16

ORF SPECIAL REPORT

Enhancing Border Management Cooperation for BBIN

Joyeeta Bhattacharjee

India-Bangladesh border | No sails today. Photo: Mista Khan

ABSTRACT

The borders that divide countries into geographical entities also serve as channels of interconnection between the very same territories. Borders divide *and* connect, at the same time; they present both opportunities and challenges: How do sovereign nations realise the potential of cross-border engagement, while managing the various issues that arise out of opening up these borders? This is a

Observer Research Foundation (ORF) is a public policy think-tank that aims to influence formulation of policies for building a strong and prosperous India. ORF pursues these goals by providing informed and productive inputs, in-depth research and stimulating discussions. The Foundation is supported in its mission by a cross-section of India's leading public figures, academics and business leaders.

To know more about
ORF scan this code

challenge that is true for the BBIN countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. Smart border management has become an increasingly urgent imperative. In March this year the Observer Research Foundation organised a Smart Border Initiative to discuss border management in the BBIN region. This paper builds on some of the key themes discussed during the conference.

INTRODUCTION

Border management has become a major challenge in the post-globalisation world. The traditional approach to border management—emphasising on security—has become inadequate. Today countries need to not only ensure seamlessness in the legitimate movement of people and goods across their borders but also undertake measures to curb illegal flow. Increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation, coupled with the adoption of new technologies, will facilitate the movement of citizens and products without endangering security.

The same challenge is facing South Asia. While the region is perhaps among the least integrated in the world, it is also where extremism is rife, and cross-border crimes such as arms and drugs smuggling are rampant. Yet there is huge potential for stronger intra-regional connectivity in the BBIN region, including higher trade—thus making it necessary to develop more effective strategies for border management. A step in the right direction is the signing in 2015 of the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) between the BBIN countries, designed to facilitate the intra-regional movement of cargo, vehicle and people.

MAPPING THE BBIN

The BBIN bloc is located in eastern South Asia. Analysts have made various projections that this sub-region will soon become a major transit hub, with projects such as the Trans-Asian Highway that will connect the entire continent of Asia through a network of roads and railways. At the same time, the BBIN sub-region is home to significant populations of the world's poorest who live on less than a dollar a day. BBIN countries also face acute challenges of insurgency, militancy and smuggling of drugs and arms. There is no doubt that enhancing inter-BBIN connectivity will pave the way for greater economic opportunities.

Enhancing inter-BBIN connectivity will pave the way for greater economic opportunities.

The question, however, is how the BBIN nations will deal with the concomitant risks and challenges of opening up their borders.

The challenge takes on varying degrees from one country to another. To begin with, the region has borders that are open in some parts and closed in others. For example, while India's border with Bangladesh is closed, those with Nepal and Bhutan are open. Moreover, India is the only country that shares borders with all the three others in the bloc, and this raises its stakes in the pursuit of a more effective border management strategy.

Table 1. India's Borders with Neighbouring Countries

Country	Length of the border with India (in km)
Bangladesh	4,096
Bhutan	699
Nepal	1,751

Source: http://www.mha.nic.in/hindi/sites/upload_files/mhahindi/files/pdf/BM_Intro_E_.pdf

The movement of people within the sub-region is common, with travellers moving from one country to another for various reasons like higher education, health, tourism, and better economic opportunities. However, while the bulk of travel of persons across BBIN's borders is for legitimate purposes, the proliferation of cross-border crime undermines the smooth management of boundaries. Among the BBIN countries, India is the largest country and shares its borders with seven other nations. Bangladesh shares a border with Myanmar; Nepal shares with India, Bhutan and China; and Bhutan shares borders with India, Nepal and China.

BANGLADESH

The border between India and Bangladesh spans 4,096 km, making it the longest in the BBIN region and the fifth in the world. The border is porous and runs through dense forests, rivers, villages and towns. It is also a hotbed of cross-border criminal activity. Unauthorised cross-border trade in goods such as *jamdani sarees*, rice, salt and diesel has flourished, despite the presence of strict trade regulations and barriers. Both countries have taken steps to strengthen border vigil through enhancement of border guards. India has also constructed a barbed-wire fence and improved lighting along the border. It set up a border management department to oversee developmental work in the bordering areas and upgraded infrastructure at major entry and exit points. India is also establishing integrated check posts (ICP) at its land borders which will house under one roof all regulatory activities such as immigration, security and customs.

India and Bangladesh have both signed a border management plan that envisions joint patrols and information-sharing. A dispute resolution mechanism ensures regular meetings between border guards as well as director-generals of the Border Security Force (BSF) and Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). India and Bangladesh have also established border *haats* to deal with illegal or unauthorised trade. Although India and Bangladesh officially trade goods worth $7 billion, illegal trade between the two countries is estimated to be double the figure.

While experts generally consider cooperation between India and Bangladesh as the best example of border management in the region, there are persistent challenges. For example, a large number of Bangladeshi nationals who are caught

smuggling cattle across the border are killed. While the number of recorded deaths has reduced significantly after India introduced a new policy of having only non-lethal weapons for BSF's use, the measure has emboldened criminals and led to an increase in attacks on BSF personnel. A search for alternatives is ongoing.

