

The Kunming Initiative: Prospects for Sub-regional Cooperation

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Introduction

In contemporary international relations, two of the most important concepts are regionalism and sub-regionalism. Traces of regionalism, though in a different form, have existed since World War II (Rana, "Regionalism," 1979). The enduring pursuit of regionalism and sub-regionalism has an underpinning thrust on peace, security and development through exploration, identification and gradual intensification of trade, economic and cultural ties among the geographically contiguous areas.¹ The Kunming Initiative, or what has come to be known as the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) Forum, is one such sub-regional venture that explores the prospects of cooperation by clustering parts or the whole of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar, specifically the land-locked frontier areas (Kunming Initiative, 2000 and Indiresan, 2000).

The term 'sub-regional' is used in this study to describe an aggregate of countries because all four—Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar—are members of one or more regional associations. Besides, sub-regionalism is assumed to be more expedient "when integration of entire economies and region proves limited and fraught with difficulties." Countries work together to make "growth polygons" based on a "particular transnational but contiguous area" (Chavez-Malaluan, www.forum-adb.org/unsorted/srez.pdf).

Profile of the BCIM

The total geographical area of the BCIM is 208,000 square kilometers with a population estimated at 4.35 hundred million (He cited in Thakur, www.ceniseas.org/newsasia/ravnipaper.doc), constituting roughly 40 per cent of the world population and including two of the fastest growing economies: China and India. Yet, the region is also inhabited by about half of the poor people in the Asia-Pacific, a population living on less than US\$1 a day, one of the lowest ranks in the Human Development Index. People living below the poverty line, taking the base year 2000, is estimated at 28.6 percent in India, 49.8 percent in Bangladesh, 4.6 in China and 22.9 percent in Myanmar.² Given this paradox, an implied agenda of the BCIM Forum was the recognition of the urgent need to remove poverty in the frontier areas to ensure "human security."

The total area of Bangladesh is 144,000 square kilometers with a population of 135.20 million, the most densely populated country within the BCIM. It shares 4,053 border kilometers with India and 193 border kilometers with Myanmar. The population of the People's Republic of China is 1,300.00 million, occupying an area of 9,598,100 square kilometers. This makes China the most populous and largest country within the BCIM. China shares 2,185 kilometers with Myanmar, 3,380 kilometers with India, out of 22,117 border kilometers it shares with other countries. India also shares 1,463 kilometers with Myanmar. India has a population of 1,091.00 million occupying an area of 3,287,300 square kilometers (Asian Development Bank, 2005).

Myanmar has total land area of 676,600 square kilometers with a population of 54.30 million (Asian Development Bank, 2005). It shares 2,185 kilometers with China, 1,463 kilometers with India in the northeast sector and 193 kilometers with Bangladesh. Myanmar has 135 “national races” including eight major national ethnic groups. All the major religions of the world have followers in Myanmar. Buddhism and Islam are practiced in the fertile plains while Christianity is strong in the mountain areas.

Yunnan is a landlocked province in Southwest China, sharing borders with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Yunnan covers an area of 394,100 square kilometers and has a population of 43.75 million comprising 26 ethnic minorities. The population of the ethnic minorities in Yunnan is about one-third of that of the Han majority at 14.6 million. Among the minority nationalities there are many believers of Buddhism. The autonomous areas of various nationalities comprise 276,700 square kilometers. Yunnan has an 84 percent mountain area, 10 percent plateau, 6 percent basins, and has a high forest area of 28,732,001 hectares.

There are eight provinces in North East India demarcated broadly on tribe and ethnic lines, real or assumed. They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The combined areas of these provinces are 255,000 square kilometers constituting about eight percent of the total area of India. It has a population of 40 million constituting roughly 4 percent of all India. The topography of North East India is hilly, with hills covering about 70 per cent of the area. Most of the mountain people have been converted to Christianity while Hinduism is practiced in the plains of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. There are also Muslims in North East India, largely among the Bengali linguistic communities. North East India has 213 tribes out of the 635 tribes categorized by the “People of India” Project. However, tribes in North East India can be broadly bracketed into approximately 75 major groups who speak about 175 Tibeto-Burman and Mon-Khmer languages.

