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PROSPECTS FOR ATTAINING A NEW HEIGHT IN BANGLADESH-MYANMAR RELATIONS: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

Bangladesh and Myanmar share both land and maritime borders, and have age-old commercial and cultural ties. These two close neighbours have unlimited potentials in mutual cooperation in trade, connectivity and people to people contact. Both geostrategic and geoeconomic viewpoints justify the necessity of strong Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. Nevertheless, they have failed to best utilise their proximity and historical ties for economic and strategic gains. Since the establishment of the diplomatic tie in 1972, the relations have not always been smooth due to lack of political will especially from the Myanmar government, mutual misperceptions and suspicions. The Rohingya refugee issue, tensions in border and transnational crimes have been the key impediments to a meaningful bilateral relation. As consequences, many vital bilateral agreements and MoUs are pending. It is a reality that friends or allies may be changed but not neighbours. Therefore, the best interests of these close neighbours lie in exploring potential areas of cooperation and prosper together. This paper identifies several potential areas of mutual cooperation to explore and argues that for attaining a new height in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, failure in resolving any hard issue such as the refugee issue should not be allowed to leave any negative impact on other prospective areas. Exploring the potential areas and trying to resolve the key disputes through various channels can be done simultaneously. For greater friendship, removing suspicions and opening up minds are imperative for these neighbours.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh and Myanmar are close neighbours sharing both land and maritime boundaries.¹ They have traditional commercial and cultural ties for centuries. Myanmar was amongst the first neighbours to recognise Bangladesh on 13 January 1972. Bangladesh also set up its mission in Yangon on 1 April 1972. Many exchanges of high level visits have taken place between Bangladesh and Myanmar since then for promoting mutual relationship.² It is noteworthy that all the heads of the state/

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¹ The two countries share 314.40 kms (207.20 land boundary, 68.20 Naff river and 39.00 kms maritime boundary up to St. Martin) common boundary. Information collected from the East Asia and Pacific Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Government on 26 June 2013.

² President Ne Win was the first Asian Head of State to visit independent Bangladesh in April 1974. He again visited Bangladesh in May 1979 and November 1982. Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt visited Bangladesh in April 2004. Vice Senior General Maung Aye, Vice Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) of Myanmar, paid a state visit to Bangladesh in October 2008. From Bangladesh side, President Ziaur Rahman paid the first state visit to Myanmar in July 1977. Information collected from the Southeast Asian

government (except the caretaker governments) of Bangladesh visited Myanmar since 1977. In recent past, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Myanmar in December 2011. The return visit of Myanmar President to Bangladesh was due in July 2012.³ The visits of top leaders of the mainstream political parties from Bangladesh indicate their priority for building a stronger relationship with Myanmar.

Despite all these exchanges of high profile visits, and of having unlimited potentials in reciprocal cooperation in trade, connectivity, tourism, people to people contact, the relations have not been always smooth.⁴ The two countries have failed to best utilise their proximity and historical ties for building a pragmatic relation because of lack of political will especially from the Myanmar government, their mutual suspicions and misperceptions regarding Rohingya refugee issue, tensions in border and transnational crimes. Undoubtedly, the influx of Rohingya refugees is the key dispute that has spill over impact on other issues. Although international organisations provide significant support for the refugees' food and medicine, Bangladesh, a least developed country, still suffers a heavy burden.⁵ The crisis having both security and humanitarian concerns has emerged as a dilemma for Bangladesh. The future of both documented and undocumented refugees in Bangladesh remain bleak and uncertain as Myanmar regime is reluctant to take them back and does not fully cooperate for a permanent solution. In contrast, the regime terms 'Rohingyas' as 'Bengalis'. In addition, due to misperceptions and lack of knowledge about each other,⁶ there exist no interests to know each other which eventually result in almost no connectivity and insignificant trade.

However, the recent political and economic reforms in Myanmar bring new hopes and opportunities for developing better relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁷ The developed world has already withdrawn their long political and economic sanctions against Myanmar, creating new opportunities for other countries including Bangladesh to explore their potential areas of cooperation with this country, rich in natural resources. This paper argues that there are prospects for vast cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar, and both countries can take their relations to a new height for mutual benefit.

Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Government on 20 March 2014.

³ Information on high profile bilateral visits between Bangladesh and Myanmar, *Ibid*.

⁴ Zaglul A Chowdhury, *Bangladesh's Relations with India, Myanmar and Nepal: The Impact on Citizens and Development*, Dhaka: News Networks, 2003, p. 55.

⁵ Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving Under Military Rule*, New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2009, p. 253.

⁶ This author views that very few people in Bangladesh know well about the culture, history, politics, economy, society, food habit, names of the cities of Myanmar even though it is an immediate neighbour. Comparatively, the people of Bangladesh know far more about the other neighbouring countries like India, Sri Lanka and China etc.

⁷ The Myanmar regime has initiated several reforms e.g. permitting greater freedom to assembly, media and cultural activities, releasing hundreds of political prisoners etc. See, Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Understanding recent political Change in Myanmar", *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2012, pp. 197-216.

The objective of this paper is to address the existing key challenges in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, and explore the potential areas that can take the relations to a new height for a win-win situation. This paper consists of six sections including introduction. Section two briefly focuses on the significance of the relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The key challenges between these two close neighbours are addressed in section three. Section four shades light on the scopes for potential areas of cooperation for taking the current relations to a new height. Section five discusses the significance of Track II diplomacy in building confidence between the countries. The final section provides some specific policy recommendations and concluding remarks.

2. Significance of the Relations

Friends or allies may be changed but not neighbours. They are linked by history, culture and geography, and must live and prosper together. Any incident in one country can definitely have spillover impacts on neighbours,⁸ e.g., the ethnic unrest in Rakhine state and the recent political reforms in Myanmar are having their respective negative and positive impacts on Bangladesh. This paper argues that both geostrategic and geo-economic perspectives justify the necessity of strong Bangladesh-Myanmar relations.

