



SADF FOCUS

Hriday Ch. Sarma

South Asia Democratic
Forum (SADF)

19 Avenue des Arts
1210 Brussels
Belgium

info@sadf.eu
www.sadf.eu

+12 026 834 180
+32 2 808 42 08

Reg. Num. BE
833606320

Prospecting energy cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN

ABSTRACT

The paper puts forth the idea of establishing inter-regional energy connectivity between the eastern expanse of South Asia and north-western expanse of Southeast Asia. Initially, it discusses the inter-regional connectivity projects that have been completed recently, and the ones that will likely come about in the near future. Then it examines the shared historical linkages of this broad landmass. Further, it explores the current geo-political environment of the two regions, which it deems as conducive for generating energy cooperation in various sectors and locales. Thereafter, it studies the prospect of the energy cooperation from the theoretical prism of regional energy security cooperation. Finally, it gauges the present interloping opportunities and challenges while proposing an increase in the level of energy cooperation among these states across the broad region.

Keywords: Inter-regional connectivity, Energy, SAARC, ASEAN

New Inter-connectivity Developments



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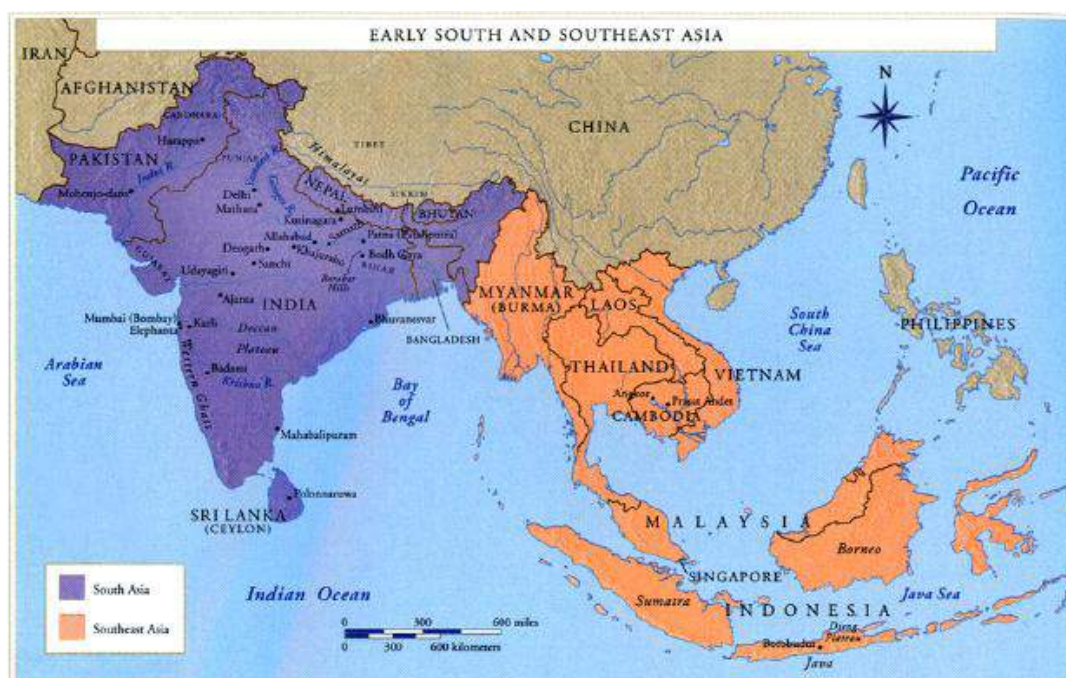
The work on India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) international highway- a 1,990 miles (3,200 km) strategic road connecting Moreh town in Chandal district in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar's Tamu, Mandalay and Myawad- has already begun. The three countries are likely to soon sign a trilateral road agreement with the purpose of promoting cross-border trade and tourism. This roadway upon completion will be the first of its kind that will cut across the sacrosanct borders of the countries in the region. Then two major regional groupings in our planet- SAARC and ASEAN- will have a physical 'bridging link'.

