Southeast Asia has to be explored and substantive agreements for the same should be made with necessary policy support. Appropriate direction and vision must be provided to the policy makers and practitioners so that a mutually beneficial economic relationship can be developed between them. The relevant think tanks of Bangladesh have also a role to play by generating knowledge on development strategies.

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), a leading think tank of Bangladesh, takes keen interests in developments in the Southeast Asian region. From its inception, BIISS has maintained interactive and exchange relations with research institutions in the ASEAN countries. Besides professional and institutional interests, the imperatives also arose from the potential benefits in terms of trade, investment, industry and technology that could result from Bangladesh's closer ties with the countries of the region. Dialogue series were conducted with esteemed institutions like the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Kuala Lumpur. In continuation, an exchange and fellowship programme called Research Fellowship in Bangladesh-Southeast Asian Relations was instituted in 1996 under the aegis of the Ford Foundation with the Singapore-based Institute of
Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) for a period of three years. Under the programme, a two-way flow was envisaged. A total of 10 scholars from Bangladesh availed of the fellowship at ISEAS during 1996-99, while four scholars from the Southeast Asian countries visited Bangladesh. BIISS in both cases acted as the coordinating institution. One last component of the programme was to organise a wrapping up seminar with a view to assessing the outcome of the programme and deliberating on ways and means of fostering closer co-operation with Southeast Asia.

With this end in view, a two-day long Wrapping Up Seminar on *Bangladesh-Southeast Asian Relations*, organised by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), was held at its auditorium during 28-29 May 2001. Apart from the Inaugural Session, there were four working sessions - two sessions held each day. A total of 11 papers were presented, two of which by scholars from Thailand and Vietnam. Working Session I focused on trade and investment co-operation between Bangladesh and Southeast Asian countries, while the theme of Working Session II was on governance and development in Southeast Asian countries and lessons for Bangladesh. Confidence building and security in Southeast Asian countries was the broad topic of Working Session III, and the last Working Session focused on Myanmar and its role in fostering Bangladesh-Southeast Asian relations. A cross section of government officials, academics, researchers, NGO and civil society representatives participated in the two-day seminar.

The present volume is the compilation of the revised version of the papers presented in the above-mentioned seminar. Out of the eleven papers presented, eight contributions are included in this volume. The other three
papers were presented by Mr. Nguyen Huy Hoang, Economist, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, (ISEAS), Hanoi, Vietnam; Prof. UAB Razia Banu, Department of Political Science, Dhaka University; and Mr. Enayetullah Khan, Editor-in-Chief, Holiday.

Prof. Mohammad Mohabbat Khan in his paper on 'Quality Improvement in Southeast Asian Civil Services: Lessons for Bangladesh' maintained that despite its overarching role, civil service in Bangladesh remains totally inadequate, ill equipped and out-of-tune with the present reality. With a view to improving the quality of civil service in Bangladesh, he attempts to draw some lessons from the measures taken in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Prof. Khan held the view that reform measures must be country-specific and must suit the peculiar needs and aspirations of its people. He stressed on merit principle that should be the sole criterion on which all decisions pertaining to the civil service needs to be taken. Political commitment is a must for successfully introducing changes that would bring quality in service delivery and enhance productivity of civil servants.

Dr. Churai Tapvong in her paper on 'Governance and Development in Thailand: Lessons for Bangladesh' argued that the successful combination of good governance and sound economic and social fundamentals is important for sound development management. She opined that realising such a template of policies for Thailand would require a substantial adjustment in how the government sees itself – from government-as-controller to government-as setter of the framework. To develop popular governance that contributes to the holistic development of nation, she prescribed the need to address the present problems in public administration by
developing a more efficient public sector, which is committed to upgrading the development potentials and capabilities of Thai people. She believes that government officials must be perceived as the allies of the people, working towards the sustainable development of the economy, society, culture and environment. She concluded by emphasising that political will is required for the development of popular governance - a lesson to be learnt from Thailand's experience.