The frontier areas within the BCIM are inhabited by “people ethnically different from each empire's ruling elite or majority and there was little identification with the central regimes” (Giersch, www.ciaonet.org/wps/gpc01/gpc01.html). Along with this, the presence of rich natural resources or “primary commodities” is a sign that can

“exacerbate the risk of conflict” as elsewhere in the world (Bannon and Collier, 2003). A marked feature of North East India and in many parts of Myanmar is the problem of integration and their history of having the longest-running insurgency in the sub-region. In North East India, more than 40 insurgent groups representing a plethora of ethnic communities continue to pose serious challenges to the government of India. In Myanmar and many North East Indian provinces, persisting problems of integration between the highlanders and lowlanders were institutionalized during the British colonial times through the colonial policy of excluding the frontier or tribal areas from its direct administration. In other words, there has been lack of political legitimacy in the sub-region and the BCIM process may be in a position to bridge the gap created over the centuries.

The complementarities in natural resources and shared history among the different ethnic groups in the frontier areas provide scope for cooperation in the sub-region. Most of the tribes, ethnic groups or nationalities in North East India trace their origins to the south of Yalung river or Shinlung/Chinlungsan in Southwest China. The Kachins or Jingpos/Singphos, the Was are spread over India, Southwest China and Myanmar. Similarly the Meiteis of Manipur are close to the Shans of Myanmar, one of the three Tai/Dai nationalities spread over Yunnan and parts of Southeast Asia (Nilikanta, www.manipuronline.com/Archives/Feature/2002/February/February2002.htm). Some prominent groups like the Ahoms in Assam are close to the Dais and Shans of Yunnan and Myanmar and the Thais of Thailand. The Khasis of Meghalaya, one of the few matrilineal societies in India, migrated from the Red River Delta in Vietnam passing through Myanmar and Yunnan (Baruah, 2004). Islamic believers are also prominent in Bangladesh, many parts of North East India and parts of Myanmar. This natural and social environment makes the sub-region fertile ground for experimentation on whether or not the “process of culture recognition or socialization of collective identity” can make an ideal and meaningful cooperation through commonality of “ideas, culture and identities”(Wang, 2003).

The Task

The state of bilateral relationship between China and India impinges on the pace and scale of the Kunming process and on their relationships with other members of the BCIM. The “unsteady” relationship between China and India entered a “new stage”³ of development following Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi’s visit in 1988, though diplomatic relations had already been established in 1950. After Indian Premier A. B. Vajpayee’s visit to China in 2003 followed by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to India in April 2005, bilateral relations can be said to have entered an even more positive phase. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit, which also marked the 55 years of diplomatic relations, was a milestone in Sino-Indian relations. It led to the signing of 12 memoranda including a guiding principle for the settlement of boundary disputes and confidence-building measures along the Line of Actual Control (Ministry of External Affairs, 2005).

Indian and Bangladeshi bilateral relations are marked by irritants. They revolve around issues relating to demarcation of land boundary, border fencing, the influx of “illegal migration” from Bangladesh, and extension of shelter to separatist groups from North East India and Islamic fundamentalist elements. The Bangladesh schema of “lebensraum” in its sparsely populated neighboring areas of North East India and Myanmar for space-constrained Bangladeshis adds another problem in the BCIM process.⁴ Trade imbalances in favor of India, “deliberate” high tariffs, customs duty imposed on Bangladesh products entering India and surcharges to the tune of 60 percent for all the agro-based products exported from Bangladesh are some of the irritants (Harun, <http://www.siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSOUTHASIA/Resource/Bangladesh-final.pdf>).

Relations between India and Myanmar improved after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Yangon in 1987. A significant step was the border trade agreement signed in April 1995 which was followed by General Maung Aye's visit in the later part of 2000, the first high-level delegation since 1988. In February 2001, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh inaugurated the 160-kilometers long Tamu- Kalembo-Kalewa road, constructed with Indian funding estimated at over US\$200 million. Common interests such as containing the spread of Chinese influence, initiation of new economic and foreign policy orientation of both countries seeking to cultivate stronger ties with neighbors, and controlling insurgency in the frontier areas of both countries appear to have a bearing on the relationship between India and Myanmar.

China and Bangladesh have maintained a “consistent policy” which is not affected by systemic and domestic changes. And in 2002, agreements encompassing broad areas of economic and technical cooperation were signed. In 2002, Premier Khaleda Zia visited China and made a stopover in Kunming, which is significant given the fact that Indian President K. R. Narayanan also visited Kunming. Both these visits are interpreted as a tacit approval to the Kunming cooperation process. Consequently, Yunnan is emerging as one important trading point for Bangladesh, with direct air links between Kunming and Dhaka. In 2003, Sino-Bangladesh trade reached US\$ 1.37 billion, which increased by 28.3 percent from the previous year (Deng, 2004).