The aforesaid development comes off the heels of other small but important steps taken in pursuit of establishing close inter-regional connectivity. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) signed a (sub)-regional motor vehicle agreement in June 2015. The BBIN agreement has paved the way for movements of individual vehicles, passenger vehicles as well as cargo. Earlier in August 2013, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) process between India and ASEAN became fully operational when the two sides endorsed the texts of the Trade and Services and Investment agreements for implementing its stipulations.

These developments for achieving intra-and inter-regional connectivity bring with them a gamut of new opportunities and challenges. However, at this juncture the existing dynamics need to be duly taken into consideration for ensuring a smooth transition into a new reality. Moreover, the foundational base for effective engagements among the people residing in the two regions need to be fortified in order to achieve lasting inter-connectivity. In the present era, energy qualifies as one of the most essential commodity for all of us. Hence, energy cooperation, which includes joint energy infrastructure projects, energy trade, energy sharing arrangements, etc., holds potential to build practical inter-dependency and progressive integration between the two regions.

Following the paper builds a case that energy connectivity should not be considered as a final goal, rather it should be considered as a medium, which is embedded within the larger scheme of national and regional plans. This will then establish inter-dependency in a true sense between SAARC and ASEAN blocs. This will, in-process, bring about shared development for all on equitable terms, which will result in greater economic prosperity, socio-cultural amalgamation and political bonhomie.

Eastern South Asia-North-western Southeast Asia: a natural landmass



Courtesy: <http://www.aryaputr.com/>

In ancient times, the Indian subcontinent was spread out across the Great North Indian Plains, mostly alongside the basins of the Himalayan Rivers of Ganga and Indus. Hence, the centres-of-power in the subcontinent principally lied in today's Pakistan. It was only after the British India Empire expanded its territorial conquests over Assam in 1826 that this region (present-day Northeast India) for the first time officially came within the Indian state.¹ Prior to that, it maintained its political and cultural allegiance, in limited terms, to the adjoining land areas. The relationships of patrimony in pre-colonial times extended over an area much larger than generally assumed, including Tibet, Assam, Bhutan and northern Bengal.²

Even during the British rule in India, the British India government pursued limited administration of the Northeast frontier. The Northeast region remained a frontier region, and never constituent part of the mainland British India Empire. After India achieved independence, the country's government toed the 'negligence policy' of its predecessor for long, i.e. until recently in realistic terms. This not only cut off the region's arteries for transacting with the adjacent regions, but also slowed down its rate of economic activities and overall development.

Throughout history, the Burmese culture has been enriched by the Indian civilization.³ The country acted as a bridge between China and India during World War II. However, the military junta's takeover of power in the country in 1962 led to complete reversal of preceding reality. The junta government isolated the country from the rest of the world and cut off business ties with other countries. Hence, it acted as a physical barrier for inter-connectivity between countries on its either sides until of late. Today with Aung San Suu Kyi led new democratic government coming back to power in the country, there remains prospect for the country to regain its historic role of acting as a natural bridge across the broad region.

¹ (In 1826) When the Ahom kingdom passed into British hands, it was the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-India imperial formation.

² The Ahom rulers of Assam send an annual "Peshkash" or tribute to the Dalia Lama based in Lhasa.

³ The existence of cultural ties between India and Burma can be traced back to as far as the life-time of King Asoka. ...The rich Indo-Burmesities continued throughout the medieval period uninterruptedly. In the medieval period Myanmar along with parts of Indian north-eastern states like Manipur and Yunan province of present day China constituted one kingdom ruled by some native dynasties which continued till the late 19th century. From 1886 to 1948 Myanmar remained part of the British colony of India after which under the leadership of General Aung San it obtained independence.

