



Research Article

## Geopolitical Significance of BBIN In South Asia

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### Abstract

The BBIN project, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, is a subregional framework meant to improve connectivity, economic cooperation, and geopolitical stability in South Asia. BBIN is becoming a practical replacement for the paralysis of larger regional groups, concentrating on functional collaboration in fields such as transportation, commerce, energy, and person-to-person connection. This research investigates the geopolitical relevance of BBIN by placing it inside the changing strategic environment of South Asia, distinguished by increasing regional imbalances, the growing influence of foreign countries, and the need for regional integration. The article claims that India's "Neighbourhood First" approach uses BBIN as a vital tool to further its strategic goals of slowing down China's growing presence in the area, especially under programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Simultaneously, even with concerns about sovereignty and unequal reliance on India, BBIN presents smaller countries like Nepal and Bhutan with chances for economic diversification and infrastructural expansion. Using its economic expansion and geographic location to serve as a regional centre, Bangladesh has become a major participant.

The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) is a key part of the plan, meant to make it easier for people and goods to move between countries. But the growth of BBIN has been inconsistent, as shown by Bhutan's decision to withdraw from the MVA out of environmental and domestic concerns, therefore underscoring the difficulties of subregional collaboration. Notwithstanding these obstacles, BBIN represents a change from conventional political collaboration to functional and issue-based regionalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Long defined by contradictions, South Asia has had geographical closeness along with political fragmentation, cultural similarities together with economic inequalities, and great potential inhibited by low regional cooperation. Even though there are regional frameworks, integration has stayed poor because of ongoing political conflicts, especially between the two biggest regional powers. In this framework, subregional projects have become practical substitutes for revitalising collaboration, and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) initiative stands out as a major advancement. The Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), signed in 2015, officially established the BBIN framework, aiming to enable smooth cross-border vehicle movement for passengers and goods. Unlike more general regional groupings, BBIN concentrates on functional cooperation, stressing practical results above political agreement. This change mirrors increasing awareness that smaller, like-minded groups can succeed where bigger structures have faltered.

Geopolitically, BBIN works in an area experiencing fast change. Particularly via significant infrastructure investments, China's emergence as a major economic and strategic actor in South Asia has brought new dynamics. These changes have increased strategic rivalry and forced local players to reevaluate their interaction methods. India uses BBIN as a means to foster closer connections with its neighbours while simultaneously advancing regional connectivity and economic integration in this setting. BBIN gives Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan possibilities to surmount structural restrictions, including landlockedness and inadequate market access. Better connections can lower shipping expenses, stimulate trade, and enable energy cooperation. Simultaneously, these nations must negotiate the obstacles of unequal power relations and make sure that cooperation advances their national interests. BBIN has the potential to change the way people think about regionalism in South Asia. BBIN is a flexible, project-based approach that puts results before paperwork, therefore moving away from rigid institutional frameworks. This model fits with worldwide trends in regional cooperation, whereby smaller groupings and issue-based collaborations are becoming more important. The geopolitical relevance of BBIN is examined in this paper via four crucial factors: regional connectivity and economic integration, strategic balancing and foreign influences, energy and infrastructural development, and political and security consequences. The study aims to offer a thorough grasp of how BBIN will influence South Asia going forward by examining these factors.

### 1. Regional Connectivity and Economic Integration

The strong focus of the BBIN project on improving regional connectivity, which acts as the foundation for economic integration in South Asia, is among its most important aspects. Though South Asia has shared cultural ties and is geographically close, it has historically been among the least integrated areas worldwide. Because of poor infrastructure, strict border rules, and political distrust, intra-regional trade makes up just a small portion of the total trade of South Asian

nations. BBIN seems in this context as a practical tool meant to solve these structural weaknesses by means of cross-national freer movement of commodities, services, and people.

