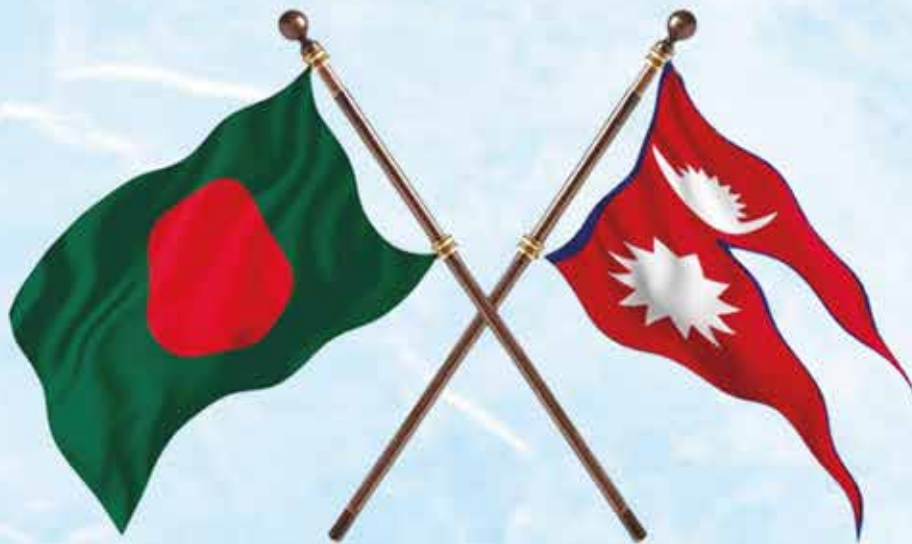




Country Lecture on
Bangladesh-Nepal Ties:
Towards A New Height

Sunday, 20 April 2025



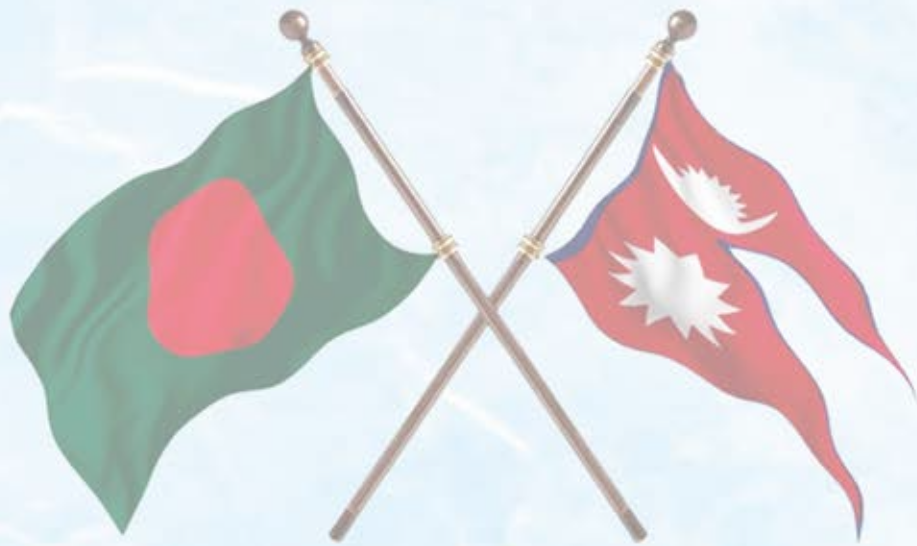
Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)



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Country Lecture on Bangladesh-Nepal Ties: Towards A New Height



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Country Lecture on “**Bangladesh-Nepal Ties: Towards A New Height**” on Sunday, 20 April 2025, at the BIISS auditorium. **H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari**, Ambassador of Nepal to the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, was the Distinguished Guest Speaker at the Country Lecture. **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, Chaired the Session. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the welcome address. **Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas**, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, set the tone of the Country Lecture.

Senior officials from different ministries, diplomatic missions, media, researchers, academicians and students from various universities, representatives from different think tanks, international organisations, actively participated in the country lecture and enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.

Welcome Remarks



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng
Director General, BIISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis, Director General of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), extended a warm welcome to all participants at the Country Lecture Series titled “Bangladesh-Nepal Ties: Towards A New Height.” He began by expressing his sincere appreciation to the distinguished Guest Speaker for gracing the occasion with his presence. He emphasised the importance of acknowledging the historical, cultural, and interpersonal connections that bind Bangladesh and Nepal as the two nations convene to examine their evolving bilateral relationship. Recalling the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972—shortly after Bangladesh gained independence—he noted that the journey between the two countries had been marked by friendship, mutual respect, and cooperation. Over the years, he observed, this bilateral relationship had evolved, expanded, and deepened to include trade, energy, culture, education, and various other areas of cooperation.

Major General Anis underscored that the similarities between Bangladesh and Nepal extended beyond mere geographical proximity. The two countries, he remarked, were connected through rivers, mountains, and centuries of cultural and civilisational exchanges. Long before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, both nations had engaged in trade, pilgrimages, and artistic and cultural interactions. He stressed the importance of reaffirming these historical connections at a pivotal time in the global and regional context, advocating for a renewed commitment and shared vision.

Turning to the economic dimension, he identified trade and investment as a major priority area of cooperation. While acknowledging the steady growth in bilateral trade volume, he pointed out that considerable untapped potential remained. He called for joint efforts to remove institutional barriers, streamline customs procedures, and endorse collaborative initiatives that would benefit both countries. Highlighting sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services, particularly in ICT and fintech, he indicated promising prospects for enhanced collaboration.