How significant are these neighbours to each other? It is not an exaggeration to say that as an immediate neighbour Myanmar occupies the second most important position only after India in many ways for Bangladesh.⁹ For examples, i) Myanmar, the largest country of mainland Southeast Asia, with an area of some 678,500 kilometers lies at the juncture of three regions within Asia: East, Southeast, and South Asia. It occupies a critical geostrategic position between the two Asian giants China and India. ii) The country is located in a region, which has experienced tremendous economic growth over the last few decades. Huge reserves of natural resources and its geostrategic location between South and Southeast Asia suggest that it has the potential to be a major Southeast Asian player.¹⁰ iii) Myanmar can be the potential gateway for an alternative land route opening towards China and Southeast Asia for Bangladesh, boosting its trade and connectivity. iv) Bangladesh is a food-deficit country. The demand for foodstuffs is steadily growing here to feed its growing population. Moreover, it needs to protect itself against natural disasters. By 2025 its population will be over 200 million. Therefore, as an immediate neighbour, Myanmar can be a prime source of importing food for Bangladesh. Regarding this, K B Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce in Dhaka, said that Myanmar, blessed with huge natural and marine resources is possibly going to be the

⁸ See, Yunus Ali Sheikh, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations: Making the Best of Proximity", *biiss journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1998, p. 471.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J May (eds.), *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2000, p. 241.

saviour of Bangladesh.¹¹ v) After five decades of isolation, for the current political and economic reforms, Myanmar has now become an attraction for foreign investment.¹² Under the country's new foreign investment rules, the Myanmar government allows 100 per cent foreign ownership on a broad range of business activities including telecommunications, energy, services, infrastructure projects, agriculture, hospitality and non-food manufacturing. A report by the McKinsey Global Institute estimated that Myanmar could attract as much as US\$100 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) over the next two decades.¹³ Certainly the changing environment in Myanmar brings opportunities for Bangladeshi investors too. vi) Rohingya Refugee crisis and transnational crimes in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border are security concerns for Bangladesh. Thus, cooperation is required from the Myanmar side to resolve or manage these disputes. vii) Due to the frequent killings of Bangladeshi nationals by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Indo-Bangladesh border, Bangladesh earnestly needs a peaceful border with the neighbouring Myanmar.

Conversely, Bangladesh also bears significance to Myanmar. i) Bangladesh can also be a gateway for Myanmar to connect to eastern India and other parts of South Asia. Certainly, bridging Bangladesh will increase Myanmar's importance to China and ASEAN countries for enhancing connectivity. ii) Chittagong-Kunming connectivity could bring benefit for Myanmar especially earning huge amount of transshipment fees from the countries of the three sub-regions of Asia (East, South and Southeast Asia). iii) With the rise of middle class, Bangladesh can become a potential market for Myanmar.¹⁴ iv) Bangladesh has a global reputation for peacekeeping and microcredit activities. Myanmar can receive cooperation from Bangladesh in the respective fields, e.g., Bangladesh can help promote human resource development in the backward areas of Myanmar like Rakhine state, and Myanmar army may receive training from experienced peacekeepers of Bangladesh. v) A peaceful solution of the refugee problem is vital for the growth of Rakhine state in particular and Myanmar in general. Hence, Bangladesh's cooperation is crucial for Myanmar. vi) Both countries need to cooperate in combating transnational crimes like drugs, arms smuggling and human trafficking.

¹¹ Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Bangladesh bids to boost trade with Burma", *BBC News*, 18 December 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-20675228>, accessed on 15 February 2014.

¹² The list of companies going into Myanmar so far includes Thai corporations such as PTT Exploration and Production; Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding; and Hemaraj Land and Development. Japan's Toyota and Honda have expressed an interest in locating a production base in Myanmar. Mitsubishi, Mitsui and Sumitomo, all from Japan, along with Malaysia's Petronas, American conglomerate General Electric, Danish shipping line Maersk and Indian group Jubilant Energy are also planning to invest. Ford Motor Company recently became the first American automaker to launch operations in Myanmar with the opening of a new showroom and service centre in Yangon. Ford entered Myanmar market through a partnership with Capital Automotive, a subsidiary of one of Myanmar's largest companies. See, Karl Wilson, "Asia Weekly: Myanmar poised for FDI take off", *China Daily Asia*, 04 October, available at http://www.chinadailyasia.com/business/2013-10/04/content_15091101.html, accessed on 10 February 2014.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ashfaqur Rahman, "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations: The Economic Dimension", Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies (CFAS), available at http://www.muslimpopulation.com/pdf/Bangladesh_myanmar_relation.pdf, accessed on 10 January 2014.

At this point, it can be claimed that these two immediate neighbours have substantial mutual geoeconomic and geostrategic interests for building a robust relation benefitting not only themselves but also the other countries of the regions. It is believed that if further research is done for exploring mutual interests and benefits, more areas of cooperation can be identified. The policy makers of both countries should consider these issues of mutual significance while making their policies.

3. Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations: Addressing Key Challenges

Despite having proximity and the above mentioned mutual geostrategic and geoeconomic interests, due to negative impacts of some disputes, the relations did not grow strong for a win-win situation. The key challenges in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations are i) Rohingya refugee crisis, ii) tension in Bangladesh-Myanmar border, iii) transnational crimes, iv) lack of connectivity, and v) insignificant trade. These challenges are discussed more elaborately in the following subsections.

3.1 Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Rohingya refugee crisis has emerged as the key challenge in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations and continues to be an unmanageable bar in establishing any sustainable relations between these two nations.¹⁵ Rohingyas are basically ethno-linguistic and religious minority Muslims belonging to no state since the Myanmar government denied their very identity by the controversial *Citizenship act of 1982* in the constitution of Myanmar.¹⁶ Going back to history, after independence in 1948, the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar claimed a separate ethnic identity and were recognised by the newly independent government. In the 1950s, Rohingyas had representation in parliament and held high level government posts. After the 1962 military takeover, however, they were systematically denied their civil, political, economic and social rights, which were ultimately legalised through the controversial *Citizenship act*.¹⁷ Why this discrimination? The Myanmar government views Rohingyas as Muslim migrants from neighbouring East Bengal which is now Bangladesh and settled in Myanmar during the British period. The junta governments in Myanmar adopted repressive policies against Rohingyas and treated them as strangers in their own land.

From geoeconomic perspectives, Rakhine (Arakan) state is very important for Myanmar. It has a coastal belt rich with natural resources e.g., petroleum, possibly uranium, iron and coal. The soil of Rakhine is very fertile. The state has a number of rivers rich in fish. It has a coastal water line of 300 miles long. In addition, the state

¹⁵ Mahfuzul H Chowdhury and Nasir Uddin, "Bar Between Brothers: Rohingya-Issue in Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations", in Nasir uddin (ed.), *To Host or To Hurt: Counter Narrative on Rohingya Refugee Issue in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: ICDR, 2012, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.), *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2010. p. 16.

has military and strategic significance as well. In case of any war or confrontation regarding South Asia, it can serve as a buffer zone.¹⁸ Therefore, Myanmar considers this region very important as well as sensitive, and in turn, continues its persecution of Rohingyas.