The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), a landmark project meant to lower logistical bottlenecks and improve transportation efficiency, forms the backbone of this connectivity plan. Vehicles from member countries can pass across frontiers without the need for time-consuming transshipment processes at border stations, thanks to the agreement. This boosts the competitiveness of regional trade by lowering transportation costs and shortening transit times. For landlocked nations such as Nepal and Bhutan, which rely greatly on transit across adjacent territories to reach world markets, the value of such an agreement is especially evident. Simplifying cross-border transportation, the MVA offers these nations more connections and financial possibilities. Beyond simple logistical advantages, improved connectivity under BBIN has larger economic ramifications. Better transportation infrastructure can increase trade, draw in both local and international capital, and boost industrial expansion in border areas. For instance, Bangladesh gains significantly from its advantageous geopolitical location. Bangladesh may become a regional commerce centre by serving as a transit route connecting India's northeastern states with the rest of the country. This not only improves its own economic outlook but also helps to create balanced regional development by including comparatively undeveloped regions into bigger economic networks. Furthermore, BBIN's vision of connectivity goes beyond merely road transportation. It combines railways, inland waterways, and even digital infrastructure in a multimodal way. Building strong and effective supply chains depends on such diversification. Improved rail and waterway connections can provide more environmentally friendly and cost-effective alternatives to road transportation, and digital connectivity can simplify customs processes and improve trade facilitation. Taken together, these projects advance cross-border value chains and let businesses profit from regional specialisation and comparative advantages. But putting connectivity projects under BBIN into action has not been easy. Progress has been unequal as a result of several reasons, such as political sensitivities, infrastructure deficiencies, and regulatory inconsistencies among member nations. Bhutan's choice to withdraw from the MVA due to environmental worries and local opposition highlights the difficulties in subregional collaboration. These changes underline the necessity of an inclusive government that balances economic goals with local feelings and environmental sustainability. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the emphasis on connectivity inside the BBIN structure mirrors a realistic and outcome-driven view of regional integration. Giving practical results and functional cooperation top priority could progressively change the economic face of South Asia. Greater interdependence among member states, less economic inequalities, and a more integrated and successful regional order can be promoted by improved connectivity in the long run.

## 2. Strategic Balancing and External Influences

When viewed in light of outside power dynamics, especially China's increasing presence in South Asia, the geopolitical importance of the BBIN project becomes more apparent. China has greatly increased its economic and strategic presence in the area during the past ten years by means of large-scale infrastructure projects, improved trade ties, and vigorous diplomatic activity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has funded and developed vital infrastructure including ports, roads, railways, and energy projects throughout South Asia, is a major engine of this expansion. Although these investments have helped the economy grow, they have also sparked worries about growing reliance and changing geopolitical alignments in the region. BBIN rises as a subregional structure able to operate as a counterbalance in this changing strategic landscape. For India, BBIN fits well with its larger foreign policy objectives, especially the "Neighbourhood First" approach and the "Act East" strategy. These policies stress regional connection and closer ties with neighbouring nations as instruments to foster stability and stimulate economic development. By promoting stronger economic and infrastructural ties with its neighbours through BBIN, India aims to strengthen its position as a key player in South Asia. By doing this, it seeks to both support regional integration and lessen China's growing influence as an outside force. For the smaller member nations, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, the geopolitical arithmetic is more complicated. These countries have actively engaged with China to take advantage of its financial resources and infrastructure knowledge, which are often provided with fewer political constraints. But depending on one outside source has risks, among them strategic vulnerability and decreased strategic independence. In this sense, BBIN offers a substitute venue for these states to diversify their alliances and strike a balance between opposing powers. Participating in BBIN can help them improve regional collaboration and prevent too much reliance on any one nation. A particularly vivid illustration of this balancing process is provided by Bangladesh. Bangladesh has followed a realistic foreign policy engaging both India and China, positioned strategically between South and Southeast Asia. By acting as a transit hub connecting India's northeastern states with the rest of the subcontinent, its engagement in BBIN helps to improve regional connectivity and commerce. Simultaneously, Bangladesh keeps its strategic flexibility and optimises economic possibilities by taking part in Chinese-led projects. Its negotiating power is improved by this double interaction, which also enables it to gain advantages from both regional and international cooperation.