Prof. Muinul Islam in his paper, 'Market Failures and Policy Failures in Overseas Migration: The Case of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Singapore', focused on the recruitment process of the Bangladeshi migrant workers, who are believed to be the fastest growing cohorts of migrant workers in Singapore in recent times. His findings revealed that the short periods of contracts, and the threats of non-renewal of the first contracts are being used by a section of Singaporean recruiting agencies and/or employers to extract and appropriate a part of the earnings from some migrant workers in advance. And the foreign worker levy system of Singapore is encouraging the flow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh to Singapore. In his view, the demands for advance pay-off can be termed as extortionist practices, explaining why the issue of market failure arises.

Prof. Abul Kalam in his paper titled 'Subregional Co-operation within ASEAN and SAARC: Role of the International Funding Agencies' explained the context, rationale and pattern of the involvement of the development financial institutions (DFIs) and other donor agencies in subregional co-operation in the ASEAN region. He also tried to place in perspective the comparative nature of their association in South Asia. Emphasising the role of private sector and the DFIs, he maintains that
while individual governments can make political commitments and endeavour to implement policy decisions towards fruition of growth zones, the private sectors as the engine of growth contribute to the strengthening of subregional co-operation. The DFIIs and donor agencies can render supportive policies, alleviating some of the pressing problems confronting policy makers in the Growth Triangles (GTs) so that the private sectors feel attracted to be drawn into subregional growth schemes.

Mr. A. K. M. Abdus Sabur in his paper, 'Managing Intra-group Conflicts in ASEAN: Relevance for SAARC' maintained that both ASEAN and SAARC were launched amidst deep-seated mistrust and numerous conflicts among the member countries. However, while the former has been successful in devising necessary mechanisms of conflict resolution and reduction of tensions, the latter has been unsuccessful with regard to the same. Mr. Sabur is of the view that the experiences of the ASEAN in this regard could be a source of inspiration as well as learning for the SAARC in its efforts to manage conflicts among the member states. He maintains that while the experiences of ASEAN deserve serious consideration, the SAARC countries will have to evolve a workable mechanism for the management of intra-group conflicts that will require sincerity and goodwill of the political leadership.

In his paper titled 'Sub-regional Co-operation in ASEAN and SAARC: Security and Foreign Policy Issues', Mr. Mohammad Humayun Kabir examined the issues of security and foreign policy relating to the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), a sub-regional co-operation forum in the ASEAN. He draws a few conclusions with regard to the lessons that could be taken from the sub-regional co-operation in the.
ASEAN for the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), another sub-regional co-operation in SAARC. Mr. Kabir maintains that what South Asia needs to learn from ASEAN experiences in regional and sub-regional co-operation is the separation of the 'economic' from the 'political', despite their intricate linkages, in the greater and ultimate interest of development and security of all co-operating parties.

Dr. Atiur Rahman in his paper, 'Track-II Diplomacy as a Measure of Confidence Building in South Asia for Regional Co-operation' observes that South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) has not yet yielded anything in terms of regional integration in practice even after seventeen years of its formation despite the example of most regional groupings, particularly neighbouring ASEAN functioning and flourishing so well. However, a certain amount of trust has been generated in South Asia following expert and committee meetings, NGO meetings and the contacts at regular intervals due to SAARC Summits. He argues in his paper for further confidence building in South Asia through people-centric Track-II diplomacy aimed at exploring regional/sub-regional co-operation in the fields of natural resources, human resources, infrastructure and communication.

In his paper on 'Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and the Stateless Rohingyas', Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed observed how people who are stateless view relationship between states, and what impact do the stateless have on the state. In addition to the official population of the Arakan or Rakhine State of 2.6 million, another 1-2 million Muslim Rohingyas reside in the Rakhine State. The author explained how the entire population of Myanmar was colour-coded for the easy identification of the citizenship status of the bearer. The Rohingyas, however,
did not fall under any categories. In 1978-1979, 250,000 Rohingyas were pushed into Bangladesh. In 1991 the second major push took place. In spite of the repatriation process initiated under the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHCR), their situation did not improve, for the once pushed out stateless people were now being repatriated also as stateless people. The paper argues that these stateless people do not have any freedom of movement, restrictions are imposed on their access to higher education, and they are used as forced labourers. According to the author, the Rohingya refugees are bound to be militant, one reason why they have small arms such as assault rifles, M16s in their possession.

