

Transit Issue with India: A Comprehensive Approach

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A debate has been raging in the country on whether transit facilities should be given to India or not through the land territory of Bangladesh. Some argue that it should not be given unless some core bilateral issues with India are resolved, while some have advanced the view that transit is an economic issue for trade facilitation and should not be politicized. Some have argued that what India wants is not a transit but a corridor.

Whichever view one holds, the fact of the matter is that transit issue is a complex one. It is a multi-faceted issue. I shall discuss it in the following paragraphs:

Difference between the three concepts: Corridor/Transit/Transshipment:

The connotation of transit is to be distinguished from that of a corridor. In the corridor, a country gives some kind of rights or control on the land to the other country making it a defacto of its territory, while in transit there is no question of rights involved in the land territory allowed for transit. It provides only transit facilities under certain conditions and can be withdrawn.

For example, under the Bangladesh-India 1974 Land Boundary Agreement, Bangladesh wanted a lease in perpetuity an area of India's territory 178 metres X 85 metres near Tin Bigha to connect enclave Dahagram with main land of Bangladesh. But eventually Bangladesh did not get "corridor" from India.

In pre-partition days, Jinnah wanted a corridor from East Pakistan to West Pakistan through India but India rejected it because Pakistan would have control on the land territory of the corridor. Russia wants a corridor from its territory Kaliningrad to Russia's mainland through Lithuania but it has been rejected because of the same reasons.

In the instant case, India wants to dispatch goods and other materials from western parts of India to its seven land-locked northeastern states through Bangladesh and no kind of rights exists on the land territory of Bangladesh. This is transit, an inter-country passage, like waterway-transit already provided to India since 1972.

Transshipment is distinct from transit. Transshipment refers to the same inter-country passage using Bangladeshi-owned transportation, whereas in transit Indian –owned surface transport move through the transit from one end to the other.

In Europe, Germany or Austria sends goods to Italy through Switzerland. Another instance of transit, Alaska dispatches goods to mainland US through Canada.

Is transit an economic issue?

Some argue transit is an economic issue. It facilitates trade and therefore it may be perceived as such. I would argue that this is conceivable but for most of the cases political relations define

economic relations. In other words, political relations cannot be separated from economic relations. History is replete with examples of friendly political relations providing the climate and the incentive for forging closer economic relations.

It has been seen that in most case progression has been from close political relations to the deepening of economic relations. For example, why does Bangladesh not have economic relations with Israel? It is because there is no political relationship with that country.

Political relationships that are not characterized by mistrust or suspicion allow first steps in economic relationship which would then expand and generate vigorous inter-state economic activities.

In that context, for creating an appropriate political climate, India has to come up with fair and just proposals to resolve some of the bilateral issues that affect Bangladesh people with “bread and butter issues”. The issues of top priority are (a) maritime boundary, (b) land boundary including the exchange of enclaves, (c) reduction of huge trade deficit and (d) equitable sharing and management of water of trans-boundary Rivers

They are long-standing disputes and Bangladesh cannot force India to resolve these issues either bilaterally or through third parties intervention including mediation, arbitration or adjudication. India has to take initiative in building confidence measures pursuing the “Gujral doctrine” with its small neighbours to manifest its good will.

Is transit consistent with sealing off the Indo-Bangladesh border?

Another prickly issue is fencing by India with barbwire barrier of the Bangladesh-India border, Does fencing off Bangladesh make India a good neighbour?

India as of June 2007 has been quietly sealing itself off Bangladesh, totaling 2,500 kilometres in the past seven years. The fencing project will eventually reach across 3,300 kilometres, or 2050 miles, hundreds of rivers, and long stretches of forests and fields.

Of the total 3,300 kilometres fencing, 577 kilometres are in the Assam-Meghalaya border. Work of 91 kilometres has been complete and work has been in progress for 129 kilometres and gradually India will seal off this 577-kilometres Bangladesh border in this sector.

In the US, its decision to fence 1,100 kilometres of the Mexican border triggered months of political debate ranging across immigration policy to the environmental impact. When Israel announced it would build a 680-kilometre barrier around the West Bank, an international outcry erupted and the International Court of Justice declared illegal some of the barrier because it was inhuman. But there has been barely a ripple over India’s far larger project began in earnest in 2000.

Bangladesh Parliament must now discuss and debate how and in what way does the fencing have impact on environment and the people who live in border area?

While India has been silently sealing off its border from Bangladesh, it wants land transit through Bangladesh. Does it not occur to India that such request is contrary to the spirit behind the fencing India-Bangladesh border? Does fencing manifest its goodwill towards Bangladesh?

Implications of transit facility:

To my knowledge, no detailed study has been undertaken on the possible benefits and non-benefits to Bangladesh. The study may include the infrastructure, viability, cost-benefit analysis, risk analysis and management and security that involve health hazards and environmental impact on hundreds of vehicles moving through Bangladesh.

Furthermore, the study for a regional multi-modal transport system will be useful so that Bangladesh can also get transit facility to Nepal and Bhutan or vice versa. Bangladesh has already provided transit facility to Nepal to use Bangladesh ports but Nepal cannot use it because India is reportedly reluctant to provide Nepal transiting through Bangladesh.

India's Prime Minister Dr. Singh in a speech on 3rd April 2007 at the SAARC New Delhi Summit spoke of "full regional connectivity" The regional connectivity could be a springboard for exploiting the vast physical resources of the eastern hub of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.

To sum up:

Transit or transshipment through Bangladesh is not a simple issue. I would argue that it can be provided to India. But before providing, a detailed study must be undertaken on the advantages and disadvantages accrued to people of Bangladesh. Furthermore reciprocal transit facilities must be given to Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan by India as well.

The transit issue should be viewed as an integrated one with other issues mentioned above and cannot be treated separately.

In any case substantive discussions can only take place on transit with the newly elected government in New Delhi after general elections that will be held within two months (April).