Bilateral relationships between Bangladesh and Myanmar are plagued by the issue of atrocities against the Rohingyas refugees who are Muslims. An apparent fear of a possible influx of Bangladeshi Muslims appears to be present among the people and policy makers in Myanmar. Yet Dhaka and Yangon signed an agreement on border trade which formally began in 1995 and agreed to establish a road link from Chittagong to Yangon through the Naaf River.

Building Connectivity through Transport

Transport connectivity is one of the main agenda of the BCIM forum. The sub-region can potentially be linked through a web of roads, railways, and waterways. The

existence of the Southern Silk Road, originating from southwest China and passing through present day Myanmar and North East India, has been noted by many scholars and can serve as a rationale for reviving the route (Ray, 2005).⁵ The BCIM countries are connected by the Asian Highway and Trans Asian Railway project under the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). The 140,000 kilometer Asian Highway (AH) project aims to connect 32 countries between Europe and Asia. In the North East Indian sector, the AH-1 and AH-2 passes through Dawki–Shillong-Jorabat-Nagaon-Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal-Moreh. From here the link to Myanmar and up to north Thailand is through Tamu-Mandalay-Meiktila-Payagyi-Myawadi-Mae Sot.

China is connected to Myanmar through Yunnan by the AH-14: Kunming City to Mandalay via Ruili-Muse-Lashio. It is further connected to Bangladesh by the AH-41 through Teknaf-Cox's Bazar-Chittagong-Katchpur-Dhaka-Hatikamrul-Jessore-Mongla. From Kunming, direct links to the Bay of Bengal is 5800 kilometers shorter than its link to the nearest Port in Shanghai (Harun, <http://www.siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSOUTHASIA/Resource/Bangladesh-final.pdf>). Given this prospect of connectivity funding for some of these road constructions is borne by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). For instance the Chuxiong-Dali-Baoshan distance of 178 kilometers and 166 kilometers respectively is financed by the ADB (Rahmatullah, 2003).

Myanmar has good road links between Yangon and Sittwe, capital of Rakhine state near the Bangladesh border, though it passes through difficult terrain and is used mostly for military purposes. Nevertheless, anticipating the prospect for enhanced cooperation, Dhaka has developed a river port at Teknaf (Bangladesh) to provide link to Maungdaw, border town in Myanmar across the Naaf River.

China, India and Myanmar were till the end of World War II connected through the Ledo Road or Stilwell Road, constructed under the command of General Joseph W. Stilwell (1883-1946), Chief of Staff of the Allied forces operating in China-Burma-India. The Stilwell Road in Myanmar runs 1,033 kilometers out of which only about 100 kilometers needs to be repaired. The 632 kilometers that runs in China is operational. Within China the Stilwell Road is rerouted cutting the distance shorter by about 500 kilometers. From Kunming three sectors are under “renovation,” from Baoshan to Tengchong and to Howqiao, making the distance from Kunming to Ledo only 1,220 kilometers (Xinhua, 2005; Guo, 2005).

As North East India shares 98 percent of its border with Myanmar, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan, building transport and trading corridors at various border points can make essential subsistence items much cheaper. Because of transport costs involved people in the region pay almost double the price for goods coming from the industrial metros like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. The opening of transport connectivity and trading routes within the BCIM neighborhood can substantially relieve the burden in the frontiers of North East India, whose market turnover is estimated at US\$ 50

billion.

Railway Connection

There is a well-laid domestic railway connectivity within the BCIM, except in some provinces of North East India and parts of Myanmar. India and Bangladesh still have the old rail network laid by the British, however it is lying unused for political and security reasons. There is a snag though. Different countries operate on different gauge systems and this may affect the flow of rail traffic. In most Southeast Asian countries, the meter-gauge system (1000 mm) is used. In China, the railway runs on the standard gauge (1435 mm). But in parts of India and Bangladesh the broad gauge (1676 mm) is used, although the meter-gauge system is used too.

Waterways

Within the BCIM, water transport connection is feasible between parts of Yunnan and Myanmar using the river port at Bhamo on the Irrawaddy River leading to the Indian Ocean. The Irrawaddy River is capable of handling 500 ton vessels between Bhamo and Mandalay, a distance of about 410 kilometers. And between Mandalay and Yangon the Irrawaddy River is capable of accommodating 800 ton vessels (Rahmatullah, 2003). Between India and Bangladesh there is Class I inter-country and transit traffic through the Inland Water Transport (IWT), which can be operated year round with a minimum draft of 12 feet. The IWT is the only link for transit traffic through Bangladesh between the North East Indian provinces and the rest of India, but it is rarely used and transit traffic stands at around 2000 metric tons annually. Both countries also have private and public sector self-propelled dump and barge operations with a capacity ranging from 150 tons to 1,200 tons.