Nepal has taken a similar approach of balancing between China and India. Being a country surrounded by land, Nepal has traditionally relied on India for transit access and trade. But recently, for infrastructure development and alternative connectivity networks, it has progressively looked to China. Nepal maintains its capacity to interact with China while gaining access to better regional transportation systems via BBIN. This fragile juggling act mirrors a more general pattern among smaller South Asian countries trying to negotiate a difficult geopolitical terrain without undermining their

independence. But whether BBIN may serve as a strategic counterweight depends on whether it produces tangible outcomes. Progress has been slowed by ongoing delays in project execution, infrastructure limits, and political reluctance. Should BBIN fail to deliver real connectivity and economic advantages, it runs the danger of losing credibility with member nations, therefore driving them toward stronger gravitation toward outside projects like the BRI. Therefore, prompt implementation and policy coherence are critical to maintaining its relevance.

## 3. Energy and infrastructural cooperation

The geopolitical importance of the BBIN structure is mostly derived from its energy and infrastructure cooperation, which reflects both the strategic objectives and developmental needs of South Asia. The region is still struggling with ongoing energy issues brought on by unequal natural resource distribution, insufficient infrastructure, and rapidly rising demand sparked by population increase and industrialisation. BBIN, in this regard, provides a workable vehicle for regional cooperation whereby member nations may combine resources, share skills, and create coordinated systems improving general energy security and economic resilience. The synergistic character of its energy resources and consumption patterns is a major asset of the BBIN subregion. Because of their mountainous topography and river networks, Nepal and Bhutan have great hydropower potential, while India and Bangladesh symbolise large and expanding energy markets. This inequality offers a solid foundation for cooperation using international power exchange. BBIN can build a mutually advantageous framework that solves both supply and demand limits by enabling the export of excess hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan to power-deprived regions in India and Bangladesh. Such systems not only increase energy availability but also help to lower reliance on fossil fuels, therefore supporting more general aims of climate resilience and sustainable development.

Particularly promising is hydropower cooperation. Long-term interdependencies developed from joint investments in hydropower generating and transmission infrastructure may help to strengthen regional links. This process depends on cross-border grid connections, power purchase agreements, and well-coordinated policy systems. Smaller countries like Bhutan already generate a sizable portion of their income from hydropower exports, and greater stability in their economy may result from increased collaboration under BBIN. Nepal also stands to profit from faster economic growth via more investment and regional market access. Beyond energy, the BBIN project depends most critically on infrastructural growth. Enabling smooth connectivity and trade depends on an effective infrastructure, including highways, railways, ports, and inland waterways. Better transportation networks lower shipping expenses, cut delivery times, and boost regional economic competitiveness. For example, improved road and rail connections can connect landlocked areas with big ports, therefore incorporating them into world supply networks. In this perspective, the growth of infrastructure under BBIN is more than simply an economic need; it is also a strategic tool

for regional integration. Moreover, BBIN encourages a multifarious strategy to infrastructure, therefore acknowledging the need to expand transportation choices. Inland waterways provide cost-effective and environmentally friendly alternatives, while digital infrastructure can simplify customs processes and enhance trade facilitation. Combining physical and digital connectivity can increase system efficiency and resilience, therefore boosting industrial expansion and cross-border value chains.

The route towards efficient energy and infrastructure cooperation, however, presents difficulties. Big infrastructure projects need a lot of money, so they usually rely on outside funding and public-private partnerships. Among member states, differences in legal systems, technical standards, and administrative processes could make it difficult to carry out projects. Furthermore, limiting aspects are environmental issues, especially in ecologically vulnerable regions like the Himalayas. Local opposition to major projects, sparked by worries about environmental damage and displacement, emphasises once again the necessity of inclusive and sustainable planning. Even with these difficulties, the focus on energy and infrastructure inside BBIN shows a modern and realistic way to regional collaboration. By tackling key development gaps and taking advantage of complementarities among member states, BBIN could help to promote long-term stability, economic development, and strategic cohesiveness in South Asia. By doing so, it not only improves regional prosperity but also raises the geopolitical importance of the subregion in an increasingly interconnected world.

