

# **BIMSTEC for Countering Terrorism and Transnational Crime: An Insight from Bangladesh Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Terrorism and Transnational crime are a domestic, regional as well as a global issue. No nation can combat terrorism without the global as well as regional cooperation. The aim of this paper is to explore the activities BIMSTEC for countering terrorism and transnational crime with individual prominence given to Bangladesh. Synchronic approach has used to accomplish the study and it has conducted through content analysis techniques. BIMSTEC has made considerable progress but yet it needs to accomplish comprehensive approaches within the regions to combat against both the domestic as well as transnational terrorism and crime.

**Keywords:** BIMSTEC, CTTC, and Bangladesh

## **1. Introduction**

Today, the world where we live is plagued by terrorism and the constantly looming nature of fear for the next attack. Terrorism has become a core assumption among national and international policymakers since the events of September 11, 2001 (Somma, 2011). For this reason Countering Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) has been adopted as an area of cooperation in 2004 following the 1st BIMSTEC Summit. Since then it has made some progress but yet there remains scope for enhanced cooperation (Rahman M. A., 2015).

## **2. Objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study was to explore the activities of BIMSTEC for countering terrorism and transnational crime with special emphases on Bangladesh. The specific objectives of this study was

- To explore the activities of BIMSTEC,
- To examine the trends of terrorism and transnational crime (TTC) in Bangladesh,
- To identify the means and way to counter the existing threats of the region,
- The explore the role of Bangladesh for CTTC,
- To identify the future challenges of BIMSTEC.

## **3. Methodology of the Study**

Synchronic approach used to accomplish the study as it is the process of analysis the similarities and differences of languages at a given point of time by focusing on their structural features and characteristics and by using phonological, morphological and syntactic explanations including semantic and pragmatic aspects (Hämäläinen, 2013). Data were collected by using purposive sampling of 'themes' and 'characters' of messages of different diplomatic websites, analytical websites, government documents, world leading online news agency, newspapers, books, and journals. The data collection period was January 2015 to October 2015. The study has conducted through content analysis techniques.

## **4. Result**

### **4.1 Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC)**

BIMSTEC cooperation under CTTC has been divided into 4 sub-groups with lead shepherds - Intelligence Sharing (Sri Lanka); Combating Financing of Terrorism (Thailand), Legal and Law Enforcement Issues (India) and Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Narcotics Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors (Myanmar) (Rahman M. A., 2015).

## **4.2 Trends of Terrorism and Transnational Crime (TTC) in Bangladesh**

Terrorism and Transnational Crime (TTC) issues continue to represent some of the most pressing and potentially useful areas for cooperation in the BIMSTEC region. In part due to the dialogue within BIMSTEC, there is a growing regional consensus on the nature of these threats. A large number of international and regional efforts exist towards combating these threats. There is limited direct involvement or in some countries no direct involvement with international terrorism. There are domestic and regional groups perpetrating terrorism in the region (Rahman M. A., 2015).

There are no significant threats of terrorism at present in BANGLADESH. However it is evident that terrorist outfit like JMB has conducted a number of terrorist attacks for example nationwide series bomb blast on 17 Aug 2005 where about 459 small bombs were detonated in 63 out of 64 districts all over Bangladesh within the space of 30 minutes (Gohel, 2014).

Bangladesh is also aware that Huji-B carried out bomb blast in a cultural program of Udichi in Jessore on 7 March 1999 where 10 people killed and injured 106. It is also responsible for Bomb blast in Bengali New Year Cultural Festival at Ramna Botomul on 14 April 2001, Grenade attack on British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdury on 21 May 2004, Grenade attack on ex-Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria on 27 Jan 2005, Grenade attack on a Public meeting organized by Awami League on 21 August 2004 at Bangabandhu Avenue with an aim to assassinate the then Leader of opposition and presently Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina which left 24 people dead on the spot and more than 500 injured (Sobhan, 2008).