Historically, ethnic Burmese political leaders – whether in government or in anti-government organisations – have tended to deny or ignore the diversity of interest, background, language and concerns of the ‘national minorities’. Moreover, Burmese people rarely recognise such denial or intolerance as problematic at all. This is evident when the deportation of Rohingya Muslims going on at the Bangladesh border received widespread support in Myanmar.¹⁹ In a recent census in March 2014 (the first since 1983) in Rakhine state, it was decided that Arakani Muslims would be identified as “Rohingyas”, but later the Myanmar authority decided that these people would be termed as “Bengalis”. Eventually, Rohingyas could not participate in the census.²⁰ Considering these circumstances, it can be argued that the key driving forces behind the exodus of the Rohingyas include denial of citizenship rights, denial of religious freedom, denial of free movement, sexual harassment, forced labour and relocation, arbitrary taxation, expulsion and other form of human rights abuse.²¹

Making relations with Myanmar has been challenging for neighbouring countries including Bangladesh.²² Regarding the Rohingya issue, Christina Fink said, “Bangladesh has been extremely frustrating by the Burmese regime’s refusal to take back all the Rohingya refugees and its continued harsh policies towards the Rohingya in Burma which, cause yet more Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.”²³ Another scholar opines that the Rohingya issue remains one of the main challenges for cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The stability and security between the two bordering cities of Bangladesh and Myanmar, namely Teknaf and Maungdaw between the Naf River, is affected by the influx of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The security in the border areas is prerequisite for enhancing trade and connectivity between the countries. Since 1978, the Rohingya issue has been hampering cooperation.²⁴

After the independence, Rohingyas started to come to Bangladesh again since late 1970s. In the early 1990s, Bangladesh witnessed a wave of a few hundred thousand

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. Also, see, Brother Jarlath D’Souze, *Rohingyas: A Case for Human Rights Violation*, Dhaka: SHETU, 1992, p. 24.

¹⁹ Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J May (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁰ “Rohingyas told to Register as Bengalis”, *The Daily Star*, 31 March 2014.

²¹ Cgris Lewa, ‘IDP’s In Burma’ in C R Abrar and M. P. Lama (eds.), *Displacement within Borders: The IDP’s of Bangladesh and Region*, Dhaka: RMMRU, 2003, pp. 169-175. Also interviewed with Rohingya refugees living in Kutupalong and makeshipt camps in Ukhia in Cox’s Bazaar district from 12 to 14 March 2014.

²² Christina Fink, *op.cit.*, p. 252.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Syeda Naushin Parnini, “Non-Traditional Security and Problems of Rohingya across Bangladesh-Myanmar Borders”, *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2012.

Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh due to ethnic conflicts, tension and sectarian violence in the Rakhine state. Currently, Bangladesh hosts 28000 documented and 2-5 hundred thousand undocumented refugees. Although Bangladesh is not a party to 1951 Geneva Convention, she has been receiving the refugees for the last three/four decades mainly on humanitarian ground. However, from a security perspective, these Rohingya refugees in particular the undocumented ones have gradually become a security concern for Bangladesh. The most alarming security concern is the change in demographic/ethnic composition particularly in Teknaf where the number of Rohingyas will be more than the local people in near future.²⁵

Particularly, many unregistered Rohingyas are involved in illegal activities like trafficking and smuggling. A number of Rohingyas are sent to Malaysia through the trafficking network. Rohingyas are also involved in transnational organised crimes like human and drugs trafficking and arms smuggling. It was argued that one of the major consequences of military operations in Rakhine and persistent torture on Rohingyas is the establishment of several dissident groups over the last three decades, and some refugees are involved with these groups.²⁶ However, there is no authentic information of their activities within Bangladesh territory, and the Bangladesh government denies the existence of any insurgent groups of Myanmar in its territory. As a whole, however, Bangladesh is facing challenges to maintain law and order in its South-eastern part due to illegal activities of Rohingyas. By using fake Bangladeshi passport, they are going to various destinations including Malaysia and Middle East and hamper the labour market. Although Bangladesh allowed the refugees many times, but being a small economy it has its limitations. Therefore, recently, when Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh and sought shelter, Bangladesh refused their appeal and pushed them back.²⁷ Based on a field trip to Cox's Bazaar from 12-15 March, the following table provides a brief overview of the security concerns generated by Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

²⁵ Interviewed with Faiyaz Murshed Kazi, Director, UN Desk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Government on 20 February 2014.

²⁶ See, Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 70-72.

²⁷ Mahfuzul H Chowdhury and Nasir Uddin, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

Table 1. Brief overview of the security concerns generated by Rohingyas in Bangladesh²⁸	
Security Concerns	Facts
Demographic Change	The high growth rate of Rohingyas (4.3 per cent) causing demographic change particularly in Teknaf. They produce more children to get more rations from the UNHCR and other international organisations in the camps.
Environmental Threats	Rohingyas are destroying forests near the camps and other areas wherever they inhabit. They also destroy mountains causing landslides in nearby areas.
Human Trafficking	Rohingyas are involved in human trafficking, smuggling, and abduction etc. There is a trafficking network sending Rohingyas to Malaysia. Their network extends from Dhaka to Chittagong.
Drug Trafficking	Rohingyas are involved in drug trafficking. 80 per cent of undocumented Rohingyas are carriers of drugs (yaba). Recently, a Rohingya was caught with 150000 piece yaba. Strong nexus between unregistered Rohingyas and some Myanmar people exists. They use mobile networks on both sides of the border to conduct the crimes.
Unemployment	Rohingyas are occupying local job market. Local women are also vulnerable as they are losing household jobs. 90 per cent rickshaw pullers of Cox's Bazaar district are Rohingyas. Even day labourers are losing their jobs as Rohingyas provide cheap labour.
Threat to Tourism Industry	Cox's Bazar is the hub of tourism industry in Bangladesh. And security is precondition for promotion of tourism. However, the activities of Rohingyas are threatening the industry.
Deteriorating Law and Order Situation	Rohingyas commit various crimes including professional killing, theft, robbery, etc.
Hampering the Labour Market	By using fake Bangladeshi passport, Rohingyas are going to Middle East, Malaysia and other countries, and for their unlawful activities, Bangladesh is losing its image.

Bangladesh has been trying to solve the problem diplomatically. There was a bilateral agreement in 1992 for the safe voluntary returns of Rohingya refugees. Myanmar wants to verify the refugees before taking them back home. Bangladesh proposed to establish a Joint Committee to exclusively deal with repatriation process. The undocumented refugees need to be identified. Bangladesh government is planning to verify the undocumented refugees though it is not an easy task as there is a fear that more influx can occur for the documentation. Bangladesh believes that

²⁸ The information in the table is based on the interviews with various stakeholders including District Commissioner, Sector Commander, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Additional Superintendent of Police, and other high officials of Cox's Bazaar district and also local people from 12 to 15 March 2014.

an amicable solution of the Rohingya issue will not only improve security situations in the border areas, but also open up new avenues of cooperation between the two countries.

