



The BCIM Forum: Retrospect and Prospect

Patricia Uberoi

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ICS Working Paper # 1

The BCIM Forum: Retrospect and Prospect*

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I

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Introduction

In this paper, I look in some detail, and with a critical eye, at the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation, founded in 1999 and formerly (and perhaps better) known as the ‘Kunming Initiative’. Invoking the rhetoric of the ‘Southern’ or ‘Southwestern’ Silk Route, the BCIM aims to restore the historical arteries of overland connectivity that once linked India’s eastern seaboard and north eastern states with China’s south western province of Yunnan through present-day Bangladesh and northern Myanmar.

The BCIM is an activity that is manifestly consistent with India’s Look-East Policy (LEP) and also with the long-term demand of India’s North Eastern Region (NER) for the opening of trade, connectivity and people-to-people contacts with the neighbouring countries that constitute some 98 per cent of the region’s borders. Moreover, this Forum is one – a rare and in this sense extremely valuable one – where India engages constructively with China in a *regional* context (see Table 1), notwithstanding the security, diplomatic and commercial rivalries and generalized ‘trust deficit’ that continue to bedevil the bilateral relations of the two giants and to occlude China from the public field of vision of the otherwise innocuous-looking LEP. Indeed, China is like the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ in discussions of overland connectivity from India’s North East region – a large and palpable, but barely acknowledged, presence. Of course, this selective blindness is cartographical nonsense, for the moment you cross into Myanmar from India’s northern states you are inexorably on the road to Kunming as much as to Singapore, Bangkok or Hanoi!

Some fourteen years and eleven meetings on, it must be conceded that the BCIM appears to have made little progress towards achieving its objectives. Far from spear-heading the process of opening up the continental route to East and South East Asia, it seemingly remains more or less as it was conceived – a reluctantly acknowledged step-child of the Government of India, neither a ‘bottom-up’ nor a ‘top-down’ political / diplomatic engagement caught somewhere in limbo between ‘Track II’ and ‘Track I’, and destined thereby to practical inefficacy.

While there is no doubt more than a grain of truth in this oft-repeated assessment,¹ I suggest to the contrary that a close reading of the evolving BCIM archive and some recent developments at the inter-governmental level disclose a more complex and nuanced picture that

¹For a comparable Chinese assessment, see Chen (2013).

precludes out-of-hand dismissal of the effort. Rather, the question at issue, in my opinion, is how to make the BCIM a more effective and sustainable instrument of regional integration, geared to the complementary objective of improving livelihoods in India's NE border regions. As we shall see, and as numerous critics have pointed out, these two objectives are sometimes—but not always or consistently—hyphenated, in discourse or in practice. This ambivalence has been and still remains one of the deficiencies of the BCIM process, as it is also for the overarching LEP from which the BCIM draws its public legitimacy.²

In reflecting on the conundrum of BCIM –its considerable potential and its very modest outcomes to date –I draw extensively on the archives of the Institute of Chinese Studies (Delhi) which, along with the Centre for Policy Research (Delhi), has been the nodal Indian institution for the BCIM Forum, and also on a recently published monograph, co-authored with Kishan S. Rana (Rana & Uberoi 2012), that interrogates the BCIM process in the evolving context of India's practice of regional diplomacy. I begin with a brief historical account of the BCIM, and an analysis of two of its foundational documents. The BCIM process is, of course, still continuing, and I will supplement my historical narrative with some comments and reflections on the Eleventh BCIM Forum meeting held in Dhaka 23-24 February 2013 under the title 'Recent Developments in BCIM Countries: New Opportunities and New Challenges for BCIM Cooperation'.³ It was following this meeting that the BCIM found 'official' recognition, for only the second time in its fourteen year career, in the Joint Statement issued at the end of the State Visit to India of the Chinese premier, Li Keqiang, in May 2013. The relevant section reads:

¶ 18. The two sides [i.e. India and China] appreciated the progress made in promoting cooperation under the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Regional Forum. Encouraged by the successful BCIM Car Rally of February 2013 between Kolkata and Kunming,⁴ the two sides agreed to consult the other parties [i.e. Bangladesh and

²For an official Indian perspective on the role of the BCIM initiative in the overall context of India's Look East Policy, see the speech of the then Foreign Secretary, Ranjan Mathai, at the Tenth BCIM meeting, Kolkata, 2012 (Mathai 2012).