The idea of shared history and regional connectedness is not foreign to Southeast Asia either. Say for example- the development of contemporary art occurred at about the same time in the four archipelagic Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The region with its vast geographical diversity and equally diverse lifestyles among the domiciling populace has many common ideas, norms, and values, which has laid its normative foundations that goes beyond the material regional balance of power. Lindsay Falvey in his influencing book, "Understanding Southeast Asia: Syncretism in Commonalities", writes: *the Region is far from being an outpost of Chinese and Indian cultures as reported in earlier foreign histories, or from having spontaneously arisen as separate cultures as represented in nation-building projects.*

Over time, Southeast Asia has permeated its profound influences on South Asia, especially Northeast India and some of its adjoining land regions.⁴ In this process, the Asian identity, which is the distinctive feature of the former, has been transported and transformed, to a limited extent, by the domiciling populace of the latter. Many factors have contributed in this regard, like cross-migration, cross-breeding, continuing land terrain, similar climatic conditions, etc. The natural occurring intimate connectedness between the two regions is such that significance of Westphalia based borders have not succeeded in altering the fundamental commonalities across the broad landmass.

Prevailing geo-political landscape

At present South Asia is politically stable to a great extent than in the yesteryears. While Afghanistan struggles to control terror elements within the country, Bangladesh experiences an intense clash between ruling government and Islamic leaning political opponents, and Nepal continues to struggle to create a constitution that will fully accommodate the interests

⁴ The Tai-Ahoms migrated from Thailand via Myanmar to Assam 600 years ago. There are also Garos in Meghalaya, Nagas and Mizos in Nagaland and Mizoram. many Nagas refer to their own region as "Western Nagaland", referring to the areas with Naga communities in Myanmar as "Eastern Nagaland". Such ecological, geographical, and cultural affinities have given rise to links with tribes and communities across the Indian Frontier. Many of the tribes feel that they have much more in common with peer groups across the border than with India .. The Simphos of India have their counterpart in neighbouring countries like Jimphos of Myanmar, Southern China, Thailand and Laos. The Mizo-Kuki-Chin group of tribes are found in Meghalaya and Mizoram and many of the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and even the plains of people, the Meitheis, have their counterparts across the border. Therefore, instead of national spirit, a sense of regional nationalism grew in the hills.

of all sections of populace in the country. However, currently all of these countries now have democratically elected governments.⁵ Hence, the national governments in the region are attempting to reap the democratic dividend by engaging in a plethora of inter-state activities that will enable them to economically prosper and secure sustainable development.

The South Asia region covers nine countries, including some of the most populous countries in the world. It is one of the least integrated regions in the world, and has been characterized by excessive poverty and energy starvation. It was in the ending years of 1970s, the seven inner South Asian nations that included India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka came together to create a trade bloc called South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that would provide a platform for the people of the region to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. In November 2005, Dhaka Declaration of 13th SAARC Summit included Afghanistan in the forum as its 8th newest member.

Currently Southeast Asia is witnessing rapid political, economic and social transformation. Individual countries in the region are witnessing momentous change: the smaller economies of Myanmar and Timor Leste are in the middle of historic economic and democratic transitions, while the larger economies of Vietnam, Indonesia Thailand, and Singapore are moving ahead experimenting and exploring their economic and political leadership roles. Now all of these countries are committed to market economics, however with more governmental political control than in the Western countries. There is now a virtual unanimity among them for commitment to economic development that is based on relatively open markets, private ownership and competition. Nevertheless, the undercurrents of political turmoil at the domestic fronts, which manifested in many of these countries until recently, exist even today with the potential to erupt at any point of time in the future.

The culturally, politically and economically diverse Southeast Asia has had a strong history of regional cooperation through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which came into inception in 1969. Despite the fact that this regional bloc started on shaky ground,⁶

⁵ It was a rare moment (currently) when all countries in the region had democratically elected governments.

⁶(At the time of ASEAN's formation) economic structures in the region were still strongly agrarian and interregional trade was underdeveloped. Other members of ASEAN were under communist rule

the member states have taken progressive steps towards achieving (economic) integration over the decades, like signing of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and a Declaration of Concord at its first summit meeting held in Bali, Indonesia in 1976, creation of ASEAN Plus in 1997, etc. In 2015, it took a step further towards closer integration with the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) - the ASEAN common market. While at present the region is experiencing closer integration, which usually marks lower political and economic volatility.⁷ However, in this context overall regional stability considerably rests on the stability of individual member states.