3.2 Tensions in Border

Bangladesh and Myanmar share about 275 (including the Naaf river) kilometers of land border.²⁹ Both countries signed a boundary agreement in 1998: “Demarcation of the Land Section of the Boundary North of the Naaf River”. However, they are yet to ratify the agreement. Compared to Bangladesh-India border, Bangladesh-Myanmar border has been peaceful in terms of frequency of border killing of Bangladeshi nationals. Nevertheless, tensions erupted in different times, e.g., in January 2001, the border area became tense and many felt a war-like situation due to the Myanmar authority’s attempt to build a controversial dam on a river near Teknaf and hostile activities of Nasaka force.³⁰ The month-long tension along the border finally almost ended when Yangon agreed to stop the construction of the dam. Another incident sparked tensions in 2009, when Myanmar started fencing 40 kilometers of Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Bangladesh government expressed its reservation on such construction. The Myanmar government assured that the construction would be used only for preventing illicit networks in the border area and it would not affect relations between the two countries. Finally, Bangladesh allowed Myanmar to construct the fence. Sometimes without any valid reason, Myanmar border forces create pressure in the border area, e.g., when in 2012, the verdict on Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime dispute was about to be delivered, the later amassed soldiers along its border with Bangladesh. Tensions ran high in Bangladesh-Myanmar border areas after the news of this deployment.³¹

When almost every month, hundreds of Rohingyas illegally entering into Bangladesh are arrested by BGB and Coast Guard of Bangladesh and then pushed back,³² the Myanmar perspectives are a concern for Bangladesh. Recently, Khin Saw Wai, a member of parliament from Rakhine state told VOA’s *Burmese service* that the laxity of Bangladesh-Myanmar border is helping Bangladeshi people to trespass into Myanmar. He said that the existing fence at Myanmar’s western door between Bangladesh and Rakhine state is not enough to stop illegal entry into Myanmar. Therefore, there would be 15 more security gates at the border.³³ Bangladesh opposed to construct

²⁹ Information varies from source to source about the length of the Bangladesh-Myanmar common land border. Some sources claim it is 271 kms and some others claim it is 275 kms. This author with his own calculation found it 275 kms (including the Naaf river).

³⁰ Zaglul A Chowdhury, *op. cit.*

³¹ “Myanmar moves army to Bangladesh border”, *Pakistan Defence*, available at <http://defence.pk/threads/myanmar-moves-army-to-bangladesh-border.165501/>, accessed on 20 September 2013.

³² In January 2014, 544 Rohingyas were pushed back by BGB while in March the number was 536 up to 14 March (till the date of interview). The difficulty of the terrain makes it almost impossible to guard all the points in Bangladesh- Myanmar Boeder; Rohingyas take advantage of this and cross the border. There is an unprotected border of 42 kms. Interviewed with the Sector Commander, BGB, Cox’s Bazaar, 15 March 2014.

³³ Khin, Phyu Htway, “Burma Constructs New Border Checkpoints With Bangladesh”, *Voice of America*, 20

fences on any of its frontiers in the past, however, has for the first time decided to put up a barbed-wire fence along the Myanmar border to prevent illegal migration of Rohingyas.³⁴

3.3 *Transnational Crimes*

The porous border between Bangladesh and Myanmar is rapidly becoming a conduit of transnational crimes such as smuggling of arms, drugs and human trafficking. The failure or inability of the Myanmar government to eradicate drug production has had particularly profound consequences for neighbouring countries.³⁵ The Bangladesh-Myanmar border region has been identified by the Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control as the key point for drugs smuggling.³⁶ There are several factories in the border area inside Myanmar which produce illegal drugs that are being smuggled into Bangladesh. The contraband yaba tablets continue to enter and flood Bangladesh despite different measures to stop them. This trade soared 14 times within a span of only three years. Phensidyl is being produced in India while yaba in Myanmar, which are posing a serious threat to our young generation due to easy availability, transportation advantage and stimulating effect.³⁷ The Rohingyas are recruited as carriers, intermediaries or traffickers. Due to hilly terrain, dissident groups of Rohingyas may take advantage for conducting various transnational crimes.

3.4 *Lack of Connectivity*

Lack of connectivity is one of the key obstacles to develop a better relation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In the era of globalisation, when nations are reaping benefit from their relations even though they are far from each other, these two close neighbours do not have even road links or sea links for trade, commerce and people's movement. Historically these links were there, but have fallen into disuse for decades.³⁸ Chittagong was connected with Arakan state of Myanmar through a road link for ages until early 1960s when it was discontinued. In 2007, the signing of the agreement to develop a direct road link between the two countries was indeed a landmark development: Bangladesh proposed Myanmar to build 25 kilometers road (2 km in Bangladesh and 23 km in Myanmar) at its own cost. The main objective was to construct 2 km long Balukhali-Gundum road within Bangladesh and 23 km long Gundum-Bawlibazar road within Myanmar. The agreement has been pending as Myanmar did not show any interest later. The Bangladesh government is also interested in setting up a railway network between Kunming city in Yunnan province

March 2014, available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/burma-constructs-new-border-checkpoints-with-bangladesh/1875708.html>, accessed on 21 March 2014.

³⁴ "Dhaka to build fence along Myanmar border", *Dhaka Tribune*, 11 June 2013.

³⁵ Christina Fink, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

³⁶ "BGB proposals for Bangladesh-Myanmar deal on security dialogue", *Dhaka Tribune*, 06 March 2014.

³⁷ "Inflow of Yaba on the Rise", *The News Today*, 21 August 2013.

³⁸ Ashfaqur Rahman, *op. cit.*

of China and Chittagong of Bangladesh via Myanmar. A 130 km railway track will be laid from Dohazari of Bangladesh to Gundum in Rakhine state of Myanmar via Ramu of Cox's Bazar. The route would also strengthen connectivity between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In this regard, Mustafizur Rahman, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said that transport (both road and shipping) connectivity with Myanmar is vital for increasing bilateral trade.³⁹ It is imperative that the countries re-establish the road link soon.

3.5 Insignificant Bilateral Trade

Despite being close neighbours, due to the negative impacts of the above problems and lack of interests in each other, bilateral trade has been very insignificant. Trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar reached around US\$ 100 million in FY 2012-13.⁴⁰ That year, Bangladesh's exports to Myanmar stood worth of US\$ 13.67 million and imports US\$ 84 million. Compared to FY 2011-12, imports from Myanmar rose about US\$ 30 million and exports from Bangladesh rose merely US\$ 0.27 million.⁴¹ The small slice in Fig. 1 reveals Bangladesh's export to Myanmar in FY 2012-13 while the bigger portion represents Myanmar's export to Bangladesh that same year. Therefore, it is clear that balance of trade is heavily in favour of Myanmar⁴² and export from Bangladesh needs to be increased. As a whole, the trade figure is insignificant compared to Bangladesh's trade with other neighbouring countries.