³See the Proceedings of the Eleventh BCIM Forum, available on the website of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, at: www.cpd.org.bd/11_BCIM/11_BCIM.html; also the summary report on the meeting available on the website of the Institute of Chinese Studies at: www.icsin.org.

⁴The idea of holding a Kunming-to-Kolkata Car Rally as a demonstration of the symbolic and material potential of overland connectivity between eastern India and south western China was first mooted at the Fifth BCIM Forum in Kunming in December 2004, and affirmed in the Joint Statement of the Sixth BCIM in Delhi in March 2006. It was accorded official recognition in November that year in the Hu Jintao–Manmohan Singh Joint Declaration. Preparations got under way with the Seventh BCIM Meeting in Dhaka in 2007, with the Rally scheduled for the

Myanmar] with a view to establishing a Joint Study Group 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.⁵

Within just a few months, in October 2013, the proposal to jointly study (along with the other BCIM partners) the potential of creating a BCIM Economic Corridor was reiterated in the Joint Statement released at the end of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to China.⁶

Does this mean that the BCIM Forum can finally be considered to have 'arrived' (or 're-arrived')? How can the new momentum be made sustainable? And, most importantly, can the twin objectives of the BCIM– North East development and regional integration – be held together in complementarity as India, a hitherto visibly 'reluctant regionalist',⁷ seeks to engage more robustly and confidently with its neighbourhood?

Some of the BCIM story will already be familiar to an informed public, but it must be conceded that the Forum is not generally familiar to the Indian public under its present acronym and is often confused with BIMSTEC, which is in fact a completely different species. Arguably, BCIM has recently become better known in consequence of a growing number of academic and popular press writings⁸—even university dissertations!; through the *BCIM Newsletter* and other materials published by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences;⁹ through local publicity

early months of 2008. For various complex reasons, the Rally could not be held as planned. However, in February 2012, coinciding with the Tenth BCIM Forum held in Kolkata, a preparatory Route Survey was conducted from Kunming to Kolkata. Running in the reverse direction, i.e., from Kolkata to Kunming, the 'K2K' Rally was finally held more than 7 years after it was first mooted, 22 February to 5 March 2013, passing through Dhaka to coincide with the Eleventh BCIM Forum. For details of the Rally and route, see Ranjan & Uberoi (2013).

⁵Joint Statement on the State Visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India, May 20, 2013', ¶18. Available at: <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/21723/Joint+Statement+on>, accessed on 16/06/2013. Several other paragraphs of the Joint Statement may also be read as conducive to BCIM regional cooperation: ¶13, on India-China collaboration 'on development projects of common interest in third countries'; ¶16, on 'strengthening border trade through Nathu La Pass' (Sikkim); ¶30, on supporting 'multilateral cooperation mechanisms in Asia', etc. The first official recognition of the BCIM Forum was in the 'Joint Declaration by the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China', on the occasion of President Hu Jintao's visit to India, 20-23 November 2006, § IX, ¶ 34, available at: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=22168>, accessed on 26/07/12. See the discussion in Rana & Uberoi (2012: 107-11).

⁶See 'Joint Statement: A Vision for Future Development of India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership', 23 October 2013, ¶ 4. Available at: http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?53/Bilateral/Multilateral_Documents, accessed on 15/11/2013. The paragraph anticipates 'further discussions on concepts and alignment of the economic corridor'. The same Joint Statement announced the setting up 'on a pilot basis' of three 'sister-city' relationships, including between Kunming and Kolkata.

⁷An apt term coined by my ICS colleague, K.S. Rana.

⁸In addition to the monograph cited above (see Rana & Uberoi 2012), the interested reader may be referred to Bhoothalingam (2013), Chen (2013); Kurian (2005); Laishram (2006); Ranganathan (2001); Singh (2005); A. Thakur (2011); R. Thakur (2006) and Uberoi (2010).