The Director General further highlighted the shared cultural heritage between Bangladesh and Nepal, describing it as both a source of pride and a platform for increased engagement. He emphasised that both countries possessed diverse and unique traditions, dialects, music, and celebrations. In this context, he advocated for cultural and diplomatic exchanges among youth, artists, academics, journalists, and other stakeholders, believing such interactions would promote deeper mutual understanding and goodwill. Addressing the energy sector, Major General Anis referred to it as a vital area of cooperation between the two nations. He pointed out the synergy created by Nepal's significant hydropower potential and Bangladesh's energy demands, describing it as indicative of a new era in energy trade and economic partnership.



Connectivity, both physical and digital, was identified as another fundamental pillar of the bilateral relationship. He stressed the need to enhance and expand cross-border transportation infrastructure to support bilateral trade and facilitate access to seaports. He also underscored that improved connectivity would yield benefits not only in commerce but also in education, travel, scientific research, and technical collaboration. Regarding the issue of transboundary rivers, he observed that Bangladesh and Nepal possessed substantial opportunities for shared water resource development and management. He encouraged cooperative initiatives to address this matter constructively.

Major General Anis highlighted the promise held by scholarly collaboration and education in addressing shared challenges. He called for greater cooperation among universities, think tanks, and research institutions to tackle issues such as climate change, disaster resilience, public health, and governance. According to him, collaborative research and exchange programmes would foster knowledge creation and forge lasting relationships between the younger generations of both nations.

In discussing the wider regional and global landscape, he noted the rapidly changing environment and cited emerging challenges including climate change, energy and food security, pandemics, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. He stressed that these issues demanded collective and coordinated responses. As developing nations of the Global South, both Bangladesh and Nepal, he asserted, shared aspirations for peace, progress, sustainability, and equity. He called for bilateral collaboration to be guided by a mutual commitment to inclusive development, multilateralism, and regional solidarity. He also suggested that Bangladesh and Nepal could contribute meaningfully to the revival of regional cooperation through existing multilateral platforms.

In his concluding remarks, Major General Anis expressed anticipation for the insights to be shared by His Excellency Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari, noting that the latter's perspectives would shed valuable light on the multifaceted Bangladesh–Nepal relationship. He once again extended his heartfelt thanks to the distinguished Guest Speaker for his gracious presence. He expressed hope that the day's deliberations would further strengthen the ties between Bangladesh and Nepal and serve as a catalyst for enhanced collaboration, deeper understanding, and mutual prosperity.

Presentation

Bangladesh-Nepal Relations: Present Status and Future Projections



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Dr Biswas began by highlighting a cultural and economic metaphor that many Bangladeshis can relate to. He mentioned that those who have a craving for delicious food and have recently visited Old Dhaka may have discovered a small Nepali restaurant in its narrow alleys called Himalayan Flavours. This modest establishment has become something of a culinary sensation, particularly known for its momo dumplings, which now attract daily queues of Bangladeshi food enthusiasts. Simultaneously, in the heart of Kathmandu, patients at the Tribhuvan University Hospital are being treated with life-saving medicines stamped “Made in Bangladesh.” These medicines are the products of Bangladesh’s robust pharmaceutical industry, which now supplies a significant share of Nepal’s imported medical products. According to Dr Biswas, such everyday scenes symbolise a quiet revolution in Bangladesh–Nepal relations—one where initial cultural ties are merging with 21st-century economic and technological transformations, forming a partnership rooted in shared values and deepening interdependence.

He then outlined key success stories that are defining this emerging relationship. The most notable of these is the energy partnership. When Bangladesh first received 40 megawatts of electricity from Nepal’s Upper Tamakoshi plant in March 2023, it marked more than a mere commercial transaction—it represented the realisation of a vision that had taken over a decade to materialise. This power trade has now expanded to 500 megawatts, under a landmark

agreement that plans to eventually reach 1,000 megawatts. In a parallel development, Nepali engineers are working alongside Bangladeshi counterparts at the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, fostering an exchange of technical expertise that bridges the Himalayas and the delta region of Bangladesh.

Dr Biswas also highlighted the pharmaceutical partnership as another transformative domain. He cited the example of Square Pharmaceuticals, which started with trial shipments to Nepal in 2010 and has now grown to become the third-largest supplier of medicine in the country. Its manufacturing facilities currently produce 87 different medications, creating 200 local jobs while delivering affordable healthcare solutions. Several other Bangladeshi pharmaceutical companies are following this model, thereby transforming what was once a modest US\$20 million trade into a thriving US\$150 million industry within Nepal.

The connectivity revolution was another area of emphasis in Dr Biswas's speech. He noted that the inauguration of a direct cargo flight between Dhaka and Pokhara in 2024 has dramatically reduced shipping times for perishable Nepali exports—from five days to merely five hours. This air corridor, along with Nepal's newly granted access to Bangladesh's Mongla Port, has contributed to a 37 per cent increase in bilateral trade volume within a single year. As a symbolic image of this transformation, he described Nepali ginger being loaded onto Bangladeshi trucks at Bangladesh's ports. While this route handled only 50 trucks per month in 2020, it is now capable of processing 300 trucks per day—a striking testament to the dynamism and growth in economic relations between the two countries.

Dr Biswas continued his speech by elaborating on the foundational elements of the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal. He emphasised that this relationship is rooted in deep cultural affinity. Nearly 600,000 Bangladeshi tourists visit Lumbini each year, making them the largest pilgrim group at Gautam Buddha Airport. He also highlighted the alignment between the two countries in global diplomatic platforms. For instance, at the United Nations General Assembly, Bangladesh and Nepal have consistently aligned and voted together on major resolutions, especially those promoting humanity, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding efforts. A recent example includes their joint stance in favour of establishing the rights of the Palestinian people.