Even though trade volumes are low, the potential is very high. At present, although Myanmar enjoys the trade in their favour as Bangladesh imports many food items from that country, the trade gap is expected to be narrowed down as Myanmar has started to import some new items from Bangladesh since early 2012, following the visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Myanmar in late 2011.⁴³ The key items imported from Myanmar are rice, fish, timber, pickles etc. Conversely, exports to Myanmar include cement, medicine, light engineering machinery, biscuit, iron, tin and soft drinks. In the 7th Joint Trade Commission (JTC), both countries were optimistic to raise the trade figure to US\$ 500 million.

Cross-border trade receives substantial attention in different countries for confidence building. Such trade can help reduce distrust and misunderstandings between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It can also assist in building harmony among people of both countries living on the borders. Nonetheless, the current cross-border trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar is on the decline. Although there is no updated official statistics available, according to a source, Bangladesh-Myanmar border trade reached US\$ 15.336 million in FY 2011-12, but dropped to a meager US\$

³⁹ "Road, sea link with Myanmar can 'help reduce trade gap", *The Financial Express*, 09 March 2014.

⁴⁰ See Table 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See Figure 1 on Trade deficit between Bangladesh and Myanmar in FY 2012-13.

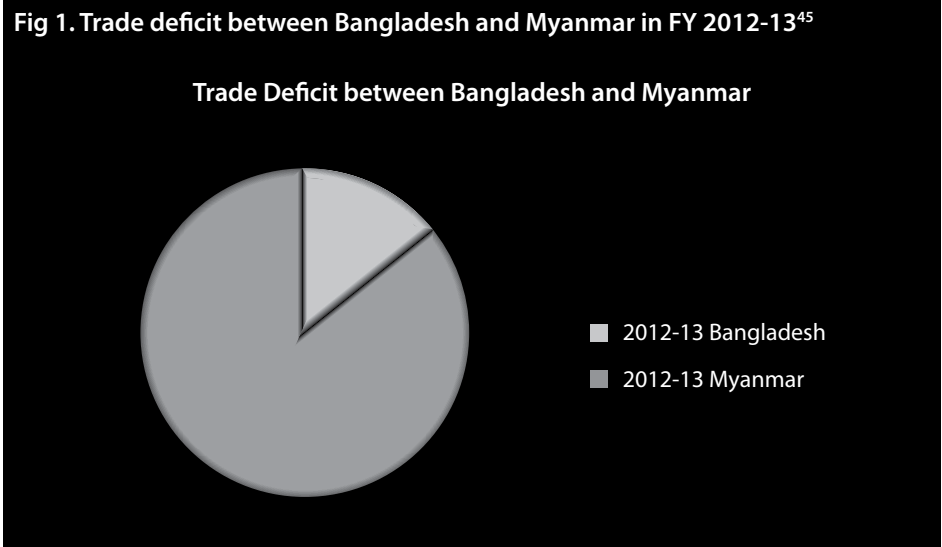
⁴³ Bangladesh's export increased to US\$13.45 million in FY 2011-12 from US\$ 9 million in FY 2010-11.

7.250 million in FY 2012-13 as revealed by a spokesperson from the Sittwe border trade centre.⁴⁴ This was due to a scarcity of fishery products and regional instability. Upgrading the infrastructures of Teknaf land port and building warehouses along the bordering areas are essential. Both countries must engage sincere efforts to use their geographic proximity for boosting cross-border trade.

Table 2: Bilateral Trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar from FY 2005-6 to 2012-13

Financial Year	Imports from Myanmar (In millions US\$)	Export to Myanmar (In millions US\$)
2005-06	66.64	5.19
2006-07	60.00	6.31
2007-08	57.85	9.58
2008-09	66.60	9.17
2009-10	57.00	10.24
2010-11	166.9	9.00
2011-12	65.25	13.45
2012-13	84.00	13.67

Source: Ministry of Trade and Commerce and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, Bangladesh Government.



Source: Ministry of Trade and Commerce and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, Bangladesh Government.

⁴⁴ See, "Myanmar relations with India, Bangladesh, Japan, North Korea, and Europe", available at http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5f/entry-3115.html, accessed on 15 February 2014.

⁴⁵ The small slice of the pie was the volume/portion of Bangladesh's trade with Myanmar in FY 2012-13.

3.6 Key Hindrances to Robust Bilateral Relations

The basis of Bangladesh foreign policy is “friendship to all, malice to none”. Based on this policy, Bangladesh has always tried to build a warm relation with Myanmar, a country ruled by Junta for long. Although democratic process started, due to the nature of the regime and suspicion, response from Myanmar was and even now is very slow. As a consequence, a number of vital agreements have not been implemented hindering bilateral cooperation. Some key pending agreements, MoUs and proposals can be mentioned here:

- Ratification of the land boundary agreement signed in 1998
- Meeting of Joint Commission agreed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit in Myanmar in December 2011
- Agreement signed in 2007 for road connectivity
- MoU between the chambers of commerce of two countries in 2012
- Renewal of cultural agreement expired in 2012
- Proposed security dialogues in 7th Foreign Office Consultation (FOC) in June 2013

It would not be exaggeration to say that understanding the Myanmar authority is a difficult job. Nevertheless, the Bangladesh government and the civil society are eager and relentlessly giving efforts to make the best of proximity with this next door neighbour.⁴⁶ Some of the key hindrances in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations that are limiting the efficacy of the official diplomacy are discussed below.

1) Lack of political will: The first one is obviously the lack of political will, particularly from the government of Myanmar, to take more robust actions in resolving the bilateral disputes. One big instance is that, due to mostly lack of political will, unresolved border issues are not only resulting into bilateral tensions but also affecting the potential of improving the volume of cross-border trade and investment, hindering inter-connectivity and development cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Concerning the Rohingya refugee problem, though governments have signed several agreements including an agreement of 1978 and an agreement in April 1992 for the ‘safe voluntary’ return of Rohingya refugees, the issue continues to offset the prospects of cooperation in other areas. A strong political will is necessary to address the sufferings of these people and create conducive environment for greater cooperation. Delay in the ratification of the 1998 agreement is another example of the lack of strong political will. Though the agreement was signed in 1998, Bangladesh and Myanmar are yet to ratify the agreement.