Tourism

Tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world with the capacity to employ 200 million people worldwide. Projection of tourist inflow around the world will be in the range of 1.6 billion spending US\$ 5 billion a day by 2020. In the BCIM, tourism potentials are in its mountains, rivers, forest and wildlife, religious places and holy shrines, ethnic cultures and its vast coastline and ocean (Bhoothalingam, 2003). As 70 percent of tourists originate within a radius of 450 kilometers, prospects of tourism within the BCIM is promising, with a thrust on “ecotourism” among the Free-and-Independent Travelers (FIT). As ecotourism integrates “styles of tourism that positively enhance the conservation of the environment and/or cultural and religious heritage, and respond to the needs of local communities,” the BCIM region will be a magnet for tourists (www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/SASEC/Tourism-Development/chap.2.pdf).

Executing the Task

To realize the objectives set out in the Kunming Initiative of 1999, a series of conferences and consultations have been taking place regularly, with venues chosen among the four member countries on a rotational basis. Since its inception, the BCIM has held six conferences: the Kunming Initiative 1999, New Delhi 2000, the Dhaka Statement 2002, the Yangon Statement 2003, the Kunming Cooperation Declaration 2004 and the Delhi Statement 2006. The Kunming Cooperation Declaration 2004 was the “fruitful result” of one of the “biggest” conferences of the BCIM. The fifth BCIM conference agreed to establish a BCIM Coordinate Office tentatively based at Kunming with English as the working language. The Coordinate Office serves as a platform for economic and cultural exchange among the “high ranks of governments (sic),” and strengthens policy research by “providing intelligent support to governments and enterprises” within the BCIM. Besides, it can also strengthen and support research on investment, resource development, environment protection, anti-poverty programs and cultural exchange (He, 2004).

The Delhi Statement 2006 agreed to study the feasibility of multi-modal transport links from Kunming to Kolkata through Bangladesh and set up expert groups on development finance and investment policies. Along with this facilitation of cross-border trade, transit trade and joint ventures based on value addition and need for transport connectivity to expedite economic exchange were identified. A liaison institution and officer will also be designated for effective implementation of the programs (“BCIM Members,” 2006).

The Problems

The BCIM Forum is a track II initiative and the level of participation by officials varies from country to country, even if it has the blessings of the respective governments. It is understandable that Indian response to this initiative was “initially far from being enthusiastic.” For instance, Dr M. Rahmatullah noted that the involvement of Indian central governments was very low in comparison with conferences held in other countries (Inoue, Murayama and Rahmatullah, 2004). Besides, participation of epistemic community and representation of political leadership from the North East Indian provinces are systematically ignored and discouraged. In one of the annual BCIM forum meet, in New Delhi probably, the attendance of the Assam state minister “was not welcomed by the officials of the central government either” (Inoue, Murayama and Rahmatullah, 2004).⁶

It manifests negligence, a dispassionate and uncaring attitude on the part of the federal governments. Incorporating provincial “epistemic community” and allowing proper

political representation may dispel the prevailing atmosphere of neglect, minimize inadvertent mistakes committed out of ignorance, and erase any perception of discrimination. Advocacy for subaltern representation is also in line with the thrust on “human security,” which stresses “including the excluded,” to minimize the perception of subjugation.

Politics--domestic and regional--is also a problem within the BCIM. It is the politics of mutual suspicion of neighbors--differential perception on security, state formation based on religion, ethnicity and language, unsettled boundary issues, trans-border migration—and this continues to influence the pace and scale of the BCIM Forum. A perennial distrust is present in spite of the rhetoric of good neighborliness and the intensification of bilateral exchanges. Besides, to what extent each member of the BCIM is willing to forego its national interests and ambitions will play an important role in actualizing the goals. A major challenge emerges from the political tradition of excluding the frontier areas whose share in the political process is marginal. These areas also have little similarity in history, language, ethnicity and religion with the powers-that-be at the federal level. People in the frontier areas lack entrepreneurial skills and capital formation; they are also socially and culturally different. These factors hinder them from participating in the economic and political process.