Dr Biswas went on to describe the natural demographic and economic synergies between the two nations. Bangladesh's robust manufacturing capabilities are well complemented by Nepal's agricultural and hydropower resources, forming a strategic partnership that goes beyond economics to include shared social and cultural heritage. Citing a recent Nepal Trade Fair held in 2024, he recalled a notable remark made by His Excellency Ambassador Anjan Bhandari, who stated, "We have only just begun scratching the surface." Dr Biswas considered this observation a profound one, urging that this momentum must continue to expand in the coming years. He expressed optimism that Ambassador Bhandari's address would offer further guidance on how to deepen the partnership.

Illustrating the growing interconnectedness, Dr Biswas described how, in Kathmandu's bustling markets, Bangladeshi pharmaceuticals are readily found on pharmacy shelves, while Nepali herbs have become popular imports in the Bangladeshi market. Although a trade imbalance exists, he asserted that there are avenues to narrow this gap and increase trade surpluses

through a mutually beneficial exchange of goods. He pointed out Bangladesh's strengths in the pharmaceutical, textile, and ceramic sectors—industries that are gradually capturing new market segments. Conversely, Nepal possesses untapped potential, especially in the area of agricultural exports and herbal medicine, which could significantly appeal to Bangladesh's growing middle-class consumers.

He then raised important considerations concerning trade, connectivity, and energy cooperation. He noted that when addressing issues such as transit and transshipment, India inevitably becomes a key factor due to its geographical position between Bangladesh and Nepal. Therefore, both countries must maintain constructive relations with India to ensure that their bilateral cooperation remains unhindered. Additionally, he called for a focus on regulatory matters, especially concerning Nepali exports to Bangladesh. Tariff and para-tariff barriers must be carefully managed to enhance bilateral trade.



Dr Biswas also discussed the issue of information gaps, particularly among the youth. Noting the demographic dividend enjoyed by both countries, he underscored the need to better leverage social media and youth engagement to explore the full potential of bilateral relations. He stressed that information dissemination and public awareness are key to strengthening people-to-people ties and economic collaboration.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Biswas focused on tourism, advocating for expanded connectivity both by air and land. Nepal's tourism industry is already globally recognised, but there remains significant room for growth, particularly through closer collaboration with Bangladesh. He mentioned the longstanding demand for a direct flight between Chattogram and Kathmandu. Similarly, popular Bangladeshi destinations such as Cox's Bazar and Saint Martin's Island could be promoted more effectively to Nepali tourists, fostering mutual tourism benefits.

Finally, Dr Biswas turned to the broader geopolitical context of energy cooperation. He reiterated that electricity and energy connectivity are crucial sectors for collaboration, and both countries must identify and utilise the most efficient routes and mechanisms to maximise benefits in this domain. He ended his speech with three strategic suggestions. First, he proposed that Bangladesh and Nepal could play a more active role together in both regional and global platforms. Notably, both are among the top five contributors to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Second, he encouraged enhanced defence cooperation in support of global and regional peacebuilding efforts. Third, he advocated for the effective implementation of the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, expansion of energy trade, and the improvement of port, rail, and air connectivity. These measures, he concluded, would significantly boost private sector engagement and elevate the Bangladesh–Nepal bilateral relationship to new heights.

Country Lecture



H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari

High Commissioner of Nepal to Bangladesh

H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari began with supporting Dr Biswas's deliberation on many key aspects of Nepal–Bangladesh relations—particularly energy cooperation, pharmaceuticals, culture, cuisine, and people-to-people ties. He then told the audience that he would attempt to present his own version of the broader relationship. Acknowledging the vast and expansive canvas the bilateral relationship represented, he likened his role to painting a picture of his own choice, offering insights and perspectives even if they did not cover the entire picture. He structured his remarks around four major themes: the spirit of true neighbourliness and friendship, growing economic partnership, vibrant cultural and people-to-people exchanges, shared pursuit of common goals through regional and multilateral frameworks. When addressing the essence of Nepal–Bangladesh relations, he stressed the friendship was grounded in mutual trust and strengthened over time. It extended beyond strategies to encompass genuine goodwill. He emphasised the organic and natural connections between the two countries, comparing them to rivers flowing from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal—paths that intertwined and moved toward shared goals of prosperity. He described the bilateral relationship as a shared story of development, with both nations serving as co-authors on a journey marked by efforts, sometimes humble, sometimes bold, but always in sync.

Although formal diplomatic relations were established in 1972, Mr Bhandari said people-to-people connections long predated that milestone. Nepal was among the first countries to recognise Bangladesh's independence. Over the past 53 years, ties between the two countries expanded across a wide range of areas. Engagements at the highest political levels and

exchanges of high-level visits further invigorated the relationship. Nepal and Bangladesh consistently supported each other in times of need, including during Bangladesh's Liberation War, Nepal's 2015 earthquakes, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The Nepali people consider Bangladesh among their closest friends, and Bangladeshi people are admired in Nepal for their entrepreneurship, resilience, and determination. Bangladeshis held similar positive sentiments toward Nepal and its people. This mutual admiration and empathy, he argued, constituted the foundation of a true neighbourliness sustained by enduring friendship.

Turning to economic dimension, he acknowledged that, while economic engagement remained modest, notable progress had been made in trade, connectivity, energy, and tourism. Bilateral trade had been growing steadily, albeit without achieving its full potential. Negotiation was ongoing for a preferential trade agreement (PTA) aimed at boosting trade volumes. A dedicated Trade Negotiation Committee (TNC) was working on finalising the PTA's text, determining rules of origin, and eliminating product lists to unlock greater trade potential. However, he stressed the need of intensifying joint efforts to reduce duties and other charges on products and address non-tariff barriers by upgrading customs infrastructure, standardising procedures, and harmonising trade regulations.

