

Keynote Address

by

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at

International Seminar

on

**“BCIM: Sub-Regional Cooperation for
Development of the Peripheral Areas”**

at

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I begin by warmly thanking the host institution for the commendable initiative to organize this important conference. The subject is significant; the venue – Shillong – is an apt choice; and the timing is perfect.

I am confident that the participants assembled here, representing different countries and institutions, will make an optimal use of this opportunity; they will not only exchange views but also strive to develop a consensus view. This should then be fed into the planning and preparations, currently underway, to take the BCIM Economic Corridor project forward and also to contribute to the further evolution of the BCIM Forum for regional cooperation.

Backdrop

The concept of multi-dimensional cooperation among Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar has come a long way since 1999 when it began as the ‘Kunming Initiative’, the result of interactions at the Track-II level of scholars and experts. Eleven full-scale meetings were held between 1999 and 2013 in order to develop a framework of ideas and proposals. Detailed historical accounts of these meetings are separately available. In the growing corpus of literature on the subject, I found the Institute of Chinese Studies monograph entitled “India's North East States, The BCIM Forum and Regional Integration” authored by Kishan S. Rana and Patricia Uberoi and the recent studies produced by RIS, to be of considerable value and relevance. Having seen in advance the extracts of the Papers to be presented at this conference, I am convinced that we are embarking on a valuable intellectual journey.

According to the Indian perspective, BCIM developed as a Track-II endeavour, even though others – China and Myanmar in particular – and later Bangladesh too saw it more as a government-supported exercise. The Kunming-to-Kolkata (K2K) Car Rally, organized in February 2013, with the assistance of the four governments, certainly caught popular imagination.

It was in this backdrop that the idea of BCIM cooperation formally received official recognition in May 2013 in a paragraph included in the joint statement issued after the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India. The Chinese and Indian governments proposed to establish

a Joint Study Group (JSG) on “strengthening connectivity in the BCIM region for closer economic, trade and people-to-people linkages and to initiating the development of a BCIM Economic Corridor.” Subsequent joint statements, issued at the conclusion of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to China in October 2013 and the visit of President Xi Jinping’s to India in September 2014, also made references to it. Between the last two visits, Indian and Chinese authorities secured the concurrence of the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar, which cleared the way for holding the first meeting of the Joint Study Group in Kunming in December 2013.

Recapitulating this background is essential for maintaining that non-governmental experts and academics have a valuable role to play in the making of foreign policy, development policy and and foreign economic policy. BCIM is a vivid example of the impact created by the ideas and proposals developed outside the official domain on governments’ thinking, decisions and actions. In order, therefore, to ensure that not only the BCIM idea remains alive but also moves forward and translates itself into practical schemes and projects, it is absolutely critical that the work at the scholarly level should continue. This conference is a step in the desired direction.

The Essentials

Let us now look at the heart of BCIM cooperation as envisaged by the four governments in close concert with non-official experts. Its overarching goal is “economic and social development and poverty alleviation.” At the first JSG meeting, it was agreed that the BCIM Economic Corridor would run from Kunming in the east to Kolkata in the west, broadly spanning the region, including Mandalay, Dhaka and Chittagong and “other major cities and ports as key nodes.” This cooperation would have four principal components:

- i) Physical connectivity through multi-modal transport as well as energy, power and telecommunication linkages;
- ii) Trade in goods, services and investment, including finance;
- iii) Environmentally sustainable development; and

- iv) People-to-people contacts through exchanges in the domain of education, science and technology, culture, healthcare, tourism and human resource development.

Participants agreed that appropriate lessons would be learnt from the best practices of other multilateral, regional cooperation mechanisms.