Nowadays many terrorist outfits are working in 'sleeper cells' for example attack on secular writer Prof. Huamayun Azad, Blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, secular writer and blogger Abhijit Roy, and blogger Washikur Rahman Babu (Joscelyn, 2015). On the other hand killing of Italian as well as Japanese citizen on last 28 September 2015 and 03 October 2015 is a matter of worry (Correspondent, 2015). However, it is evident that the following outfits are active in underground at present-Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), Hizbut Tahrir Bangladesh (HT-B), Jamaatul Mujahiden Bangladesh (JMB), Harkatul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (Huji-B), Ansar al Islam, Ansar al Islam Bangla 2, Ansar Bangla 7.

It is a matter of worry that there are inter-relation between home grown terrorist outfits and international terrorist outfits in the BIMSTEC region. ABT has translated many magazines of AQAP in Bengali. So it is clear that they have adopted the ideology of AQAP. After the formation of AQIS, it is learnt that home grown terrorist outfits like ABT and JMB are trying to get support from AQIS to increase their strength. Besides from inception, Huji-B has a link with AQ as most of its founding members were Afghan War veterans. Again, we have seen that JMB and Huji-B exchanged their training and material support with Rohingyas during 1990's. Transnational terror outfits ideology is imported to Bangladesh through Diaspora people living in Western countries like HT-B is an extension of HT-UK. Regional terror outfits like LeT, TTP, ULFA, JEM, SIMI have interest on Rohingya refugees. They might use Bangladesh as a transit route for conducting operation in India and Myanmar as they have shown their concern over Rohingya issue. Joining of Diaspora in IS (even though the number is very low) may inspire the youths of the country to join in IS (Chandran, 2015).

## **4.3 Organized Transnational Crime**

The organized transnational crime in BIMSTEC region are as follows which is nothing but the great issues of political tension and dispute among the member countries. These are

### **4.3.1 Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration**

Bangladesh acts as an important source and transit country for trafficking in persons and illegal migration in BIMSTEC region (Bangladesh, 2014). Bay of Bengal situated is the southern part of Bangladesh which blessed for human broker to traffic a person. International agencies estimate that as many as 88,000 men, women, and children have traveled from Bangladesh and Burma in boats to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia from March 2014 to May 2015. Most have traveled in boats to Thailand, where they are then transported overland into jungle camps in Thailand and Malaysia. The camps are used as holding facilities in which victims are detained, extorted, and abused, with mass graves found recently on both sides of the border of Thailand and Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

### **4.3.2 Drug Trafficking**

Bangladesh is situated in the central point between the 'golden triangle' (Myanmar, Thailand and Laos) and the 'golden crescent' (Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) in terms of geographical location. And it is also surrounded by the major drug producing countries of South Asia. According to data released by criminal justice programs, India is a main supplier of illegal narcotics to countries in South Asia. India provides most of the heroin and cannabis that is consumed in Bangladesh.

Again, the use of yaba and Phensedyl that mostly comes from the neighboring Myanmar is increasing in great volume with each passing year. According to a report of a vernacular daily, about four cores of yaba tablets were used to be bought and sold in 2010 in Bangladesh. After five years in 2014 this figure stood at 28 cores. This means that during the last five years use of yaba registered a sevenfold increase. At the same time huge

amount of phensedyl bottle has been coming through Bangladesh and Myanmar border daily. This frequent access of yaba and Phensedyl to BD emerge as a great threat for the country by destroying its youth power (Rahaman, 2014).

#### **4.3.3 Gold Smuggling**

Gold smuggling via Bangladesh has reached an alarming level which has resulted mainly from the rise in import duty on gold in India. Smuggling syndicates are using Bangladesh as a transit point to smuggle the yellow metal to India, which has hiked import duty on it thrice to 10 percent since January last year. Around 520 kilograms of gold was seized last year, whereas the amount was only 25 kg in 2012, according to customs intelligence unit of the National Board of Revenue.