Mr Bhandari acknowledged Bangladesh's generosity in providing Nepal access to the Mongla and Chattogram ports, though he noted the majority of trade currently took place through the Banglabandha land port. Limited use of seaports was largely due to high costs and longer transit distances. Nonetheless, he expressed optimism regarding the potential for greater utilisation of these ports, particularly through the Rohanpur–Singhabad railway transit route, which could strengthen regional connectivity. Energy cooperation emerged as the most promising area of bilateral engagement. Nepal's immense hydropower potential and Bangladesh's growing energy needs made collaboration in this sector a win-win enterprise. He referred to the historic commencement of power exports from Nepal to Bangladesh—40 megawatts of hydroelectricity transmitted via the Indian grid on 15 November 2024 as a landmark event. The tripartite agreement signed on 03 October 2024 in Kathmandu among Nepal, India and Bangladesh inaugurated this cooperation, with regular power transmission scheduled for five months each year, from mid-June to mid-November, corresponding with Nepal's peak energy production season. While the initial volume was small, he described it as a symbolic “baby step” that could spur broader subregional power cooperation. He also highlighted ongoing talks between Nepal and Bangladesh on a joint venture in the 683 MW Sunkoshi-III Hydropower Project. Besides, Bangladeshi authorities were engaged in negotiations with India's GMR Company, which is developing the 900 MW Upper Karnali project—of which 500 MW could be allocated to Bangladesh.

Another significant issue of economic development pointed out was the forthcoming graduation of both countries from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category by 2026. While graduation was a key developmental milestone, it also brought challenges due to the phasing out of international support measures. In this context, Mr Bhandari emphasised the importance of continued collaboration—both bilaterally and in international fora, e.g., financial institutions and multilateral bodies, to ensure a smooth, sustainable, and irreversible transition. Nepal and Bangladesh were already working together to avoid any setback during the post-graduation period.

On the third major theme—cultural and people-to-people relations, Mr Bhandari underlined the depth and historical richness of ties between the two countries. Shared spiritual traditions, linguistic affinities, and cultural values wove a common heritage. Citizens of both countries



appreciated one another's arts and music, carrying centuries of wisdom that shaped modern identities. He recalled that renowned Bengali scholars such as Atish Dipankar and Banasree travelled to Nepal centuries ago to spread Buddhist teachings. In 1908, the Bengali scholar Haraprasad Shastri discovered the ancient Sanskrit manuscript Charyapada in the royal court of Nepal, another testament to the long-standing cultural linkages. Both Nepali and Bangla languages had roots in Sanskrit, and that the two nations celebrate similar festivals. While Nepal observes the Nepali New Year and Dashain, and Bangladesh celebrates Pohela Boishakh and Durga Puja, both societies observe common festivals like Eid, Saraswati Puja, and Pahela Falgun, illustrating their harmonious cultural blending. Tourism, he noted, was another important pillar of people-to-people connectivity. Nepal's scenic beauty and welcoming spirit had long attracted Bangladeshi travellers, making it a preferred tourist destination. In 2024 alone, nearly 50,000 Bangladeshi tourists visited Nepal. At present, Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Nepal's Himalaya Airlines operate a total of 13 direct flights between Dhaka and Kathmandu each week, another testimony of growing travel and people-to-people exchanges.

Mr Bhandari presented a broad and optimistic picture of Nepal–Bangladesh relations. He affirmed that the relationship was rooted in deep friendship, growing economic cooperation, vibrant cultural linkages, a shared commitment to regional and global progress. Through sustained engagement and mutual respect, Bangladesh-Nepal ties would continue to reach new heights. He then continued with his address by reflecting on the growing tourism connections between the two nations. He emphasised the need for sustained and collaborative efforts from both sides, including establishment of cross-border tourism circuits. Ongoing discussions are

focused on connecting historical and archaeological monuments of the two countries. In this regard, promoting lesser-known travel destinations, local cuisines, cultural expressions, regular exchange of art and cultural programmes would play vital role. One significant aspect of the people-to-people relationship was the growing number of Nepali students pursuing higher education in Bangladesh, particularly in the field of medicine. At present, approximately 2,700 Nepali students are enrolled in various universities across Bangladesh, mostly in medical institutions, but also in agriculture, pharmacy, engineering, and liberal arts. These students are cultural ambassadors who serve to strengthen societal and cultural ties between the two nations. Looking ahead, Mr Bhandari expressed a desire to see academic exchanges expand in both directions. Nepali universities and colleges, renowned for their excellent facilities and high-quality education, are keen to host Bangladeshi students, especially in areas such as liberal arts, hospitality management, and information technology.

Turning to the broader theme of regional and multilateral cooperation, Mr Bhandari acknowledged the potential of regional cooperation in South Asia remained largely untapped. Despite ambitious initiatives launched under frameworks such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, the region had still to achieve meaningful economic integration. South Asia accounted for merely 1.5 per cent of global merchandise trade and around 5.5 per cent of intra-regional trade, with regional trade contributing only about 2 per cent into the regional GDP. While poverty declined significantly, the region is still home to half of the world's poor population. Nepal and Bangladesh, as two strong advocates of SAARC and BIMSTEC, long championed enhanced regional connectivity, trade facilitation, energy cooperation and people-to-people contacts. Many of the region's problems had local solutions, urged all member states to work together to revive stalled regional processes through solidarity and shared resolve. These regional frameworks allow for deliberation on a wide range of traditional and emerging areas of cooperation, but above all, connectivity—whether physical, digital, by land, air, or water—remained the cornerstone of any successful regional or sub-regional initiative. About sub-regional connectivity, he drew attention to ongoing negotiations under the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) framework relating to facilitation of movement of cargo and passenger vehicles. Successful conclusion of these discussions, which had been underway for some time, would represent a major milestone in achieving seamless road connectivity across the sub-region, provided legitimate concerns of all parties were equally addressed.