Presentation of each paper was followed by lively and thought provoking discussions. A number of substantive issues were deliberated upon and the experiences of Southeast Asian countries were brought to bear in the deliberations. The speakers were in accord that Bangladesh as a country of South Asia has a lot to know from the adjacent Southeast Asian region where several countries made spectacular progress in recent times in the sphere of economic development. In the case of ASEAN and SAARC, there is much more room for co-operation. Due to the lack of complimentary trade relations, or ASEAN’s preference for bilateralism with SAARC countries, SAARC-ASEAN co-operative relations have not flourished, as it should have been. It was suggested that Bangladesh’s location could play a conduit between ASEAN and Bangladesh. Similarly, Pakistan can play a conduit with Bangladesh’s relation with Central Asia or Middle East. One of the lessons to be learnt from ASEAN is how bilateral arrangements can be given multilateral colour.
The speakers of the seminar stressed the need for more co-operation between SAARC countries that does not have to be market driven only. The areas of co-operation can also include water-sharing, human resource development, environment etc. They opined that sub-regional co-operation is beneficial for a country like Bangladesh if this country becomes the focal point of such ventures. The house felt that it was necessary to change the mindset of our people in order to make the different regional or sub-regional co-operative efforts successful.

The participants were in accord that ways and means have to be found out to reduce extortion of foreign migrant worker at both sides: the country of origin and the host country. The two causes for extortion of Bangladeshi workers are political and bureaucratic. More attention needs to be given to the overseas Bangladeshi workers, as they are the major source of remittance. Registration of migrant workers as voters will help identify the number of workers and their host country. The house demanded for the free movement of labourers. The participants felt that embassies should be more co-operative and sensitive to overseas labourers.

The participants stressed that political honesty is necessary for any good governance in any country. They pointed out that good governance coupled with multi-faceted measures aimed at the welfare of the people has proved to be the key to economic and social development in several Southeast Asian countries. They felt that democracy in Bangladesh has not been able to flourish because of the absence of devolution of power, lack of accountability, lack of free judiciary, illiteracy, lack of ombudsman, limited freedom of press, and failure of political leadership. They stressed that training facilities, incentive structure, accountability and transparency, etc.
should be provided to civil servants to improve efficiency. The role of the press in Bangladesh was lauded although fear was expressed that muscle and black money prowess may cripple the society including free expression of the will of the people.

The participants took a unanimous view that Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) are important in South Asia for bettering bilateral ties. They recommended that appropriate dialogue mechanism, formal and informal, coupled with political will and political wisdom to evolve convergence of views as far as possible would help develop CBMs in the regional countries. They urged that the member states should make more earnest endeavour to make their defence spending more transparent. They also felt that there is a need to establish nuclear free zones, zones of peace, and invite extra-regional powers to facilitate CBMs.

They opined that South Asia need to learn CBMs from adjacent Southeast Asian region since beneficial ventures like the SAARC are being afflicted by lack of necessary political understanding. The speakers often drew parallels in the South Asian and Southeast Asian scenario and lamented that what could be possible in one region is largely absent in the other because of mistrust and inhibitions. They also felt that states of South Asia must stop looking suspiciously at each other for the sake of furthering the SAARC and improvement of the overall political environment in the region. They observed that ASEAN had overcome much of intra-group conflicts and shifted emphasis from "political to economic" issues to turn the forum meaningful.

The participants observed that conflict and cooperation are natural phenomena in bilateral relations. So instead of remaining bogged down with such irritants one
should explore the areas and scope for co-operation, which in the case of Bangladesh and Myanmar are much greater. Economic imperatives in the age of globalisation also demand the same. Both Myanmar and Bangladesh have much to offer to each other and Yangon with its enormous natural resources can look forward to a market of 130 million people of Bangladesh. It was stressed that Bangladesh, irrespective of the kind of government in Myanmar, should be more aggressive in terms of generating political and economic relations with Myanmar.