Customs officials seized 220 kg of gold at Dhaka and Chittagong airports in the last three months. In July 2014, 1,064 gold bars weighing around 124 kg were seized at Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka. It is the biggest gold haul in recent years.

Seizure of one or two kg gold every day is quite common at the two airports. Customs authorities and local jewellery traders say price gap between the UAE, India and Bangladesh encourages smugglers to bring gold to Dhaka for transporting it to India illegally. Per 10 gram gold costs about Tk 38,000 in Dubai, more than Tk 40,000 in India and around Tk46, 000 in Bangladesh.

India raised import duty on gold from 2 percent to 4 percent in April 2012, 6 percent in January last year, 8 percent in June and 10 percent in August to stop outflow of foreign currency and reduce the yawning current account deficit. In May 2014, traders in India imported 1.62 lakh kg gold, which came down to 19,300 kg in November following the increase in import duty. Gold smuggling has become very lucrative for offenders, as smuggling of one kg gold leads to net savings of over 1.5 lakh rupees through legal channel, according to India's Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The World Gold Council estimates that a staggering 150-200 tons of gold is smuggled to India each year (Rahman S. , 2015).

#### **4.4 Resource and Way to Counter the Existing Threats of the Region**

The platform has been set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) though India is entrusted with the sector Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime.

Four Sub-Groups or SGs, each led by a Member country designated as lead shepherd has been working for CTTC. These are

- a. Intelligence Sharing – Sri Lanka;
- b. Combating Financing of Terrorism – Thailand;
- c. Prevention of illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals - Myanmar, and
- d. Legal and Law Enforcement Issues – India.

On the other hand, the major activities of BIMSTEC are as follows:

- The “BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking” has been adopted in 2009.
- Only India and Bangladesh have ratified the’ Convention– (Article 15, all members need to ratify the Convention for its entry into force).
- Total 15 Articles’ has made.
- The BIMSTEC CTTC related convention appears’ more as a confidence-building measure;
- The JWG-CTTC has held 6 meetings, the last or 6th having been held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 7- 8 May, 2013; The meeting also approved the final text of the “BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters”; Recommended inclusion of “Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration” on the Agenda of the 7th JWGCTTC meeting and creation of a new Sub Group (SG) on this; Also approved the proposal to start drafting and negotiating on “BIMSTEC Treaty on Extradition”.
- The Sub-Group Meetings Intelligence Sharing SG – 3 meetings. The Fourth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Intelligence Sharing was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 30-31 March 2015. It was attended by representatives from BIMSTEC member states, and discussed the necessity for and possible modalities to share intelligence among BIMSTEC countries. Combating Financing of Terrorism (CFT) SG – 7 meetings. Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals SG – 3 meetings The Legal and Law Enforcement SG – 5 meetings.
- The organization has been working on various instruments and mechanisms including conventions, MOUs, information and intelligence sharing, channels of communication, database, designation and enlisting of focal points and experts, e-mail contact points, joint or shared web pages, e-learning and sharing of experiences, technical assistance and setting up of drug monitoring desks etc since its inception in 1997.
- In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit CTCT 2014, the CTTC agenda has been strengthened through the acknowledgement

of the following initiatives

- Enhancing focus from international terrorism to terrorism in all its forms by “emphasizing the need for closer cooperation in combating all forms of terrorism and transnational crimes.”
- Stressed alleviation of poverty to ensure dignity, improve quality of life and well being of the people;
- Recognized the need of the LDC members to be supported in their developmental efforts;
- Calls for expediting the ratification of the Convention; and
- Also call for early signing of the “BIMSTEC’ Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (Rahman M. A., 2015).”
- The 7th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 04-05 August 2015 at the invitation of the Government of Thailand. The 7th Meeting has finalized the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (BIMSTEC, 2015).