Mr Bhandari then focused an issue that resonated with both Nepali and Bangladeshi people deeply: climate change. South Asia is on the frontlines of global climate crisis. Despite contributing negligibly to global greenhouse gas emissions, the region bears some of its harshest consequences. He highlighted scientific evidence linking the fragile ecosystems of mountainous areas with downstream coastal livelihoods. The impact of global warming is already visible: glaciers are melting rapidly, glacial lakes are at risk of bursting, changing rainfall patterns are leading to droughts and reducing water sources. In this context, he referred to the UN's designation of 2025 as the International Year of Glaciers' Preservation. To advance dialogue on this pressing issue, Nepal's government would host the first edition of the Sagarmatha Sumbad, a permanent dialogue forum named after Mount Everest, from 16 to 18 May in Kathmandu. This inaugural session would be held under the theme Climate Change, Mountains, and the Future of Humanity. He expressed hope for high-level participation from Bangladesh government in this

important event. Emphasising climate action would require collective commitment and regional solidarity, he called for mobilisation of resources, empowerment of youth and local communities. Inaction, would result in loss of thousands of lives, disruption of millions of livelihoods, and the denial of sustainable development to countless people. Quoting Albert Einstein, he stated, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them,” highlighting the urgent need for re-imagining countries’ approach to climate action through renewed commitment and accelerated implementation. Multilateral cooperation endeavours between Nepal and Bangladesh were less frequently highlighted, but remained significant. The two countries consistently worked together to advance shared interests in global fora such as the UN, Non-Aligned Movement, Group of 77 and China, and the LDC Group. Their efforts had been particularly aligned on the global development agenda, especially in relation to climate action, poverty reduction, sustainable development, and South-South cooperation. Notably, as two of the largest troop and police contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, both Nepal and Bangladesh made notable contributions to global peace and security. In these multilateral settings, they continue to amplify the voices of developing nations and push for more equitable international frameworks, especially in areas such as climate finance, fair trade practices, and access to technology.

Mr Bhandari concluded the lecture with how few bilateral relationships between close neighbours would embody as much promise and potential as that between Nepal and Bangladesh. However, much of this potential remains unrealised. He urged all stakeholders to harness the transformative power of collective strength, solidarity, and cooperation to achieve mutual prosperity. “Now is the time for action,” he declared.

Open Discussion



Ambassador M. Shameem Ahsan

Ambassador M. Shameem Ahsan began by thanking the Chair for once again organizing a very important country lecture focused on Bangladesh-Nepal relations, emphasizing that the event was taking place at a time when there was significant potential for energized and enhanced interaction between the two close South Asian neighbours. Referring to the event's title "Towards a New Height," he made a light-hearted remark relating it to Sagarmatha (Mount

Everest), noting that he had read somewhere that Everest's height was increasing by two millimeters each year. He suggested that as the height increased, so too must efforts be enhanced to meet the ever-growing challenges, drawing a parallel with the need for deeper cooperation on the ground.

Ambassador Ahsan also made an anecdotal reference to food, mentioning that both the keynote presenter and the Ambassador had referred to food items like "Momo," which held deep emotional significance in Bangladeshi culture. He noted that the word "Momo" was very dear and widely used in Bangla literature, and expressed hope that the audience could appreciate its emotional resonance.

Reflecting on the discussion, he remarked that while the speakers had modestly mentioned that they were only "scratching the surface," it was, in fact, important to do so in order to discover underlying opportunities and challenges. He highlighted the issue of the trade gap between Bangladesh and Nepal, noting that trade imbalances could sometimes become a source of difficulty between any two countries. Ambassador Ahsan requested Professor Niloy Ranjan Biswas to provide insights into potential areas where the trade gap could be bridged, including whether it would be feasible for Bangladesh to invest in Nepal and what the prospects might be.

He further pointed to the topic of the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), noting that although Ambassador Bhandari referenced it, the issue had been a longstanding challenge for Bangladesh, with limited progress achieved in negotiations with various countries. He expressed interest in hearing more about the challenges related to PTAs either from Ambassador Bhandari or from Professor Biswas.

Ambassador Ahsan also stressed the importance of soft issues, particularly people-to-people contacts. Reflecting on his own student days, he recalled the presence of many Nepali students in Bangladeshi medical colleges a trend that, according to him, continued with around 2,700 Nepali students still studying in Bangladesh. He suggested that there was room for value addition in this area and invited Professor Biswas to elaborate on possible pathways.

Finally, he raised a question regarding the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA), noting that despite long-term negotiations, progress appeared to be stalled. He requested an update on the current status of the agreement and where the bottlenecks might be.

Rear Admiral ASMA Awal (Retd)

Rear Admiral Awal began by expressing gratitude to His Excellency for delivering a very illuminating speech. He noted that what struck him most was the sincerity underpinning friendship, something he considered rare but tangible.

Turning to the issue of transit, he remarked that it remained a subject of much speculation among the business community and others, as many were unsure of the current developments. He recalled that the first transit agreement between Bangladesh and Nepal had been signed in 1976, covering 37 kilometres, a distance he emphasised as non-negotiable.