#### 4. The political and security implications

The political and security ramifications of the BBIN Initiative must surpass its economic and infrastructural goals, therefore making it a vital framework for influencing regional dynamics in South Asia. Essentially, BBIN seeks to improve regional collaboration among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal by building trust, lowering tensions, and supporting long-term stability. The possibility of developing mutual trust among member nations is among the most important political consequences of BBIN. South Asia has historically been characterised by political distrust, border conflicts, and divergent national interests. Projects like BBIN, in this setting, might help to build confidence by promoting regular communication, institutional collaboration, and shared development goals. The cost of war increases as nations grow more financially interdependent through connectivity projects, energy trade, and transit agreements, hence fostering peaceful coexistence. This rising interdependence might progressively change the regional attitude from rivalry to cooperation. But there are problems with the political scene inside BBIN. Smaller member states like Bhutan and Nepal may feel uneasy due to the unequal distribution of power, especially India's commanding position in terms of geography, economy, and political clout. These nations could be concerned about excessive reliance or unbalanced advantages, which could cause internal political opposition. For instance, internal debates in Bhutan and Nepal over regional connectivity initiatives have

been affected by worries about sovereignty, environmental effects, and economic disparity. Therefore, the political success of BBIN depends on ensuring transparency, inclusiveness, and fair distribution of benefits across all partners. Though sometimes challenging, it is imperative to address local sensitivities and strike a balance between regional cooperation and national interests. From a security point of view, increased connections under BBIN offer chances as well as hazards. On the one hand, better transportation networks, border infrastructure, and communication systems can help security organisations to coordinate more effectively, therefore supporting combined efforts to address transnational threats, including terrorism, human trafficking, and smuggling. Greater collaboration can improve overall regional security by enabling coordinated border management and intelligence sharing. Greater connectivity, however, could also expose weaknesses. Non-state actors might use easier movement of commodities and people for illegal purposes, including counterfeiting, arms, and narcotics trafficking. Particularly in rural and undeveloped areas, permeable borders can aggravate these hazards even more. Thus, the creation of strong regulatory systems, efficient law enforcement tools, and coordinated security policies will mostly determine BBIN's success. Important measures to reduce these difficulties include improving customs procedures, increasing surveillance, and fostering institutional cooperation across border security organisations. Notwithstanding these worries, BBIN provides a great venue for ongoing communication and collaboration. It could help to create a more stable and coherent regional order by combining economic goals with political and security concerns. Managed well, BBIN has the potential to turn geopolitical challenges into chances for cooperation, therefore building peace, trust, and long-term prosperity in South Asia.

#### CONCLUSION

The BBIN project is a major advancement in the changing topography of South Asian regionalism. It provides a realistic substitute to conventional frameworks that have struggled to produce meaningful results by stressing functional collaboration and practical outcomes. Its focus on infrastructure development, economic integration, and connectivity helps to solve some of the most urgent issues confronting the region. In terms of geopolitics, BBIN is vital in determining regional dynamics. It offers a venue for strategic balancing, therefore empowering member states to manage the intricacy of outside influences and improve their own capacities. For India, it's a tool for regional leadership; for smaller countries, it presents chances for expansion and diversification. But there is no certainty of BBIN's success. To guarantee its efficacy, obstacles including political sensitivities, unequal power relations, and implementation difficulties must be overcome. The project has to show clear advantages to keep its relevance in a cutthroat geopolitical scene as well. To sum up, BBIN has great promise as a regional change accelerator. Although it might not solve all the problems of South Asian integration, it is a significant step towards a more interconnected, collaborative, and peaceful region.

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