

Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal Area: Challenges and Options for Bangladesh

(Lecture by Professor TANAKA Akihiko)

A Lecture Program by Professor TANAKA Akihiko on “Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal Area: Challenges and Options for Bangladesh”, was jointly organized by the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) of NSU and the Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh on 28 August 2021.

In his lecture, Professor TANAKA Akihiko, President, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) elaborated on the economic resurgence of the Indo-Pacific region and emphasized the importance of the realization of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). He said that Bay of Bengal has a potential to be a connectivity hub in the region through infrastructure projects, in particular, Matarbari deep seaport, under the initiative of “Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B)”.

Prof TANAKA also emphasized the significance of the preservation of peace in the Indo-Pacific for its prosperity. He said that in dealing with China’s growing power and its assertiveness, liberal democracies should avoid misunderstanding their intentions, establish and maintain effective mechanisms of emergency communication, and explore areas of cooperation along with competition.



Ambassador ITO Naoki, Ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh graced the program as the guest of honor. He stated that almost 50 years ago, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emphasized the importance of freedom and peace in the Indian Ocean which has some relevance today. He

mentioned that it is important for Bangladesh to ensure the infrastructure projects are economically efficient and meet the country's requirements with its developmental stage, in line with debt sustainability. Ambassador Ito also said that the twin celebrations this year demonstrated the enhanced stature of Bangladesh in the region, and Dhaka was the center of the regional diplomacy as a result of its political stability as well as economic growth. He strongly hopes that Japan will continue its cooperation so that Bangladesh plays a prominent role in the region, particularly as a partner in pursuing a FOIP.

Concerning the Bay of Bengal connectivity, Ambassador Shahidul Haque, Professorial Fellow, SIP, NSU and Former Foreign Secretary, GoB said that Bangladesh, being a politically neutral country - in terms of geopolitics - faces difficult strategic choices. He further added that it will be interesting to observe how Bangladesh responds to this choice, balances its foreign policies to facilitate regional connectivity as well as protect its geopolitical and economic interests. He also expressed fear that Asia's great power rivalry could prevent the entire region from reaping the benefits surrounding the Bay of Bengal.

Rear Admiral (Retd) Md Khurshed Alam, Secretary (Maritime Affairs Unit) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GoB stated the Bay of Bengal as the third neighbor of Bangladesh and laid emphasis on the Rule-based maritime order in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific region for a peaceful and prosperous future. He also stated the importance of the Blue economy for the development of Bangladesh and urged Japan to be an important partner in exploiting the deep-sea resources, Portland development, and more connectivity in the region.

Dr. Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) opined that the Bay of Bengal is not only the third neighbor but it is a part of Bangladesh. He also stated that Bangladesh should negotiate with RCEP for strengthening trade ties with its member countries.

Professor Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, Director, SIPG & Chair, Dept. of Political Science and Sociology, NSU stated the importance of the Bay of Bengal for the economic development of Bangladesh in his welcome speech. He also emphasized on the geostrategic importance of the Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh to become a regional hub of connectivity in the Indo-Pacific Ocean region.

Professor Atiqul Islam, Vice-Chancellor of North South University, chaired the webinar. He highlighted the interests that big powers are showing in the Bay of Bengal and expressed hope that Bangladesh will successfully be able to balance its tactics in this regard.

Dr. M Jashim Uddin, Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science and Sociology, NSU moderated this virtual event. He noted that to be a developed country Bangladesh needs technological and economic assistance from the development partners. In this regard, he opined that Japan, as the largest development partner and a trusted friend, can help Bangladesh in unleashing its enormous economic potential from the Bay of Bengal.

Academics, Excellences, marine economy experts, diplomats, Japanese delegates, journalists, and students were present among the participants.