



# BIPSS SPECIAL REPORT



## First BIPSS-ISAS Roundtable on Bangladesh-Singapore Relations

Singapore, 24-25 May, 2009

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies  
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## **BIPSS Report on “First BIPSS-ISAS Roundtable on Bangladesh Singapore Relations”**

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Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) is a non-party, non-profit organization and independent think tank devoted to the study of peace, security and strategic issues of South, Southeast Asia and beyond. BIPSS and Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS, Singapore) jointly organized first roundtable dialogue on Singapore-Bangladesh Relations on 25 May, 2009 in Singapore. This will be a yearly event starting from this year.

Major General Muniruzzaman, ndc, psc, (Retd) President of BIPSS led a four member delegation to the dialogue. A wide array of issues, related to security, trade, economy and diplomacy, were discussed during the roundtable. The dialogue topics encompassed issues that are of interest for both the countries- Singapore and Bangladesh. Each institute presented papers on domestic socio-economic and political developments, Singapore-Bangladesh bilateral relations, regional security architecture and the evolving nature of regionalism in South and Southeast Asia.

The Roundtable, held at Furama Riverfront, Singapore, commenced at 9.00 am with the welcome remarks made by General Munir and Ambassador See Chak Mun. Both Bangladesh High Commissioner to Singapore and Singapore High commissioner to Bangladesh were present during the inaugural session. The Singapore High Commissioner to Bangladesh, H.E. Verghese Mathews, attended all the sessions, from beginning to end, and made valuable contributions.

The first presentation of the day was made by Dr. S Mahmud Ali. Dr. Ali is the Senior Editorial Coordinator of BBC World Service, London and the member of the BIPSS International Advisory Board. He made the presentation on ‘Key Socio-economic and Political Developments in Bangladesh’. Dr. Ali, with his apt proficiency, described to the audience about significant developments that Bangladesh has made over the years and the obstacles faced during this journey.

The second presentation was from Singapore side, presented by Dr. Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow, National University of Singapore, and the topic was ‘Key Socio-economic and Political Developments in Singapore’. An open forum discussion followed the presentations of the first session.

The second session of the Roundtable was on Bangladesh- Singapore Relations. Mr. Khaled Iqbal Chowdhury, Research Associate of BIPSS, presented the paper on ‘Relations between Bangladesh and Singapore- Bangladesh perspective’. Similarly, Mr. M. Shahidul Islam, Research Associate of ISAS, made a presentation of same topic but from Singapore perspective. Both the speakers dealt with the historical background of the Bangladesh Singapore relations, trade, and commerce and advocated a number of ‘ways ahead’ to strengthen existing bilateral relations.

The post-lunch, third session was focused on assessing security landscape of South and South East Asia. President BIPSS, Major General Munir presented a paper on ‘Major Security Challenges facing South Asia’. General Munir, with his professional deliberation, highlighted the changing security nature of the region of South Asia, emerging security challenges, South Asian scene of terrorism and Counter Terrorism measures. He also emphasized on the geopolitical relevance of South Asia and how Bangladesh fits in it.

Mr. Daljit Singh, Visiting Senior Research fellow of ISAS later made a comprehensive presentation on Major Security Challenges facing Southeast Asia. His talk was followed by an open forum discussion on the presentations of the third session.

The final session put more focus on South Asian and Southeast Asian regionalism and the dynamics involved in this. Mr. Shafqat Munir, Research Analyst at RSIS, Singapore on secondment from

BIPSS, explained 'Bangladesh, the South Asian Region and SAARC'. Mr. Munir elaborated the conceptual objectives behind the formation of SAARC, the challenges facing SAARC and how the SAARC can be made more effective.

The seasoned former diplomat and Senior Fellow of ISAS, Ambassador See Chak Mun, presented the last paper, from Singapore side, on 'Singapore, the Southeast Asian Region and ASEAN'.