He further outlined the progress made since then, mentioning the establishment of railway connectivity through Rangpur, Singhabad, and Biralganj. He also referred to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Bangladesh and India on June 29 of the previous year.

Reflecting on the June 29 MoU, Mr. Awal observed that it was perhaps the first time Bangladesh had received a clear statement from the Indian side regarding transit facilities, despite previous assurances that had remained largely theoretical. He noted that, in practice, transit operations were still handled domestically rather than across borders. Given this context, the speaker requested clarification on the exact status of the transit arrangement. He also referred to a previous mention by the professor regarding the limited utility of Mongla port. He pointed out that today, efforts were underway to upgrade Mongla port, although it was caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war. In this regard, he asked whether Nepal would prefer to use Mongla port or continue to rely on Kolkata port, and sought elaboration on that preference.

Finally, he addressed the broader issue of connectivity, specifically rail connectivity. He referred to discussions about a railway project connecting China's Tibet region to Lhasa and plans to extend it to Kathmandu. He suggested that, if their proposed rail link could be completed, it might be possible to connect to Kathmandu and eventually to China. He asked whether this vision was a mere dream or if it could realistically be achieved.





Abul Kalam Azad

Professor, Department of International Relations
Faculty of Security & Strategic Studies (FSSS),
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Professor Abul Kamal Azad stated that a question would again relate to broader strategic issues, particularly the Bangladesh-India-Nepal relationship within the larger geopolitical landscape of South Asia. He noted that, India remained a central factor in this context. Reflecting on discussions during previous forums, he pointed out, Mongla Port regarding energy cooperation and transit had been signed, though substantial progress on

implementation was lacking.

Specifically, Professor Azad mentioned agreements related to hydroelectricity projects, which naturally involved Indian territory, and emphasized that India's role could not be overlooked. He raised concerns about the slow progress regarding Nepal's access to Mongla Port, despite longstanding discussions and negotiations. Comparing the geographical positions of Nepal and Bangladesh, he observed that Nepal, despite being landlocked, had strategic advantages and bargaining power due to its proximity to both China and India. He reminded the audience that Nepal had rights to access the Indian Ocean and its resources under UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).

Furthermore, Professor Azad stressed that the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative) was effectively non-functional, likening its current state to that of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). He posed a direct question to the dignitary, seeking views on how the Indian factor might affect future cooperation, particularly whether Nepal's connectivity initiatives, like the use of Mongla Port, would be impeded by India's influence. He requested a response regarding the concrete steps Nepal was taking to advance these goals independently, given the critical importance of Mongla Port for regional access and trade.

M S Siddiqui

Legal Economist



Following Professor Azad, Mr M S Siddique introduced himself as primarily a trader, indicating that his focus was on trade relations. He referred to the upcoming graduation of Bangladesh and Nepal from Least Developed Country (LDC) status and highlighted the relatively low levels of trade between the two countries.

He noted that while there had been mentions of non-tariff barriers, no specific issues had been identified. Referring to the existing

Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) under SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement), Mr Siddique remarked that the current trade relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal remained limited and lacked significant growth.

Drawing on his observations from his visits to Kathmandu, he remarked that Indian products previously dominated Nepalese markets, but Chinese products were increasingly taking over, including a noticeable shift in the automobile sector. Citing a retired Supreme Court justice, he shared a prediction that within a decade, Chinese vehicles could dominate the market almost entirely.

Mr Siddique then asked whether there had been any progress in developing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Nepal and Bangladesh. He expressed the view that relying solely on SAFTA and PTA mechanisms was insufficient and emphasised the need for stronger trade agreements. He requested the speaker to provide an update on the status of discussions regarding an FTA between Nepal and Bangladesh.



Ambassador Mahmood Hasan

Ambassador Mahmood Hasan raised two questions. First, he noted that the SAARC Secretariat is located in Kathmandu and mentioned that the 19th SAARC Summit had been postponed since 2016, with Bangladesh having previously expressed its desire for the summit to be held as soon as possible. He inquired whether there had been any movement from the Government of Nepal regarding this summit. Second, he referenced that Nepal is

currently led by Prime Minister Oli of the Communist Party of Nepal and asked for a description of Nepal's relations with India and China.

Fatema-Tuj-Juhra

Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations,
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Fatema-Tuj-Juhra mentioned that, during a personal conversation with Nepalese friends in the US, the topic of human rights violations against migrant workers in the Middle East arose. While presenting a thesis on this issue, the friends noted that they face similar challenges, with identical causes and impacts. They highlighted the frequent arrival of coffins and deceased workers at airports, bringing trauma to families. Ms Juhra inquired whether it



would be feasible to address this shared trauma through collaborative efforts, such as regional organizations or bilateral relations, emphasizing people-to-people connectivity between the two countries. She also queried the possibilities in incorporating this issue into discussions on bilateral relations.



Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Shahadat

Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Shahadat shared that he has two primary areas of interest: China-related studies and tourism. Based on these interests, he offered two direct suggestions, providing some context. He explained that before 2011, Nepalese participation in Bangladesh's tourism fairs was minimal, with only one or two individuals occasionally appearing at the Bangladesh stall. In 2011, while serving as the sole consultant and coordinator

for the Asian Tourism Fair, he contacted various embassies, including Nepal's, which responded positively by sending representatives to set up stalls at the event held at the Bangladesh China Friendship Center in Agargaon. Since then, he has observed increased tourism exchange, noting that approximately 50,000 Bangladeshis have visited Nepal, as referenced by His Excellency Ghanshyam Bhandari.