Theoretical (de)-construction of the regions

Both Southeast Asia and South Asia regions when analyzed from the prism of regional security complex (RSC) theory- a middle-range theory postulated by Bary Buzan and Ole Wæver that lays emphasis on the regional level for determining security at the systemic level- are being characterized as standard security RSCs. However, China has been penetrating in both these regions to forge various events that suit its national security interests.⁸ In the past few years, China's financial sector has played a key role in supporting the member countries of ASEAN. They, in-turn, lent their support for China's initiative to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁹ On similar line, China has executed plans to invest heavily in strategic projects in South Asian countries, like Gwadar port in Pakistan and Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, and has been able to strengthen the strategic dimension of its relationship with these countries.

at the moment of its foundation. There was no impetus to integrate them into the Association at the end of the sixties, the height of the Cold War.

⁷ Martin et al. (2012) argue that economic and political integration are complements.

⁸ Penetration occurs when a state outside a RSC makes security alignment with states inside the RSC. This is a situation whereby two or more RSCs get linked together, but each RSCs remain exclusive.

⁹ During the 17th ASEAN-China Summit in 2014, under Myanmar's Chairmanship, ASEAN noted: "We appreciate China's continued support for the implementation of the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC). We are pleased with the signing of the MOU between ASEAN and China on the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Development Bank as founding members. We expected the AIIB to provide financial support to regional infrastructure projects, with an emphasis on supporting the implementation of the MPAC."

To be noted, RSC theory markedly deviates when it is applied specifically to the realm of energy. Mikko Palonkorpi defines regional energy security complexes (RESC) as those which are formed by energy related interaction between two or more states in a limited geographical area that comprises an energy dependency relationship between the states involved and perception of this dependency as a threat (securitization). The energy interaction comprises transactions like production (export), purchasing (import) and transit of energy. The RESC, in principle, increases the scope of spatial factor beyond a defined RSC if two or more states, which are located in different RSCs, have a direct energy dependency relationship, like long-distance pipeline.

Analyzing the prevailing scenario from the theoretical prism of RESC infers that currently the two discussed regions cannot be considered as having any energy interaction as the amount of energy transaction happening between states at the inter-regional level is meagre. The states in both of these regional blocs have been mostly embroiled in multi-dimensional conflicts against each other while attempting to meet their own energy needs. However, more recently they have started cooperating with each other, in limited terms, in order to evince relative gains in the process. E.g. Recently, Indian state of Manipur started supplying electricity to the border towns of Myanmar for the first time ever. Last year, Thailand and Myanmar signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on future energy cooperation, specifically in the petroleum and electricity sectors. This will give a positive thrust to the 26-year Myanmar-Thai oil and natural gas cooperation agreement, and will benefit energy sufficiency of the two countries. In the recent years, India and Bangladesh have executed energy cooperation projects, like a joint venture (JV) project between public sector companies from states for development of 'Maitree' - a 1320 MW coal-based thermal power plant in Bangladesh, and few others.

The aforesaid developments infer this historically connected landmass is now placed at an early stage of energy dependency relationship. However, the energy trade that is currently happening at the fringes will take time to grow in terms of volume and diversity that may qualify as energy dependency relationship. Every step taken in that direction, either between two or more countries or at the regional level, will progressively strengthen the relationship by imputing the element of energy security- both perceived and actual.

By and large, it may be said an obvious path ahead for all of these ‘energy-deficit developing states’ is to tread in the direction of securing national energy security, which may be achieved to a limited extent with regional cooperation but along with independent actions at their respective home fronts.

Energy Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges

The recent cooperation activities between the countries of the two regions have opened up a window of opportunities for furthering the degree of engagements at all levels, i.e. people-to-people, government-to-government, business-to-business, etc. However, opportunities are infused with inherent challenges, and both of these aspects do not stand distinct from one another. This essentially calls for stakeholder parties to address the challenges in coordinated and concerted ways, while pursuing for opportunities. Following are listed some of the pertinent opportunities and challenges that lie on the way for increasing energy cooperation across the broad landmass.