⁴⁶ Yunus Ali Sheikh, *op. cit.*

II) Lack of trust and confidence: Another important hindrance is the lack of mutual trust and confidence between the governments. This is an issue which needs to be addressed through gestures of goodwill and mutual compromise over a number of years. For developing a strong bilateral tie and friendship, trust and mutual confidence is essential. On the other hand, a lingering trust deficit is overshadowing a positive and dialogue mindset and hindering institutional collaboration among pertinent bodies of different ministries of the two countries. Issues of tensions between the border security forces of both countries, reluctance to exchange intelligence and take collective actions to address transnational security issues are some corollaries of trust deficit. One pertinent example is border fencing by Myanmar government. Though it confirmed that fencing is only for preventing illicit networks in the border, but barbed wire fencing 40 km of border suggests lack of mutual trust and confidence.

III) Lack of regular exchanges: A third major hindrance is the lack of regular exchanges and confidence-building measures between the border security forces. Due to the lack of regular interactions and joint ventures, both countries have failed to curb illicit networks in the border areas and effectively deal with other transnational security problems. A study by Saferworld presents an alarming scenario of illicit networks in the border areas and alerts about the security concerns.⁴⁷ However, in the 7th FOC, Bangladesh proposed a consultation mechanism between the chiefs of the border security forces of both countries. Bangladesh is also emphasising on the necessity of communication and dialogue among the civil administrations of border districts in both countries.

IV) Lack of interest and knowledge about each other: Lack of interest and knowledge among general people including business community of both countries is also obstructing official engagement as well as the potential for trade and investment. Although both countries established Joint Trade Commission in 2003, lifted tariff barriers against 152 products, arranged business meetings several times, trade and investment volume remained unexpectedly low. The lack of mutual understanding of economic and social characteristics, habits and practices have resulted into low level of political, economic and social engagement and low level of exploration of opportunities on both ends.

4. Prospects for Mutual Cooperation in Various Fields

There are potential areas where Bangladesh and Myanmar can and should extend their cooperation for reducing misperception and best utilising their proximity for mutual benefit. Several areas of cooperation are identified in this section that need to be explored by these two close neighbours.

⁴⁷ Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Mitra and Associates and Saferworld, "Safety and security in the South-East border area of Bangladesh: A public perceptions survey", London: Saferworld, February 2013.

4.1 *Energy Cooperation*

There are prospects of cooperation in the energy sector through importing gas from Myanmar, as Bangladesh faces energy shortage while Myanmar is rich in it. Applying the buyback policy, a joint venture can be initiated in the border districts of Bangladesh as such by using Myanmar's gas, Bangladesh can produce urea fertiliser and export to Myanmar for meeting its agricultural needs. Bangladesh has already showed interests for importing gas, but Myanmar has been reluctant as it always says that after meeting domestic needs, if there is any surplus, then it will export. Bangladesh has also shortages of electricity. Myanmar can export hydropower to Bangladesh. In September 2010, it was announced that two countries would sign an MoU to build two dams in Rakhine state. The dams would supply 575 Megawatts (MWs) to Cox's Bazaar. If Myanmar allows Bangladesh to buy hydroelectricity, it would be helpful for Bangladesh. However, there is no concrete timeframe and advancement for the project. Currently, Myanmar exports these commodities to China and Thailand. If it can export these commodities to those countries, then why not to Bangladesh?

4.2 *Cooperation in Promoting Human Resources*

Bangladesh can cooperate with Myanmar on microcredit, education and women empowerment. Bangladesh is proud to have two globally reputed microcredit organisations like Grameen Bank and BRAC. Model of Grameen Bank is being adopted by other countries. BRAC, on the other hand, has experience to conduct its activities in many other countries in the world including several African countries and Afghanistan, a war ravaged country. It has already started activities in Myanmar on a small scale. It can play significant role in promoting human resources in remote or backward areas like Rakhine state in Myanmar. Vocational training could be another area, where they can help Myanmar. If the Myanmar government shows interest, the Bangladesh government can proceed in this regard.⁴⁸

4.3 *People to People Exchange*

People to people exchange is the key for attaining a new height in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. It can be done through tourism, student exchange, organising sports events etc. Every year almost 3 million tourists from all over the world visit Myanmar as it has many attractive tourist spots.⁴⁹ On the other hand, every year,

⁴⁸ "Informal Track II Dialogue between BIIS and MISIS" held on 22 January at Traders Hotel in Singapore. The Bangladeshi delegation was led by Major General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, ndu, psc, Director General of BIIS while the Myanmar delegation was led by Ambassador (retd.) Win Lwin. This author participated in the dialogue as one of the members of Bangladeshi delegation. The delegation from MISIS requested the Bangladeshi delegation to help Myanmar promote human resource development particularly in the backward regions of the country.

⁴⁹ Information collected from the Southeast Asian Desk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Government on 25 March 2014.

about six hundred thousand Bangladeshi tourists visit Thailand and Malaysia, but almost nil to Myanmar. Myanmar can earn huge currency from Bangladeshi tourists by strengthening the relations. Bangladesh also has many attractive places to visit. Both countries have several religious and historic places. Moreover, Bangladesh has substantial number of Buddhists. Shwedagon, Maha Wizaya, Maha Bodhi Ta Htaung etc are some famous Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar. Therefore, tourism in the form of pilgrimage can be arranged for Bangladeshi Buddhists. Such trips can also be arranged for Myanmar's Buddhists who may wish to visit Golden Temple of Bandarban, Moinamoti Buddhist Bihar, Ramu etc. Both countries can explore vast opportunities for promotion of tourism. The coastal nearness can be used in this regard. Myanmar's port city of Sittwe and Bangladeshi port city of Cox's Bazaar are situated nearby which both nations must focus on encouraging this industry. Both are now trying to open coastal shipping between themselves, for business purposes, however such shipping facilities can be used for tourists too.

Student exchange, on the other hand, can be another way to boost up the idea of people to people contact. A good number of foreign students including Chinese students are coming to study medical science in different medical colleges and universities in Bangladesh. Students from Myanmar can also come to study medical science and engineering in Bangladesh. For boosting student exchange, the Ministry of Health, Bangladesh government, planned in October 2013 to provide financial support/scholarships to five Myanmar students who are interested in studying medical science in Bangladesh.⁵⁰ Usually, the SAARC countries have this kind of provision to support students of the region. In addition, by organising sports events, summer vacation, this people to people contact can be enhanced.