Col Shahadat suggested that the authorities of Bangladesh and Nepal, such as the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Nepal's tourism organization, should collaborate to form joint tourism teams. He proposed creating 12 teams each year, composed of business professionals, senior officials, students, and representatives from various sectors. He clarified that these teams would not require government funding, as participants would pay their own expenses. However, he believed that if the authorities organized these teams, it would enhance participants' comfort and security, making the visits more productive. In his view, organizing 12 teams from each country could significantly boost tourism and business.

Additionally, Col Shahadat addressed challenges faced by Nepalese students in Bangladesh. He noted that while some students reside in facilities like medical hostels or university accommodations, many live in private residences in Dhaka, where they often encounter difficulties, such as frequent relocations, which disrupt their focus on studies. To address this, he recommended that Bangladesh and Nepal jointly consider establishing or renting apartments in suitable locations, equipped with facilities reflecting Nepalese culture, to provide a supportive environment for these students. He believed this initiative would attract more Nepalese students to study in Bangladesh.

Lastly, Col Shahadat shared visions regarding electricity cooperation, highlighting Nepal's significant electricity resources. He envisioned collaboration between electrical engineers and scientists from both nations to develop innovative solutions, such as methods to transmit

electricity from Nepal to Bangladesh. He stressed the importance of exploring electricity imports from Nepal through bilateral negotiations, potentially involving India.

Dr Md Abul Hossain

Member, Joint Reverse Commission



Dr Md Abul Hossain explained that the majority of the Ganges tributaries originate in Nepal, with 70 per cent of the dry season flow coming from there. He highlighted the strong relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal in the water sector, noting that they have held numerous meetings and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the previous year. He mentioned that both countries are now exchanging data, maintaining good relations, and have agreed to conduct joint research on climate change and other areas. However, he emphasized that to fully optimise the benefits of the river basin, a river basin commission should be established. He pointed out that while there are over 100 river basin commissions globally, such as the Mekong River Commission and the Danube River Commission, South Asia lacks such a body. Therefore, he urged Nepal, as the upstream country, to take the initiative in forming a Ganges River Commission. Additionally, he noted that just the previous Thursday, the Bangladeshi cabinet had approved the 1997 Water Convention, which addresses the non-navigational use of international watercourses and lakes. He stressed that for Bangladesh to fully benefit from this convention, upstream countries like Nepal must also join it. Consequently, he requested Nepal to consider ratifying or becoming a part of this convention.



Ambassador Khalilur Rahman

Ambassador Khalilur Rahman, a retired secretary and former ambassador to Canada, reinforced Ambassador Mahmood Hassan's point regarding Nepal's potential role as the SAARC host country in supporting the next summit or strengthening the SAARC mechanism. He expressed satisfaction with the growing economic cooperation partnership and referenced the signing of the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) between the two countries. Rahman then inquired how trade growth between Bangladesh and Nepal might be affected following the cancellation of the Transshipment Agreement and subsequent decisions by the Bangladesh government to suspend exports through land ports.



Salahud Din Ahmed

Former broadcaster, faculty member, and a member (commissioner) of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC)

Salahud Din Ahmed, a volunteer storyteller for dementia patients and a trainer for caregivers of dementia patients, who was formerly a broadcaster, faculty member, and a member of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission, shared his thoughts. He mentioned that they often shared many things, like rivers carrying the tears and pains of the people. However, to him, the most important entity shared as siblings in the South Asian subcontinent was a very big brother figure – ‘Dada’ or ‘Bordada’. He emphasised the need to be very intelligent, wise, and tactful in handling relationships with countries, whether bigger, smaller, or of the same size.

He expressed that he felt really assured when His Excellency mentioned that while co-authoring the history of the relationship between Nepal and Bangladesh, they, at times, became bold and at other times humble– a very assuring position. He particularly highlighted the big brother, the wise figure he had referred to earlier, noting that he found them to be formidable at times, fantastic, sometimes funny, and, many times, friendly. Thus, he stressed that one must be very careful and that it was truly assuring to observe their position, which every smaller country should particularly work towards emulating.

He added that, especially in areas like power trade where there was huge potential and where exploration was proceeding in the right direction– carefulness was essential. However, when it came to path trading issues, extra caution was needed. He pointed out that the Honourable Ambassador had also mentioned that in nurturing relationships among countries, nations sometimes behaved in a friendly manner and, at other times, took strategic stances. He concluded by expressing confidence that the right actions would be taken so that, together, all countries could move much further ahead. He advised that one should always aim to be strategic, friendly, humble, or bold when necessary.

Naima Tarannum

Student, Department of Economics,
University of Dhaka



Naima Tarannum, a student from the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, introduced herself and highlighted her major in economics. She pointed out that, in addition to discussing topics such as the current geopolitical scenario, the power grid sector, and advancements in hydropower, she wished to address the issue of trade diversification in Bangladesh and Nepal. She noted that both countries currently have limited products in their markets and suggested that they could focus on greater trade diversification. Naima proposed that both Bangladesh and Nepal consider enhancing cross-border private sector investment, public-private partnerships, and public sector investment. She emphasized the importance of focusing on supply chains and procurement as a means to diversify trade. She further argued that the existing markets of both countries primarily feature only a few shared products, and by expanding trade, their economic relationship could be strengthened. Lastly, Naima expressed that the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal should not remain confined to the two countries, but should also involve third countries or multilateral and trilateral partnerships to achieve greater regional cooperation.

Response



H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari *High Commissioner of Nepal to Bangladesh*

In response to the questions from the audience, Mr Bhandari said that ambassadors, regardless of their country of origin, operate within diplomatic constraints, what he termed as “red lines”, and many of the questions posed, actually touched upon those sensitive boundaries. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that several of the topics had also been touched upon during his own remarks and those of Professor Biswas.