Securing energy security- Energy security in this context will involve uniform access of energy, at least in relative term, by all sections of populace residing across the broad landmass in an environmentally sustainable manner. Hence, making energy accessible to everyone beyond state borders at an affordable price and without affecting the local environment is a big challenge. Although, many sub-regions of this broad landmass are naturally endowed with rich harvestable forms of energy; however the degree of economic development has been profoundly varying. Even today a limited number of people have access to regular supply of energy, while the masses still suffer from acute energy poverty. The need of the hour for all state and non-state actors, which work on energy relating issues, to come together, is to set common goals and make coordinated attempts in pursuit of that.

Harnessing locale, connecting regional – The broad landmass has rich energy resources of divergent forms, which are unique to particular locales. E.g. – the Northeast region of India, especially the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam, has large bamboo plantations, both natural and commercially grown. Bamboo is a rapidly growing renewable resource that is a rich source of biomass, which can be utilized for producing electricity. Currently, Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL), a Government of India undertaking, is implementing a bio-refinery in Assam to produce bio-ethanol from available non-food bio-mass feedstock of bamboo, and the project is proposed to be implemented in

two years time. This will feed electricity into the national electricity grid, but transmit mostly within the North Eastern region.¹⁰ Thailand, which is a tropical country and has abundant sunshine throughout the year, has started harnessing its solar-power with government support for clean energy and private sector participation.¹¹ In 2015, about 1,500 megawatt of solar capacity got connected to the national grid at an investment of \$2.7 billion. This has brought electricity to many remote corners of the country, while making it a leader of renewable energy production in the Southeast Asian region. Such off-grid projects and expansion on on-grid network, which most countries thereby are deliberating presently, qualify as nascent steps for building an inter-connected energy system in the future.

However, the difficult terrain and poor interconnectivity infrastructures will continue to pose as major challenges for meaningful energy cooperation even ahead. This will likely prolong the gestation period of many of the conceptualized projects.¹² So, a best way for achieving energy cooperation thereby is to generate off-grid power wherever needed, while simultaneously expand and interlink national grids wherever possible.

Harmonizing inter-state trade policies – Over the past decades, a lot of government-to-government discussions and deliberations happened to bring about harmonization of national trade policies between states and at the inter-regional level. However, it is only in the recent years certain noteworthy practical advances have been made in this direction. In 2014, India has signed the free trade agreement (FTA) in services and investments with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This has paved the way for free movement of professionals and further opened up opportunities for investments. In 2015, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh signed a landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement for seamless movement of road traffic among the four SAARC Countries. The BBIN-MVA Agreement has cleared the way for seamless movement of people and goods across their borders for

¹⁰ Grid Management in India is carried out on a regional basis. The country is geographically divided in five regions namely, Northern, Eastern, Western North Eastern and Southern.

¹¹ In an attempt to enhance its solar and other clean energy reliance, the Thai government has introduced a feed-in tariff program, which guarantees a fixed price for power to renewable energy suppliers. This has encouraged new businesses to enter the industry, as well as helping existing suppliers to grow further.

¹² The time involved between the commencement of a project and its completion is called gestation period.

achieving inter-regional integration and general economic development. This is an opportunity for private entrepreneurs and state-backed profit-oriented entities to augment their trade in terms of scope and volume, while in the process lobby for further harmonization of policies in other sectors.