4.4 Cultural Cooperation including Interfaith Dialogue

The Bangladesh-Myanmar longstanding historical ties provide ample prospect for promoting cultural cooperation. In the past, such relations did exist which are reduced at present. Cultural delegations can visit each other. Exchange of music, drama and art should be helpful not only to know each other more but also increase mutual understanding and remove mutual misperceptions as well as distrust. In some of the famous folk songs in Southern Bangladesh, the name of Rangoon and bringing valuable things from there for loved ones are found. This cultural cooperation can make our tie stronger. Interfaith dialogues, on the other hand, between Muslims and Buddhists can be organised for broadening harmony and mutual respect. It may help reduce the tension in Rakhine state. So far, Bangladesh government is interested in organising such dialogues. Therefore, positive response from Myanmar would be great. MoU on Cultural cooperation between these two countries already expired in 2012 which needs to be renewed immediately.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

4.5 Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation between these two close neighbours is vital. Over the years, armed forces of the two countries have maintained friendly relations. Cooperation exists in the following fields: visits by high defence officials; training of defence personnel; exchange of navy ships' goodwill visits and arrangement of goodwill visit among military medical institutions, army medical corps etc.⁵¹ The consecutive visits by the Chief of Air Staff Air Marshal Muhammad Enamul Bari in January and by the Chief of Bangladesh Army Staff General Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan in February 2014 signify the importance of Bangladesh-Myanmar defence cooperation.

To increase defence cooperation, both armed forces can cooperate at least in two specific areas. Bangladesh is highly experienced and globally reputed in providing training for peace support operations and the country has also been the second largest contributor at UN peace missions. Therefore, Myanmar can be benefitted by sending its personnel to Bangladesh to be trained in those. The *Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT)* can be the leading institute for providing necessary education to those officials. Another area is that both countries can jointly carry out exercises to combat maritime piracy in the Bay of Bengal. Since they have close friendship and military cooperation with China, they may take technological and logistic support from that country.

4.6 Trilateral/Chittagong to Kunming Connectivity via Myanmar

In addition to Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) connectivity, trilateral connectivity among Bangladesh, Myanmar and China is imperative for greater cooperation. The Chittagong-Kunming connectivity will bring enormous benefit for these three countries.⁵² China, Myanmar's longtime close ally, is keenly interested in this connectivity as it would help increase its export by using the proposed Sonadia seaport in Chittagong. One of the major benefits of this connectivity is the decrease of both-way trading costs. A direct road link would help lessen transportation cost and increase smoother and timely delivery of products in trade. Thus products from Myanmar such as fish, timber, spices will be able to attract more customers in Bangladesh given the low cost and timely services. A major outcome is tax and custom related revenues that Myanmar could avail from the direct road link. The traffic of transportation from Bangladesh to China through Myanmar can provide the country with a huge amount of transit and transshipment fees and other associated revenues. Through this road link, a corridor can be extended up to other ASEAN nations.⁵³

⁵¹ Southeast Asian Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op. cit.*

⁵² See, paper presented by M. Jashim Uddin, "Bangladesh-China Relations: The Way Forward", at a Roundtable Discussion on *Bangladesh-China & Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations: Political and Economic Dimensions*, organised by BISS on 01 September 2013.

⁵³ There was a proposal of building road connectivity between Bangladesh and Myanmar in mid 1990s. The proposed road also connects Bangladesh with Thailand and China through Myanmar and thereby would bring ASEAN countries and parts of China adjacent to Myanmar closer to Bangladesh.

4.7 Investment in Myanmar

It is a fact that Myanmar is more resourceful compared to Bangladesh. Myanmar's landmass or geographical territory is almost 5 times larger than that of Bangladesh but because of the policy of Myanmar, the resources have remained largely unexplored. The country is already open to the rest of the world, and if it continues to maintain this openness, Bangladeshi business community particularly who are interested in investing there can be encouraged. During the British period, contributions of expatriate Bengalis were enormous in areas of agriculture and business in the then Burma. Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are interested in investing in Myanmar, particularly in agro-processing industries. If there is road link then it will facilitate the local entrepreneurs to visit Myanmar. There are vast scopes for cooperation in exploring energy and natural resources for the benefit of both countries.

4.8 Cooperation in Maritime issues

Demarcation of the maritime boundary was one of the key challenges in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. But, by the verdict of International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) declared on 14 March 2012, the issue was settled. The Tribunal allocated approximately 111,631 square kilometers of the relevant area to Bangladesh and approximately 171,832 square kilometers to Myanmar. The ratio of the allocated areas is approximately 1:1.54 in favour of Myanmar.⁵⁴ The solution of the problem opened new opportunities for both countries. Beyond the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ, 200 nm), Myanmar can go for fishing while Bangladesh has right to explore seabed resources. In case Bangladesh finds resources in that area, it may have to consult with Myanmar for the exploration. It is now necessary that both countries cooperate for further exploration of natural resources and amicable sharing of maritime areas. Constant communication and information sharing about exploring natural resources are necessary to avoid any further debate on the issue.

5. Significance of Track II Diplomacy in Building Confidence between Bangladesh and Myanmar

Considering the current relations, it will not be exaggerated to say that official channel of interaction between Bangladesh and Myanmar could not bring expected level of outcomes. Although there have been several attempts including high level of official visits, agreements, MoUs and FOCs, advancement in many areas has not been satisfactory as evident in ongoing tensions on the refugee and border issues, and pending agreements and MoUs. In fact, Track I diplomacy has inherent limits in negotiations as the diplomats engaged in have due obligation to the respective governments and people that restrict their scopes and they remain alert as to not say anything harming their national interests. On the other hand, although Track II

⁵⁴ Information collected from "Brief for Bangladesh delegation to China", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Government, 25 June 2013.

diplomacy is informal, it has more scope and can play a significant role for dialogue and confidence building between and among the parties. Joseph Montville, an American diplomat, coined the term “Track II diplomacy” for the first time in 1981, which covers a wide range of unofficial contacts and interactions aimed at resolving conflicts between the parties in conflict. He defined Track II diplomacy as “Unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations which aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.”⁵⁵

It is important to note here that Track II diplomacy is not a substitute for Track I diplomacy, but a supplemental operation. According to Lewis Rasmussen, “Unofficial actors, in what is known as Track II diplomacy, perform a range of supplemental or parallel functions to help improve relationships at various levels and among different individuals.”⁵⁶ Track II diplomats can facilitate successful conduct of official state relations as witnessed in the Oslo components of the Middle East Peace Process. Track II diplomacy may have a role in the settlement of a conflict in which at least one of the parties believes that Track I intervention would give too much legitimacy to its rival. Track II diplomacy, this author argues, is a second line of communication between the adversaries or parties, which seeks to bridge the gap between official government positions by serving as testing grounds for new policy recommendations and a combination of Track I and Track II efforts could be more effective in managing an intricate and long conflict.