#### 4.5 Bangladesh and BIMSTEC CTTC

Bangladesh has been an active member of BIMSTEC in the areas of CTTC. The Government of Bangladesh has offered to host Eighth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime in 2016. Bangladesh has made exemplary progress in CTTC in line with not only BIMSTEC but to fulfil its commitments to all bilateral, regional, and international instruments. Follows a ‘zero tolerance’ policy towards terrorism; in April 2009, the government formed the following counter terrorism strategy.

- a. **Developing a Comprehensive CT Strategy:** Appreciating the likely terrorist threat, our govt. is keen in devising a comprehensive counter terrorism strategy. The strategy has four principal strands: prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. Our motto is to “Deny Sanctuary to Terrorist”. In addition to decapitating the terrorist organizations, the government is strongly pursuing to defuse the ideological links to different terrorist outfits and individuals to prevent the spread of radicalize ideas.
- b. **Anti Terrorism Act 2009/13:** The Current govt. has passed the original Anti-Terrorism Act in 2009 after coming to power designed to combat terrorism which also has been amended subsequently twice in 2012 & in 2013. In the latest amendment, the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act 2013, provisions were made for the courts to accept videos, still photographs and audio clips used in social media as evidence. The amended law also provides for capital punishment and stiff financial penalties for terrorism and subversive activities, depending upon the gravity of the crimes. Whoever commits terrorist act shall be punished with death or imprisonment for life time or to a maximum **14 years** and not less than **4 years** rigorous imprisonment, to which fine may also be added.
- c. **Enactment of Money Laundering Prevention Act:** Reforms have also been undertaken in the area of terrorism financing. In 2012, the government has enacted the Money Laundering Prevention Act 2012, which is the first legislation in Bangladesh making specific provisions for money laundering and terrorism financing. The Financial Intelligence Unit of the Bangladesh Bank has taken effective steps to curb terrorism financing which tells "a person guilty of the offence shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 12 years and it shall not be less than 4 years, to which fine may also be added which is twice the money involved in the crime or taka 1 million (whichever is more)".
- d. **Formation of National Committee for Intelligence Coordination (NCIC):** In the July 2009, the govt. of Bangladesh has formed an eight-member “National Committee for Intelligence Coordination”, with the Hon'ble Prime Minister as Chairperson, to co-ordinate the intelligence activities of different agencies. The committee is responsible to improve the campaign against extremism through exchange of information among law enforcement and intelligence agencies.
- e. **Formation of National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention (NCMRP):** In April 2009, AL government also formed a 17-member “National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention,” headed by the state minister for home affairs, comprising of relevant ministries and security agencies, to tackle extremism and mobilize public opinion against extremist activities.
- f. **Mutual Legal Assistance Act 2012:** In 2012, Bangladesh has also enacted the Mutual Legal Assistance Act 2012 which provides a legal framework for inter-country cooperation in carrying out enquiries, prosecutions and trial of criminal activities. This law empowers the government of Bangladesh to freeze properties of criminals and terrorists and their equipment used in criminal activities in line with the request of a foreign country.
- g. **Enactment of Children Act 2013:** The current govt. also enacted the Children Act in 2013, with provisions for capital punishment of those convicted of exploiting children to commit terrorist acts including keeping provision for the appointment of a Children’s Affairs Officer in every police station.
- h. **Enactment of ICT Act (Cyber Crime):** In October 2013, AL govt has amended the “Information and

Communication Technology Act (ICTA)” 2006 to punish the cyber criminal within the ambit of criminal jurisdiction. Under the new legislation people can be arrested for committing the cybercrime without any arrest warrant. This amendment raises the penalties for cyber crimes setting a minimum of 7 years imprisonment and a maximum of 14 years or a fine of Tk. 1 crore or both. Besides, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has formed a special cell to crack down cyber terrorism. The 11-member Bangladesh Computer Security Incident Response Team (BD-CSIRT) has already started its work.