⁹See <http://www.seasas.cn/portal.php?mod=list&catid=19>, accessed on 16//2013.

generated by the Kolkata Forum in February 2012 (the first meeting held in Eastern India); through the Kolkata-to-Kunming(K2K) Car Rally, of February–March 2013; and latterly through the ‘bolt-from-the-blue’ reference to the BCIM in the Li Keqiang–Manmohan Singh Joint Statement of May 2013 and its October follow-up. Nonetheless, misapprehensions and suspicions abound, some of them not entirely ill-founded. In the third section of the article, I look at some of the arguments commonly advanced to explain the mediocre performance of BCIM, in particular the question of the continued non-official status of the Forum(from the Indian side, that is), as well as the delicacy of diplomatic engagement between *sub*-regions of larger countries, before finally turning to a consideration of the potential, and also the undoubted challenges, opened up by recent developments and culminating in the afore-mentioned India–China Joint Statements.

Informing this exposition is recognition of a dynamic tension between two coexistent or alternative perspectives on the BCIM project. For want of better names, we might simply label them as ‘economistic’ *versus* ‘inclusive’. I see these alternatives as instantiated in the foundational documents of the initiative that I present in the following section. However, though they manifest in this narrative account as a ‘Chinese’ proposition and an ‘Indian’ response at a particular historical moment, I believe that this tension is reflective of two contrasting paradigms of development that are of more general relevance.

II

The BCIM Forum: A Brief History

The BCIM Forum for Regional Cooperation came into being officially with a meeting held in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, in August 1999. The final statement of that meeting was titled ‘The Kunming Initiative’ (see Ranganathan 2001), and it was by this name that the Forum was originally known – until political discretion suggested a more neutral denomination of the quadrilateral. By this time, Yunnan province had already thrown itself into the ADB-sponsored Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) project which, focused on the common resource of the Lancang-Mekong river basin, had in a short space of time become a shining example of the potential of *sub*-regional cooperation in the Asian theatre.

Foundations

The thinking behind the Kunming Initiative is revealed in a remarkable note, titled ‘Proposition on Formation of “Sub-regional Cooperation Zone of China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh”’, canvassed by Professor Che Zhimin (then Deputy Director of the Economic and Technological Research Centre of the Yunnan Provincial People’s Government), during a visit to India in the previous year.¹⁰ I summarize it here as best as I am able.¹¹

Professor Che situates his ‘proposition’ within the overall context of 21st century global economic integration in which ‘various regional and sub-regional cooperative organizations are continually springing up’. In this emerging scenario, he observes that China has still not succeeded in ‘effectively connecting’ with India, despite their civilizational interactions over millennia. Che then defines the scope of the proposed ‘sub-region’ which, he believes, can spearhead this new ‘co-operation zone’:

In the southwest of China, at the south-eastern foot of the Himalaya Mountains and bordering on the Bay of Bengal, there is an area where China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh adjoin each other. This area covers four south-western provinces and cities of China, including Yunnan Province, Sichuan Province, Chongqing Municipality and Guizhou Province,¹² six states in the north-east of India,¹³ [and] the whole territories of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

This region, he goes on to elaborate, has a number of special characteristics:

- (i) the zone is at the meeting-point of ‘the three markets of China, South East Asia and South Asia’, and in this sense can interconnect the two major markets of China and India and even the markets in the whole [of] Asia....;

¹⁰ The note was presented at a Conference hosted by the ICS and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi in November 1998 (see Che 1998; Rana & Uberoi 2012: 91n.2).

¹¹ The English translation of Che’s original text is in places not altogether transparent.

¹² Alert observers have noted the enhanced role of Yunnan province since the initial BCIM Forum, and the neglect of Tibet (TAR), with which India shares its land border with China. According to Chen Jidong (2013), the presumptuousness of Yunnan province in spearheading this regional initiative, to the relative neglect of other provinces within the Western Regions Development zone, is one of the factors accounting for the Forum’s mediocre track record.

¹³ Che is presumably excluding Arunachal Pradesh, claimed by China, from the enumeration. The state of Sikkim was at that time not officially recognized as a component of India’s North Eastern Region (NER).