Advancing energy associated sectors – At present, all states located in this broad landmass are facing a dilemma whether to focus on developing the various sectors associated with energy, like basic infrastructure, banking and finances, science and technology, etc., for generating energy cooperation or *vice versa*. In a way, most of them are treading the first lane with the general belief that energy cooperation is a resultant product that comes from prior capacity-building. Hence, they are currently engaged in strengthening the resilience of the overall milieu, like high quality roads, transparent domestic laws and rules, etc. This is definitely not a flawed line of thinking. However, they should rather put priority in building energy cooperation at inter- and sub-regional level, which will then generate developments in other energy associated sectors as a matter of horizontal strategic alliances.¹³ Today, the challenge for state parties is to break free from their upheld ideas regarding the preferred pathway for securing energy cooperation, while the very situation is offering latent opportunities for other stakeholders to convince the former to shunt pathways for reaping optimal benefits ahead.

Creating socio-cultural-economic amalgamation – In the distant past, the domiciling populace of this landmass used to criss-cross the terrain more frequently than after the Westphalia based state system came into existence. They could then share and inter-exchange their efficacies more efficiently, which led to indigenous form of economic development and socio-cultural advances. However, the long duration of foreign rule pushed back the countries into the ‘dark-ages’ in terms of shared common development. Presently, there lies a window of opportunities for re-invigorating the indigeneity of the locales across the landmass. This will be distinctly different in nature from other parts of the world. Such a reality will actualize by harvesting of locally available forms of energy, modifying and rebuilding structures that support such forms of energy as well as re-designing the destinations for their final application.

¹³ Horizontal strategic alliances are formed by firms that are active in the same business area. This implies that the partners in the alliance used to be competitors and work together in order to improve their position in the market and improve market power compared to other competitors.

Promotion of people's democracy- Today countries in both the regions are persisting to promote renewable forms of energy in order to adhere to their commitments to the international community and achieve sustainable development. The promotion of renewable energy usually comes with policy changes (both at local and national level) that is not only beneficial for mitigating climate change, but also generates jobs, social cohesion and energy security. Renewables are not to be seen as forms of energy that are pitted against fossils in order to erode their relevance. However, both of them are to be considered as mutually complimenting forms of energy, which may be applied as per economic viability and situational demands. For the fact, the broad landmass is marred with conflicts of various nature, ranging from secessionist movements (Kachin separatism in Myanmar, etc.) to Islamic insurgency (Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand, etc.) and communal strife (Rakhine Buddhists- Rohingya Muslims tensions, etc.). Hence, access to energy will enable people to avail livelihood opportunities and pursue career professions, which will empower them in true sense. This will, in-turn, create a new reality whereby people's democracy will flourish.

The above listed sets of opportunities and challenges hold the key to build a proper pathway for a holistic transformation at the regional and system level. In the present neo-liberal era, market opportunities are getting furthered with the heightened urgency to deal with global climate change. Under such circumstances, all stakeholder actors to this landmass- i.e. states, private sector companies and civil society organizations from therein as well as those from outside- need to equally share responsibilities and urgently get on a level-playing field for achieving energy cooperation in realistic terms. Alternately, if they fail to do so, then the repercussions will be grim even at the system level.

Conclusion

The recent years has witnessed a spurt of inter-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN, including in the realm of energy, due to the implementation of new connectivity projects, like international road highways, political-economic institutions, trade agreements, etc. This has reinvigorated the historic linkages that had existed between this continuing landmass. The emerging energy cooperation between the two regions cannot be precisely categorized into any established theory for this is presently in a nascent stage. Various factors at the regional and systemic level, like political, economic, etc., will determine how this energy cooperation evolves in the future and acts as a binding force interconnecting the two regions. Nevertheless, the present congenial geo-political climate is presenting a range of interloping opportunities and challenges for strengthening energy cooperation thereby. All stakeholder entities to the energy businesses, from within the region and outside, should attempt to capitalize on this for furthering their own benefits as well as greater good for mankind.

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Biography of the author

Hriday Ch. Sarma is pursuing his PhD in Energy studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University on a topic concerning energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Hriday is the founder and national coordinator of a India based NGO, Green-Cosmos. He is working as a core team member of few credible international organizations, like Association for Conflict Resolution-International Section, Squakonomics and Peace Tree International. Hriday has a MA and MPhil in International Relations. He has experience of working with few reputed organizations, like Institute for National Security Studies (Israel), and independently working on clientele projects.