Further, and this is very important, **certain basic principles** would guide the future evolution of BCIM project. These are “**mutual trust and respect, mutual interests, equitable sharing of mutual benefits, pragmatism, effectiveness, consensus-building and securing win-win outcomes.**”

The Wider Context

A celebrated Myanmar scholar defined Myanmar as the place where China and India ‘meet.’ One may, more aptly, refer India's North Eastern Region (NER) where our four countries ‘meet’, and where South Asia and Southeast Asia also intersect. It is necessary to assert that, from the Indian viewpoint, interest in BCIM stems from our keenness to deepen, expand and accelerate the socio-economic development of our NER. No one can seriously suggest that any of our countries follows or - followed in the past - “a scorched earth policy” in respect of our peripheral regions. Over the years India has invested heavily in the development of NER, but there is certainly a case for doing much more.

That is the rationale for India's Act East Policy, earlier known as the Look East Policy. This policy has several dimensions, namely increased focus on development of NER by the central government; India's close economic cooperation with Myanmar and Bangladesh; strengthening linkages with the sub-region through BIMSTEC and MGC; and developing multi-faceted connectivity and cooperation with ASEAN as well as other important role-players in East Asia. Considerable progress has been happening on many of these multiple tracks and more is awaited or expected in the coming years.

Hence, we should bear in mind that BCIM will be one of the platforms – but not the only platform – which India would like to utilize for ensuring the development of NER.

Considered Suggestions

In order to encourage further debate and consensus-building, I wish to place before you a few considered suggestions.

Firstly, concerns about the engagement of China in our border regions, persist. Many security experts are still resolutely opposed to the idea of BCIM. It is, therefore, suggested that the advocates of BCIM should understand and address those concerns in a constructive manner, with the aid of reason and patience.

Secondly, a sensible and realistic message for our Chinese and other friends gathered here is: we are sincerely interested in promoting BCIM, but for this process to make concrete progress, a conducive environment, marked by maintenance of peace and tranquillity at the border as well as a sustained endeavour to resolve the boundary issue, would be considered essential.

Thirdly, supporters of BCIM should also recognize that the sources of investment that the region needs will have to be many and varied. Financing for infrastructural development may come not only from China and India but also from multilateral and regional institutions and capital-rich countries such as Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore. The need for some equilibrium needs to be considered.

Fourthly, BCIM projects should be designed in such a manner that they complement rather than replace the on-going projects involving India and its eastern neighbours. As a senior Ministry of External Affairs official put it recently: “The focus of Indian approach, of course, is on how to generate eco-hubs in the North-East itself so that it gets prepared for linking up with the outside world.” This should be kept in view.

Fifthly, a useful, though symbolic, suggestion was made by a scholar from the Northeast at the seminar hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs last year. He advised that BCIM Economic Corridor should be renamed ‘BCIM Growth Corridor’, ensuring that the under-developed parts of the region become the centre of development activity rather than mere wayside stations. This merits consideration.

Sixthly, we will no doubt debate as to how BCIM EC would relate to China's proposals regarding the Southern Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road (MSR). This linkage as well as the scope, modalities and implications of the Chinese proposals need to be spelt out by the Chinese scholars assembled here. Our position may aptly be described as one of willingness to listen and to understand. In this context, it is worth recalling that, according to official Indian sources, the issue of MSR was "neither raised nor discussed" officially during President's Xi Jinping's visit to India. As we already know, it found no place in the joint statement issued after the visit.

Finally, another suggestion would be for us to listen carefully to the specific ideas of the experts from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal on BCIM-EC. Perhaps, like us, they are for it. This is welcome, but, this may not be sufficient. We will appreciate learning from them how the proposed projects would lead to equitable benefits for all parties. Further, we should also listen, with due respect, to the voices of our academics from the Northeast.

Conclusion

In the end, it is our sincere hope that this distinguished assembly of experts and scholars will discuss these suggestions and many other relevant issues in a candid, constructive and forward-looking fashion. Our collective deliberations, conducted in a friendly spirit, are sure to produce greater clarity and deeper understanding. They will also help us in building a consensus about the future pathways that promote our common welfare.

Once again, thank you very much for your gracious invitation to me to deliver the Inaugural Address and for your attention.