NEPAL

Nepal shares an open border with India which facilitates the free movement of people, creating economic opportunities for both sides. Millions of Nepalese move to India for work. However, the open border is under growing threat of criminal enterprises which use it for human trafficking, mainly of women and children, narcotics trade, and the transport of fake currency.

Being a landlocked country, Nepal depends on India for connectivity to the rest of the world. Any disruption at the border creates significant socioeconomic impacts for Nepal. Ensuring the smooth movement of goods and vehicles at the border is both a necessity and a challenge.

Experts have made strong recommendations for better coordination of agencies and closer monitoring of the border. India has deployed Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) at the border. An increased use of technology in monitoring border movement can also help to secure the open border.

BHUTAN

Bhutan is another landlocked country that shares an open border with India. This border is defined by foothills, unlike the complex topography of dense forests, rivers and populations that defines the borders of India and Nepal, and India and Bangladesh. The two countries share warm bilateral ties and strong border coordination. Officials meet biannually to discuss various issues concerning border management. Bhutan's main concern is that its citizens and vehicles should be allowed free movement once they are in Indian territory. There have been instances where the movement of Bhutanese nationals has been disrupted due to socio-political disturbances in India, such as during the Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal when vehicles belonging to Bhutanese nationals were destroyed. It is necessary for India's central and state governments to ensure that appropriate measures are in place to protect the citizens of Bhutan or any other neighbour who may be in India during moments of internal strife.

There are also concerns that the open border is being abused by both criminals and insurgency groups. Insurgents from neighbouring Indian states often sneak into Bhutan for sanctuary. Although Bhutan succeeded in flushing them out of its territory in a major operation in 2003, fears are persistent about criminal and militant activity.

Migration is another issue in Bhutan-India border management. As areas bordering Bhutan are largely underdeveloped, many Indians work as manual

labour in construction sites in that country, where they manage to earn more decent wages. This migration has provoked concerns of altering demographies in both countries. Migrants and infiltrators are also accused of deforestation, poaching, and wildlife smuggling.

For Bhutan, issues of hydropower and trade within the region impinge on its border cooperation. Other issues such as rupee trade and banking facilities on both sides of the border are also important.

EXTREMISM AND RADICALISM

The threat posed by militant groups in the region has become acute. While militant groups from India's Northeast states are known to have set up camps in Bangladesh and Bhutan, Nepal's Maoists are known to harbour links in India. Bangladeshi militant organisations have also established camps in India, disturbing the peace in both countries. Incidents like the Burdwan (West Bengal) blast in October 2014 have revealed the presence in the country of a deep-rooted network of Bangladeshi militant organisations such as the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Pakistan-based militant groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba are also known to carry out terrorist attacks in India using Nepal and Bangladesh as transit countries. Controlling the movements of extremists, radicals and insurgent groups is a big challenge for border security organisations.The gravity of the problem has worsened, as militant extremist groups Al-Qaeda and Islamic State(IS) seek to widen their arc in the region.

Although the Bangladesh government has been working on stricter counter-terror measures, including the control of terror financing, there has been a rise in incidences of radicalism and militancy on its soil in the past few years. The government has banned groups like the JMB and the Harkat-ul-Jihad, and has even executed leaders like JMB's Bangla Bhai, and six of his associates responsible for the countrywide bomb blast of August 2005. Aware that madrassas can breed cadres for these militant organisations, the government has also taken steps to reform their curriculum.

Despite these steps, Bangladesh is seeing a resurgence of terrorist groups. New radical groups like the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and the Hizbut-Tahirir find recruits from madrassas and also from mainstream institutions. Moreover, these new radical groups have ideological links with international organisations like the IS and target secular voices that are critical of their ideologies, such as academics and bloggers. Security analysts and sociologists feel that unless the problem of radicalism is not addressed immediately, it will further undermine the country's stability.

External migration is an important factor in the spread of radicalisation in Bangladesh. An example of links between radicalism and migration was the formation of the Harkat-ul-Jihad Bangladesh (Huji-B), a radical group founded by fighters who returned from the Afghan jihad in 1992. There have been instances where British citizens of Bangladeshi origin have joined the IS. Analysts attribute

the rise of radicalism to the spread of Wahhabi Islam from the Gulf countries, where many Bangladeshis work, which is alarmingly supplanting the predominant Sufi Islam faith in Bangladesh. There have also been a large number of people who have been radicalised through the internet and social media, and are joining the IS fight in Syria. An immediate worry is the use of countries as transit points by such groups. For example, it is claimed that the perpetrator of the Bangkok blast of 2015 transited through Bangladesh after the attack, en route to Syria via Delhi. Such incidents have increased the need for stricter security arrangements at all entry points and closer cross-border coordination among agencies for data and information sharing.

It is also important to discuss the situation in Nepal. The transformation of Nepal from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic in the last decade has brought forth new challenges for the country. In Nepal, minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, have used their rights to form organisations and establish madrassas and mosques. Wary of these developments, the government has taken steps such as the formation of a madrassa board to monitor the curriculum and widen it to include subjects like mathematics and history. To control radicalisation, the government has also banned its citizens from seeking employment in strife-torn countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan. However, a large number of Nepalese work in the Gulf countries. Security analysts warn that for many of them, when they return to Nepal they are already radicalised, posing a security threat to their home country.