Due to the starting of democratisation in Myanmar, it is now expected to be easier to conduct discussion or negotiation between Bangladesh, a democracy, and Myanmar. However, the country is still in transition; the regime is not fully democratic in nature and still influenced by the military who governed the country for long. Therefore, outcome of official negotiations is not being as desired. This indicates the necessity of unofficial Track II diplomacy which has long been proven to play a substantial complementary role in creating conducive environment for governments to engage more effectively and constructively.

What can be done at Track II level for reducing suspicion and building confidence between these two close neighbours? At the outset, both Bangladesh and Myanmar need to address the areas of both conflict and cooperation. Then they should go for prioritising among these issues and can form groups of relevant experts on specific issues. These groups can observe issues/areas, analyse, work on and provide viable suggestions or recommendations to the respective governments. For example, a group can initiate extensive research work on connectivity. For that, they

⁵⁵ Joseph V. Montville, “The Arrow and the Olive branch: A case for track two Diplomacy”, in John W. Mc Donald and Diane B. Bendahmane, (eds.), *Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy*, Washington D.C.: Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, 1995, p. 9.

⁵⁶ J. Lewis Rasmussen, “Peacemaking in the Twenty-First Century”, in I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen, (eds.), *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods & Techniques*, Washington D. C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1997, p. 43.

can go to the field to study this matter, not limiting their work just to literature review. They can study the existing problems, prospects, as well as necessity and feasibility of connectivity. Such practical work can be undertaken regarding the refugee and border disputes too. Bangladesh government has proposed to hold security dialogues with Myanmar. At the back channel, how these disputes emerged, what initiatives already have been taken, what are the shortcomings, what initiatives can be taken are some questions to be discussed and answered through dialogues.

Concerning the Track II initiatives between Bangladesh and Myanmar, to strengthen Bangladesh-Myanmar relations the informal dialogue between Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) held in Singapore on 22 January 2014 facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue can be a good example to mention here. The outcome of the Track II dialogue was significant. After a detailed discussion in a very friendly atmosphere, both sides agreed to give emphasis on various issues including road building between Bangladesh and Myanmar, visiting each other's institutes and signing an MoU, implementing border trade agreement to increase cross-border trade, defence cooperation in particular in the area of peacekeeping, cooperation for human resource development especially in Rakhine state, and more frequent visits by senior political leaders of both nations.⁵⁷ This kind of Track II initiative should be taken more to reduce suspicion and build confidence between the two countries.

6. Policy Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

6.1 Policy Recommendations

For enhancing the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the following recommendations are imperative:

- I Political will is the driver for developing a bilateral relation. Therefore, leaders of both countries must have their political will for bringing this relation to a new height. In this regard, mutual visits of high level leaders can play a vital role in reducing suspicion and misperception. The visits can bring new opportunities for the people of the countries.
- II Undertaking initiatives for increasing people to people contacts, e.g., forming various forums for businesspeople, journalists, students, people from different religious communities for interfaith dialogue, people involving sports etc. These will work as Track III diplomacy to shape and influence the Track I diplomacy.

⁵⁷ "Informal Track II Dialogue between BIISS and MISIS", *op. cit.*

- III Connectivity is the key to boost up the relations. Chittagong-Kunming connectivity can bring enormous benefit for Myanmar, China and Bangladesh. Therefore, the concerned ministries in Myanmar can study the matter deeply and discuss with other stakeholders initially at the Track II level.
- IV As the lack of follow up of measures decided in various bilateral meetings has been a constraint, therefore, monitoring the follow up measures to keep commitment with sincerity is an obligation for both parties involved in negotiations.
- VI For enhancing people to people contact, obtaining visa easily is a key. Both governments need to ensure smooth visa procedures. It is an issue that deserves utmost priority.
- VII Think tanks like Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Myanmar ISIS can engage more with each other, sign MoUs with relevant institutions, jointly organise international seminars and dialogues on both challenges and potential areas of cooperation.
- VIII Various measures need to be taken to promote trade and investment between these two neighbours. The current trade figure is insignificant. Considering the reality, in the short term, rapid growth in trade and investment may not be attainable, but in the long run may be. For trade promotion, chamber of commerce of both countries can provide a blueprint to increase trade and investment. Both countries should encourage and provide incentives to each other to participate in trade fairs. Illegal trades should be brought into the legal framework of trade for mutual benefits.
- IX If Myanmar wishes, Bangladesh can help Myanmar promote human resource development, implement educational reform and also provide training in vocational education in Rakhine state. Our competency in disaster management is widely recognised, thus Bangladesh can provide disaster management training to Myanmar.
- X Defence cooperation between neighbours is always crucial as it tremendously helps build confidence and has very positive impact on the overall bilateral relations. Therefore, both nations can and should expand their defence cooperation. They should continue to push each other to engage in regular security dialogues on border management.

6.2 *Concluding Remarks*

Being immediate neighbours, Bangladesh and Myanmar are politically, economically and strategically vital for each other. Connectivity between these two countries can bring enormous opportunities not only for them but also for other countries. In addition, there are various unexplored potential areas where they have prospects for mutual cooperation on a win-win basis. But regrettably, due to the Rohingya crisis and lack of enthusiasm from the Myanmar government in resolving other existing disputes, proper utilisation of the proximity and exploration of potential areas for mutual economic and strategic gains have yet to be realised. The characteristic of the Myanmar regime may have discouraged policy makers in Dhaka to build a healthy bilateral relation. Bangladesh has been always open and cooperative to resolve the disputes and expand the level of cooperation. Therefore, Myanmar should reciprocate in the same way.

Resolving the existing challenges and seeking cooperation in the potential areas can be done simultaneously by the two countries. Failure in resolving any hard issue should not be allowed to leave any negative impact on other prospective areas. Undoubtedly, the Rohingya issue has spillover effect on all other bilateral issues, but it will be wise if the issue is singled out and resolved through both Track I and Track II channels. For mutual interests of the countries and greater stability in the region, the Rohingya issue needs to be resolved as early as possible on the basis of national security concerns and humanitarian perspectives.

Bangladesh and Myanmar have prospects for enhancing their bilateral relations. Various measures including recent Track II dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar in Singapore for reducing suspicion and building confidence can be mentioned. From another perspective, proximity has both advantage and disadvantage. The disadvantage is that unless and until a cordial relation is established, an element of insecurity remains at one's doorstep. Therefore, confidence building between neighbours is very much essential. For greater friendship, removing suspicion and opening up minds are imperative. To this end, people to people exchange and more and more constructive Track II dialogue can play a vital role to shape public opinion for cooperation between the two nations. For attaining a new height in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, these close neighbours must think beyond their boundaries.