Recommendations

The success of the BCIM Forum, like any other sub-regional cooperation project, will depend, as geographer Anssi Passi argued, on “political, economic, cultural, and administrative institutionalized practices and social consciousness, and continually reproduced in these practices.” (Cited in Baruah, 2004). This study concludes that in the absence of proper policy formulation which should be solicited from different communities and the participation of the provincial authorities, epistemic communities and civil society, no sub-regional group can be meaningful. Experimenting with “participatory regionalism” (Acharya, 2004) may ameliorate the Kunming process. Categorizing the region as a monolithic structure with a top-down developmental planning would lead to serious policy failure. Investment for setting up of an “extractive industry” (Giercsh, www.ciaonet.org/wps/gpc01/gpc01.html) in the region is inevitable. But failure to accord due participation to the locals may invite strong protest from civil society and various armed ethnic separatist, autonomist and secessionist groups. Concrete measures to erase the feeling or perception of neglect and disproportionate representation in shaping the destiny of the frontier provinces can augment the BCIM process.

The lack of interaction between the frontier areas and the central authorities is common within the BCIM, even in China before the establishment of the Communist regime. This gap, real or imaginary, must be bridged. The unique natural attributes of the BCIM is its vastness in size and population as well as its ethnic and cultural diversity. These factors make it unrealistic to visualize sub-regional development

strategies in a unilateral manner. The success of sub-regional cooperation is conditioned by its own peculiarities. Questions of sustainable development will also loom large if the frontier regions are just being used as a mere transport corridor for goods originating from other metros to other destinations.

Sincere and transparent efforts to incorporate alienated communities through cultivation of ethnic, religious, cultural and civil society networks may produce good dividend. In designing proper development strategy for the frontiers, provincial scholarships can contribute to chalking out appropriate strategy through their peculiar local experiences and insights. Soliciting the participation of local communities or civil society in creating policy strategy may be helpful. Wide publicity of the merits of trade, tourism, and economic cooperation is imperative to enable different communities to prepare for such opportunities. Giving autonomy to and planning with the provinces will help the BCIM process move forward.

Endnotes

¹ For theoretical debates on Regionalism, see A.P. Rana, "Regionalism as an Approach to International Order: A Conceptual Overview," *International Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1979. pp. 491-535; Kanishka Jayasuriya, "Introduction: The Vicissitudes of Asian Regional Governance," and "Embedded Mercantilism and Open Regionalism," pp. 1-38 in Kanishka Jayasuriya, (ed.) *Asian Regional Governance: Crisis and Change* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Wang Zhengyi, "Contending East Asian Regional Identity: Market-Led, Institutions, Social Reconstruction," Proceedings of 3rd Annual Fellows' Conference of the Asian Scholarship Foundation, July 1-2, 2003, Bangkok, Thailand, CD-ROM.

² There are different methods of measuring levels of poverty, but this data is used to enable us comprehend the extent of poverty within the subregion, Asian Development Bank, *Basic Statistics 2005*, www.adb.org/Statistics/pdf/Basic-Statistics-2005.pdf.

³ Many Chinese scholars view Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988 as a turning point in Sino-Indian relations. For instance, Sun Shihai, "China and India: Competition or Cooperation," www.asiapacific.ca/pastsummits/apsummit2004/speakers/s_shihai_speech2004/s_shihai_speech2004.pdf; Ren Jia "Relations returned to normal after the visit of Rajiv Gandhi in 1988," cited in Ravni Thakur, *The Chinese Perspective on Kunming Initiative*, p. 4.

⁴ Sadiq Khan argues that "The natural trend of population overflow from Bangladesh is towards sparsely populated lands of the Southeast Asia on the Arakan side and of the North East in the Seven Sisters side of the Indian continent" cited in D. N. Bezboruah, "Illegal Migrants from Bangladesh," *Dialogue*, January-March 2002, vol. 3. no. 3. www.asthabharati.org/Dia_jan02/bezboruah.htm.

⁵ Haraprasad Ray, *North East India's Place in India-China Relations and Its Future Role in India's Economy* (Kolkata: Institute of Historical Studies, 2003); Rehman Sobhan, *Rediscovering the Southern Silk Road* pp. 2-5.; B. G. Verghese, *Reorienting India: The New Geo-Politics of Asia*, pp.1-45.

⁶ Kyoko Inoue, Mayumi Murayama, M. Rahmattullah, Centre for Bhutan Studies, *Sub-regional Relations in the Eastern South Asia: With Special Focus on Bangladesh and Bhutan* (Tokyo: IDE-JETRO, 2004) www.ide.go.jp/English/publish/Jrp/pdf/jrp_32_sec1.pdf p. 63; In the 5th BCIM conference held in Kunming in December, this scholar was denied attendance, at the first instance. It appears that the organizers of the conference were finding it difficult to include a scholar from North East India sitting among the Chinese participants. Ultimately, a member from the Indian delegation, who happens to know this scholar intervened and could attend the conference under an assumed name.

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