- (ii) despite its varied topography and poor infrastructure, the zone possesses abundant natural resources, which ‘could become the focal point for large-scale development in the next century’;
- (iii) the differences in levels of economic development and the distribution of resources make for complementarities ‘of the resources, industries and product structure[s] available in the region’;
- (iv) isolated from world markets, the zone is characterized by relative poverty: of the southwest *within* China, of the NE *within* India, and of both Bangladesh and Myanmar;
- (v) each of the countries concerned is now actively seeking to participate in one or another of the various regional and sub-regional organizations (SAARC, ASEAN, etc.) and to integrate into the global economic system.

Given these basic characteristics of the sub-region, Che Zhimin sees the likely benefits of cooperation as follows:

- (i) If the two large developing countries, China and India, manage to cooperate in international affairs through such a mechanism, it will ‘contribute to the establishing of the new multi-polar world order and [to] safeguard[ing] the peace and stability of Asia and the world’;
- (ii) Sub-regional cooperation enables rational planning and the optimal utilization of resources, as well as strengthening environmental protection. It may also contribute ‘to rooting out social evils such as drug production, drug trafficking and drug taking’;
- (iii) A sub-regional cooperation zone linking the two big markets of China and India ‘will doubtlessly connect the unlinked markets of Asia and integrate the sparsely distributed economic strength of the continent’;
- (iv) It will thereby assist the alleviation of poverty and the promotion of social development; and

- (v) will become the ‘land bridge’ for connecting the Pacific Ocean(which, till the Asian financial crisis had seen unprecedented growth) with the Indian Ocean, which he foresaw as the new ‘focal point’ of world economic development.

As to the immediate practical agenda of this proposed sub-regional co-operation,

- (i) the key requirement was the building of modern communication and transportation networks – regionally connected rail, road and air routes in the sub-region by 2005, ‘or no later than 2010, through co-ordination by each country’;
- (ii) the expansion of intra-regional trade volumes;
- (iii) the development of tourism, for which the whole region is ideally suited;
- (iv) the institution of economic and technological co-operation, based on complementarities, rather than unproductive competition; and
- (v) cultural exchange, leveraging ancient ties to create the mutual trust necessary for the furtherance of economic co-operation.

As to how to proceed, Che suggested, no doubt following an established protocol, that the proposition should be discussed first at an academic level – as was indeed the agenda of the Yunnan delegation’s current visit– followed by the establishment of a ‘general forum’ of academics, business and financial circles. This was the basis for the international conference that took place in Kunming some months later, formally launching the Kunming Initiative. Once established, the immediate aim of the forum would be ‘to officially enlist the sub-regional co-operation into each government’s agenda’ so as to gain assistance from international organizations and institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, etc.

I have adduced this foundational document at some length (no doubt exhausting the reader’s patience in so doing) to illustrate, firstly, the level of deliberation and planning that had already gone into Che Zhimin’s modestly titled ‘proposition’ for sub-regional cooperation

within the BCIM,¹⁴ and further, to press home the point that only the first steps in the process that Che outlined have so far been taken. Excepting the one-off event of the K2K Car Rally (the symbolic and pragmatic importance of which should not be dismissed) and the very recent and cautious initiation of a Joint Study Group to further discuss the concept and alignment of the proposed BCIM Economic Corridor, the BCIM Forum has so far failed to persuade the four governments to set up *quadrilateral* cooperative inter-governmental mechanisms to institute any of the activities on the agenda,¹⁵ let alone to garner the assistance of international financial institutions to create the necessary connectivity infrastructure for effective sub-regional cooperation. Indeed, the Joint Statement at the conclusion of BCIM-11 in February 2013 resolved *once again* to carry out these very tasks!

But, to return to our historical account of the beginnings of the BCIM Forum, Che's 1998 'proposition' for sub-regional cooperation elicited a generally sympathetic response from Indian participants in the Conference, several of them prominent public intellectuals and academics from India's north eastern region. The time was clearly opportune. On the one hand, the proposal was manifestly in consonance with India's 'Look East Policy', enunciated as a foreign policy objective in the early 1990s. By 1998 it was also evident that China's support for insurgency movements in India's North East (the so-called 'Sino-Pakistani axis') had long since dwindled (cf. Bhowmik 2009: 153-63), and that China was developing a new and more cooperative 'neighbourhood policy' aimed at turning closed borders into open economic corridors. At the same time, domestically within India, it had become starkly evident that India's NER was becoming steadily more marginalized vis-à-vis the rest of the country (Brunner 2010, esp. Ch. 2), a trend requiring urgent remedial measures. Prominent among these, it was widely argued, was the opening up of the border regions to trade with neighbouring countries (cf. Planning Commission 1997), a project commended also by the historical and ethnic ties of the borderland peoples.