About enhancing Bangladesh-Nepal trade linkages, he underscored its importance, reiterating his earlier point about the necessity of building a substantive economic partnership. While sincerity, goodwill, and support were essential pillars of the Bangladesh-Nepal relationship, a meaningful bilateral relationship could not be sustained without a robust economic foundation. Many in the audience already asked rhetorical questions, which carried their own implicit answers. Two key issues were hindering trade: non-tariff barriers and other duties and charges beyond just tariff lines. These barriers, he explained, existed on both sides and were not limited to challenges Nepali trucks faced when entering Bangladesh, but also apply in reverse. To address this, he highlighted the importance of standardising, harmonising, and modernising trade facilitation measures—including customs procedures, infrastructure of land and sea ports, as promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). He further elaborated on the continuing negotiations over a PTA between Nepal and Bangladesh. While acknowledging that the process took years, he expressed optimism that finalisation of a product list, even if narrow, could serve as a useful springboard to enhance bilateral trade. The existing land route connecting

Banglabandha, Fulbari in India, and Kakarbhitta in Nepal had been operational since 1997. Despite these measures, business people were guided by profitability. If duties and tariffs rendered trade unprofitable, it would naturally limit the scale of bilateral commerce. Still, he noted positive trends: trade volumes were rising modestly. Bangladeshi products like pharmaceuticals, juices, and other consumer goods, are now commonly found in Nepali markets, just as Nepali lentils, oranges, and ginger entered Bangladeshi markets.

On energy cooperation, Mr Bhandari described it as a top priority and a “low-hanging fruit” for both countries due to the clear potential and mutual willingness. He referred to ongoing energy collaborations as a win-win enterprise. Although progress had been slow, tangible steps had already been taken, e.g., transfer of electricity from Nepal to Bangladesh through Indian grids. Furthermore, he spoke on two notable hydropower projects currently under discussion: the 683 MW Sunkoshi-3 and the 500 MW Upper Karnali project. While such projects would require time to materialise, particularly in terms of infrastructure and investment, they carried immense promise for future hydroelectricity supply from Nepal to Bangladesh. He expressed confidence in continued cooperation, citing Nepal’s clean, green, and sustainable hydropower as a sunrise industry well-suited for Bangladesh’s growing energy needs.



Turning to the BBIN sub-regional initiative, he clarified a common misconception: BBIN is not solely about connectivity or motor vehicle agreements, rather, an umbrella framework encompassing energy, tourism, infrastructure, and broader connectivity. The Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), signed in 2015, is one component of this larger vision. Two protocols—one for passenger and the other for cargo vehicles—were under negotiation, and a trial run for passenger vehicles took place in 2018. He acknowledged the slow and often tedious nature of subregional, regional, and multilateral processes but firmly rejected the notion of BBIN being inactive or defunct. Instead, progress was ongoing and the framework held promise in several

sectors, including energy and tourism, under not just BBIN, but also SAARC and BIMSTEC frameworks. Speaking about the Mongla port, he said the government of Nepal did not favour one port over another; decisions are based on commercial feasibility as determined by traders instead. While Mongla received considerable attention from Nepal due to its proximity, its current transshipment costs remained higher than other ports used by Nepal. Mr Bhandari personally visited Mongla and was impressed by the ongoing infrastructural upgrades. Nepali business community was monitoring these developments and was hopeful that the port's potential would soon be fully realised, especially given the generous access offered by Bangladesh government.

On LDC graduation, he described it as a deeply personal issue, having served in Nepal's mission in New York during the adoption of the UN resolution on that matter in 2021. Alongside the Bangladesh mission, Nepal played a significant role in negotiating the inclusion of a five-year preparatory period, extended from the usual three years, due to vulnerabilities arising from COVID-19, climate change, and natural disasters. He framed LDC graduation as a major development milestone for both countries and explained that Nepal and Bangladesh were working on two fronts: bilaterally, through finalising national smooth transition strategies, and multilaterally, by advocating for post-graduation support through international institutions like the UN and WTO. He stressed the need of securing ongoing privileges, benefits, and concessions beyond 2026 with a view to ensuring the transition would be smooth, sustainable, and irreversible. He briefly discussed on migration, affirmed its importance as a policy priority for both countries, alongside indicating the issue would warrant deeper engagement in the future.

Concluding Remarks



Ambassador Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), concluded the session by highlighting the longstanding and cordial relationship between Bangladesh and Nepal. He emphasised that this bond had been shaped by historical connections, cultural affinities, and mutual respect. As key nations in South Asia, both countries have over time developed strong bilateral cooperation across trade, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges. He noted that the present moment offered a timely opportunity to deepen these ties further in pursuit of shared prosperity.

In extending his concluding remarks, Ambassador Sarker expressed special thanks and deep gratitude to His Excellency Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari, Ambassador of Nepal to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, for attending the event as the Chief Guest. He acknowledged the Ambassador's valuable time and insightful contribution despite a busy schedule. Ambassador Sarker also conveyed his heartfelt appreciation to all distinguished participants for their thoughtful observations, recommendations, and engagement. He further acknowledged the dedicated efforts of BIISS staff and officers in ensuring the successful organisation of the Country Lecture.

Looking ahead, Ambassador Sarker called for enhanced collaboration to fully realise the potential of Bangladesh–Nepal cooperation. He stressed that the path forward should be marked by mutual trust, sustained dialogue, and concrete partnerships. By working together, both nations could unlock opportunities for shared progress, regional stability, and sustainable development. He concluded with optimism, reaffirming BIISS's commitment to facilitating such meaningful exchanges in the future.

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