The event provided the opportunity to collate expert opinions and suggestions for strengthening Singapore Bangladesh bilateral relations. A number of issues and focal areas came up during the meeting in this regard. We are presenting these expert and academic suggestions in the form of recommendations to further ties between these two countries:

1. Bangladesh and Singapore have strong economic relations. Bilateral trade between the two countries has gradually increased from S\$ 1.46 billion in 2002 to S\$ 1.7 billion in 2006. Bangladesh should explore the possibility of export base diversification and the export volume to Singapore. Setting up a Joint Bangladesh-Singapore Trade Chamber may further augment bilateral trade and commerce.
2. Singapore is one of the leading investors in Bangladesh. In 2006, Singapore was the 9th largest investor in Bangladesh. Major Singapore investments were made in telecoms, textiles, electronic & electrical goods, knit ware, ready-made garments. It is estimated that the Singapore investment in Bangladesh exceeds a billion US dollars now. The government of Bangladesh should make efforts to draw more Singapore investment. BIPSS suggests that Bangladesh can organise single country fairs or Board of Investment (BoI) exhibitions annually in Singapore.
3. Singapore is one of the very first countries to recognise Bangladesh, in February 1972, immediately after Bangladesh's independence. Since 1972, relations between Bangladesh and Singapore have excellent and growing steadily. Both countries share common views on various regional and global issues. Therefore, efforts should be made to maintain the momentum of excellent relations and to further these increased high level state visits to and diplomatic coordination with Singapore is essential in this regard.
4. It came up during the meeting that at present Bangladesh and Singapore cooperate with each other in the effort of institutional capacity building. This endeavour should be advanced with more vigor to promote more Govt-to-Govt and People-to-People contacts between Bangladesh and Singapore.
5. It is estimated that more than 100,000 people of Bangladeshi origin currently live in Singapore. There have been around 50,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore in any given year since the late 1990s. Out of them 90% are migrant workers doing different kinds of skilled and semi-skilled jobs (mostly employed in ship building and construction sectors). Among the professionals, most are mariners followed by engineers, bankers, management consultants and university and polytechnic faculty members. Bangladesh government should more seriously engage itself with its Singapore counterpart to export more manpower to Singapore. Along with non-skilled/ semi-skilled labor export, Bangladesh should start working sending skilled and professional manpower to Singapore.
6. If we look at the data of the remittance flow from Singapore, we will find that Bangladeshi Diaspora in Singapore makes substantial contribution to our economy. Whereas in 1998-99, remittances from Singapore reached 13.07 million USD, the comparable figure for July 2008-March 2009 stood exceeded 120 million USD. Hence, Bangladesh mission in Singapore should be more forthcoming in advancing the interests of the Bangladeshi expatriates there.

7. Singapore has attained tremendous advancement in the field of Information Technology (IT). Bangladesh can benefit itself by establishing cooperation with Singapore in sectors such as IT, eGovernance and eGovernment. Bangladesh can also use Singapore best practices from different sectors.
8. From January to June, 2008 over 56,000 Bangladeshi tourists visited Singapore for different purposes (32% more than a year earlier). 60 per cent of Bangladesh's tourists go to Singapore for leisure, 35 per cent for business and 5 per cent for education and health. Bangladesh too has considerable potentials for tourism- Cox's Bazar, Sundarbans, ancient Buddhist monasteries/ relics and many historical ruins, and can draw tourists from Singapore as well. Bangladesh should take initiatives to attract tourists from Singapore.
9. In the age of Transnational Terrorism and organized crime, Bangladesh and Singapore can jointly work on security issues. Bangladesh can benefit immensely if it builds up close relations with Singapore in security areas such as- capacity building of the law enforcement agencies, best practice sharing, Counter Terrorism efforts, anti-money laundering and defense cooperation.
10. Mil-to-Mil cooperation, between these two countries, is another potential area that Bangladesh can explore. Mil-to-Mil cooperation may include- exchange programs for Armed Forces Officers, training exchanges and joint military exercises.
11. Singapore has the experience of resolving maritime disputes with its neighbours. Bangladesh can gain by working closely with Singapore on maritime issues.
12. Bangladesh should work with Singapore to initiate reform in our healthcare, education and public service sectors. New areas of cooperation can also be singled out, eg. Using Singapore's recycling, specially water management and recycling expertise.
13. Bangladesh and Singapore can work jointly in the following areas;
  - a. Cooperation in technological/ technical know-how assistance
  - b. Cooperation to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change.
  - c. Trade/ investment barrier removal.

The Roundtable was concluded with the closing remarks made by the General Munir and Ambassador Mun. The roundtable dialogue will essentially play a noteworthy role in strengthening Singapore-Bangladesh relations and furthering regional cooperation. This initiative is only the first step towards bringing academics, think tanks and policy drivers and formulators into a single realm to ensure a sustained move forward. This will be, from this year on, a yearly event, held in alternate capitals to work as a driving force for further enhancing Singapore-Bangladesh bilateral relations.