¹⁴ Indeed, the proposal was backed by solid research by Yunnan academics through the previous decade (Chen 2013: 321; R. Thakur 2006). Acknowledgment should also be made to the pioneering research of faculty of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, the BCIM partners in Bangladesh (see e.g. Sobhan 1999, 2000).

¹⁵ The initiation of the *BCIM* Newsletter and the inauguration of a BCIM Business Council are also counted among the achievements of the BCIM Forum, though conducted by Track II institutions. *Pro forma*, the K2K Car Rally (from the Indian side) was also conducted by a Track II organization, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), but of course, given its nature, it had the full support of the central and state / provincial governments of all four countries.

Significant among the Indian contributions to the same 1998 dialogue was a presentation by the well-known anthropologist-administrator and social activist, Professor B.K. Roy Burman (1920-2012), often described as the ‘walking encyclopedia’ of knowledge on India’s tribal peoples in general, and on the north east region in particular. Roy Burman’s response to Che’s note was to go back to basics to seek conceptual clarity on the notion of ‘region’: what are the necessary (if not sufficient) conditions for the delineation of a region, against which the Yunnan proposal for sub-regional cooperation could be evaluated? As a preliminary framework, Roy Burman postulated some eight features of a cooperation ‘region’.¹⁶

- (i) *The unity of interest of a sizeable section of the population in generating and maintaining the regional framework:* Such a unity of interest, he suggested, may derive either from either trans-border historical-cultural links, or from long-term economic ties. Both features exist in good measure in the region under consideration, where various ethnic groups retain memories of migration from Burma and South Western China,¹⁷ and where ancient trade routes (still utilized for clandestine commerce) criss-cross the region.
- (ii) *The policy decision of the state / states:* Developing a land route for large-scale trade between India and China had been an aspect of British imperial expansionism from the mid-19th century, albeit constrained by a ‘buffer state’ perspective, while the strategic value of sub-regional connectivity was re-affirmed during World War II, which saw the construction of the famed ‘Stilwell Road’ linking Ledo in Assam with Kunming in Free China. After a long hiatus, it appeared that the political climate in the South and Southeast Asian region was once again conducive to the promotion of a trans-border ‘regional’ agenda foregrounding India’s North East region.
- (iii) *A physical resource base for supporting the functional specialization of the region as distinct from other regions not within the ambit of the same region:* India’s North East region is rich in forest, mineral, and water resources but, according to Roy Burman, the economic exploitation of these resources in the proposed sub-region of cooperation would be dependent on a number of factors on which there was still

¹⁶Only the first five of the enumerated features were spelt out at any length in this presentation which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been published. My thanks go to Professor Savyasaachi (JMI, New Delhi) for his clarifications in this regard.

¹⁷A number of papers at the Conference testified to the cultural yearning on the part of various north eastern peoples for reconnection with their ancestral homelands in Southeast Asia and Southwest China.

insufficient informed reflection.¹⁸ Sagaciously, he anticipated here two major issues that might emerge in the process of resource development. The first derived from the association of ethnic / sub-ethnic identities with community rights to the exploitation of natural resources – forest resources in particular –resulting in a ‘hiatus in the perceptions of the state and [of] the different tribal peoples about the legal status or ... legitimate rights in respect of the forests.’... ‘Any regionalization process involving change in land use pattern will have to take note of this fact’ which, he noted, is currently ‘the source of much overt or covert disquiet in the hills of North East India’. Added to this was the issue of food security in a region lacking sufficient arable land to generate an agricultural surplus: ‘Any trans-country regionalization schema without ensuring basic food security in North East India itself will make the structure of regionalization fragile, unless there are other countervailing factors’.