There are also issues of radicalism in the Terai region. Various militant groups have taken advantage of the open border to engage in subversive activities in India and the region. Nepal's weak infrastructure at airports and borders increases the possibility of the country being used as a transit point by various groups. Thus there is an immediate need to upgrade the infrastructure at entry points in the country to monitor the movement of people.

Understanding the state of affairs in India's northeast region is also crucial for discussing BBIN, as it borders the other three countries. The 2014 Burdwan blast was a watershed incident that changed the security dynamics of the region, given that it exposed the nexus of cross-border terrorist organisations active in the area in question. Arrests that followed the blast exposed the existence of sleeper cells of organisations such as JMB operating in the region. The incident raised concerns about the rise of radicalism through migration and other security challenges for the BBIN project. Active and constant support from Bangladesh and Bhutan is necessary to help dismantle militant camps in India's Northeast.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

An example of effective use of technology in border management is the Schengen Information System of the European Union (EU), which aids in the sharing of information among these countries. The initiative has enabled an integrated border management system within the EU, which covers regular travel

facilitation, understanding of entry and exits, and cooperation among different services, including police, customs and border controls. Such cooperation is key to the smooth functioning of all border management systems. To keep a check on the movement of visitors, the EU is trying to establish a smart border, although the huge influx of refugees from war-torn Syria is posing its own set of problems.

Whether the EU model can be replicated in the BBIN region remains to be seen. Countries in South Asia have mostly adopted a bilateral approach in dealing with borders and the idea of developing a border cooperation mechanism at the regional level is still new.

Technology for managing borders can be used to either guard borders and/or build border infrastructure. There are various technologies available for the former, such as the smart fencing, electronic-optics and surveillance devices, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Specific technologies exist for specific purposes. Regarding the latter use of technology in border management, there is a need to upgrade infrastructure at borders, particularly at entry and exit points. India has announced that it will be setting up 13 integrated check points along its borders, where technology will play a major role. Devices like scanners and weighing machines have already been installed for smooth functioning of ICPs. But experts feel that technology has a bigger role to play at these posts. For instance, they suggest greater use of information and communications technologies to reduce paperwork and promote faster clearances.

For border cooperation to succeed for BBIN, there is a need to synergise the system and strengthen infrastructure.

Considering the economic conditions of BBIN countries, border management specialists have cautioned that all countries in the region might not have the financial capacity or expertise to suddenly take a leap forward in the use of better and more sophisticated technology. For border cooperation to succeed for BBIN, there is a need to synergise the system and strengthen infrastructure. This, in turn, requires joint capacity-building and training. While India can help its neighbours in building capacity, additional support can be sought from countries outside the region that have successfully cooperated with their neighbours. For instance, the United States has a smart border system with Canada and also organises activities on border management for capacity-building in various countries.

In the BBIN region, there is concern whether the use of technology is an economically viable solution. Policymakers and analysts feel that while the development and use of new technologies might pose financial challenges in the initial phases, in the long run the cost will fall below that necessary for the deployment of guards along the lengthy borders. Further, technology is important for better coordination among agencies, as this will enable smooth data-sharing both inside the country as well as across the borders. The lack of coordination among agencies is a key reason for the malfunctioning of land custom stations and ICPs. No border cooperation will be successful unless border infrastructures are fully developed.

WAY FORWARD

Border management in BBIN countries will be crucial for the development of the sub-region. Since challenges and concerns vary across the member countries, building consensus for a common border management framework will take time. As the BBIN countries are now discussing deepening cooperation in areas of trade and energy, there is cause for optimism about such prospects.

Recommendations for effective border management in the BBIN region:

1) Adopt biometric and digital profiling of citizens who travel across the region.
2) Set up smart fencing along borders.
3) Sensitise agencies along the borders about legal and illegal movements.
4) Install closed circuit televisions for better border monitoring.
5) Promote cooperation and exchange of information among officials across the borders to tackle challenges of radicalism and extremism.
6) Develop a shared understanding and work together to counter terrorist and militant groups operating across the entire region.
7) Establish an integrated border security system to deal with drug trafficking, human trafficking, movement of weapons, infiltration by terrorists and similar other violations.
8) Strengthen coordination and integration among agencies for smooth functioning of the ICPs.
9) Improve the capacity of various agencies by training them to use technologies as and when adopted.
10) Improve socio-economic conditions of the border populations.
11) Take into account interests of the local population. As problems vary from country to country, a blanket policy for the sub-region should be avoided. Policies should be made in accordance with ground realities.
12) Keep in mind emerging challenges for security and welfare of borderlands, which include issues relating to water, climate change, agriculture, public health, telecom and cyber security, as these have trans-border implications.
13) Maintain strong relations with each other, given that any border management framework for BBIN will depend on the nature of bilateral relations between its member countries.

ORF OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Ideas · Forums · Leadership · Impact