- i. **National Education Policy 2010:** Govt. also introduced a secular National Education Policy in 2010, highlighting the need for reforming madrasa curriculum to a standard level that includes language, math, and science modules. The govt. has also recognized the need for developing a strong awareness campaign and as a result has issued guidelines to 114,000 schools, madrasas and universities to warn students about dangers of religious militancy. In addition, the government plans to introduce anti-extremism chapters in academic text books.
- j. **Reform & Modernization of Madrasa Education System:** Modernization of Madrasa education system and gradually bringing all Madrasa into equal footing are priority tasks for the Govt. Some of the steps taken by the government to modernize Madrasa education system are:
  - a. Introduction of science group
  - b. Establishment of academic buildings of the Madrasa throughout country
  - c. Distribution of Computers to increase computer literacy of the students
  - d. Training of teachers through Bangladesh Madrasa Teachers Training Institute, Gazipur
  - e. Improvement of syllabus and curriculum at all levels
  - f. Introduction of extra-curriculum activities for the students

Besides this BD has taken various measures in contrast to organized transnational crime, like Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act, 2012; Also adopted the first National Plan of Action or NPA 2012-2014 to implement this comprehensive law. The Narcotics Control Act 1990 is the principal counternarcotics legislation in Bangladesh. Three pronged strategy for prevention of trafficking in narcotics are Supply reduction; demand reduction; and harm reduction (BISS, 2015).

#### 4.6 The Achievements of BIMSTEC

The achievements of the platform are as follows since its inception.

- The Convention on CTTC The Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance;
- Inclusion of Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration;
- Expanding terrorism coverage to “all its forms”.
- Extradition Treaty and formulating a BIMSTEC specific intelligence sharing’ Database;
- Acceptance to Indian offer of training on issues’ relating to drug enforcement for officials of the member states;
- All the member states have Anti Money Laundering’ (AML) and Combating Financing of Terrorism (CFT) related Acts (Rahman M. A., 2015).

#### 4.7 Future Challenges

##### 4.7.1 BIMSTEC Free Trade Area

The most important driver should be the **BIMSTEC Free Trade Area**. While a Framework Agreement has been signed, it has yet to come into force. Member countries should not only conclude their negotiations on trade regarding goods but they should also quickly expand their scope to services and investments as it has been envisaged in the Framework Agreement. Physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity should be the cornerstones of this cooperation (Singh, 2015).

##### 4.7.2 ‘Mental Resistance’ to cooperation and exchange information

Ensuring Regional Cooperation in terms of **economy, trade and terrorism** is still farfetched. Mental resistance to cooperation and exchange information is a great challenge in this sector (Rahman M. A., 2015). BIMSTEC, like SAARC, SAFTA etc is yet to play any fruitful role. Because BIMSTEC has so far been “Summit based.” To address the regional as well as domestic terrorism, transnational crime and the proliferation of a regional trade agreement that is BIMSTEC FTA, and India–Bangladesh FTA, the activities of BIMSTEC should be strengthened through the pragmatic implementation.

##### 4.7.3 More Focused and Coordinated Pragmatic Initiatives

BIMSTEC needs to make concrete progress on those areas where it can bring the most added values. BIMSTEC has dealt with a wide range of CTTC issues including illegal trade and trafficking of goods including prohibited, substandard or spurious products, drugs and narcotics, arms, trafficking of people including women and children, money laundering, smuggling of currencies and counterfeiting (Rahman M. A., 2015). A more focused and coordinated pragmatic work plan is needed.

#### 4.8 Concluding Remark

BIMSTEC is nothing but the unified umbrella which has been working to solve regional problems through regional solutions. To enhance the speed of this forum regional based informal approach is needed than a bureaucratic one. Considering this zone of possible cooperation, BD and other BIMSTEC countries should strive to improve all kinds of connectivity through trade facilitation infrastructure, enhancing CTTC measures as well as institutional connectivity through the convergence of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures for cross-border trade and investment. Together they can facilitate better people-to-people connectivity (Singh, 2015).

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