- (iv) *‘Human resource for generating and maintaining the regionalization impulse’*: Here, Roy Burman made positive mention of the relatively high levels of education in the NE region, and the evidence of entrepreneurial energy, even in the absence of meaningful industrial development.
- (v) *‘Infrastructure for both physical and human resource mobilization and for [the] flow of goods within the region and outside the region.’* In this section, Roy Burman wrestled with the issue of the gap between the modern Indian legal system (Company Law, Cooperative Law, Banking Law, etc.), and local notions of ownership and control whereby a large proportion of the resource-rich hilly lands in the NE region are owned by communities, not by the state. This makes land acquisition for development and infrastructure purposes a doubly ticklish issue, fraught with the challenges of resistance and social disruption.¹⁹ Similarly, the induction of migrant labor for development infrastructure construction needs to be carefully planned, and policies designed or re-designed to protect local interests.

Other considerations in the making of a ‘region’ in the era of globalization included (vi) *‘patterns of interdependence of the region as a whole, or segments within the region with other*

¹⁸ See Brunner (2010) who provides a comprehensive recent assessment of the economic potential of the NER.

¹⁹For a contemporary reflection on this issue of individual and community land-rights as one of the challenges facing infrastructure development in the state of Mizoram in the context of the high profile Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMTT) project, see Jacob (2013).

regions or segments of other regions’; (vii) ‘*[the] extent to which intra-regional interdependence and inter-regional interdependence benefit[s] exceed the cost of such regionalization*’; and (viii) ‘*[the] pattern of distribution of benefits within the region and across the region so that the regional entity becomes sustainable over a length of time*’. Of these several issues, Roy Burman concluded, sufficient information was not as yet available to the public: ‘This essential task must be done first’, he urged, ‘so that viable regionalization can take place based on informed public opinion.’

The Evolution of the BCIM Forum

In the fourteen years since its inauguration, it cannot be said that the BCIM Forum has followed a linear path of development such as Che Zhimin had initially anticipated, i.e., from a Track II to a Track I endeavor (Uberoi 2010; Rana & Uberoi 2012). For China and Myanmar, the BCIM was always a Track I activity (notwithstanding the prominent role of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in the former instance), and Bangladesh has increasingly moved in that direction while retaining its Track II operations in parallel.²⁰ But from the Indian side the BCIM remains ostensibly a Track II venture,²¹ a deficit that has been the source of much unproductive recrimination among the partners. Whatever the face-saving formula invoked to disguise this asymmetry – the ‘Multi-Track’ or ‘Parallel Track’ formulation²² – or the bravado of some supporters of BCIM sub-regional cooperation who insist that under present circumstances Track II engagement is infinitely more practicable and productive than Track I cooperation (Mishra 2011, 2013), the asymmetry has continued. In this light, the India–China Joint Statement of May 2013 may indeed mark a major breakthrough which, hopefully, will prove to be a blessing and not the proverbial ‘kiss of death’. As disillusioned commentators often point out, the Indian government does not have a good track record with regard to regional cooperation organizations,

²⁰ The formal official recognition of the BCIM Forum by the Bangladesh government was incorporated in the Bangladesh–China Joint Communiqué, signed in April 2005 during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao. See: <http://bd.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/hzjj/200705/20070504698156.shtml>. Support for BCIM was reiterated in the Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of P.M. Sheikh Hasina’s visit to China in March 2010.

²¹ Reflecting a more general trend in the comparative literature on multi-lateral cooperation, some commentators like to describe the status of BCIM now as somewhere between Track II and Track I, calibrated in fractions. The conduct of the K2K Road Rally is widely seen to have pegged BCIM at the Track 1.5 level.

²² A constructive suggestion by a senior Chinese delegate at the Eighth BCIM Forum meeting in Nay Pyi Taw, 23–24 July 2009.

on the whole preferring bilateral to multi-lateral processes. In consequence, South Asia (epitomized by SAARC) is reckoned to be the least ‘integrated’ region of Asia (Rana & Uberoi 2012: 77-78), while much advertised Track I forums like BIMSTEC or the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) have remarkably little to their credit as yet (ibid.: 81-85).²³

A second (and not unrelated) asymmetry lies in the fact that BCIM is a species of *sub*-regional cooperation,²⁴ conceptually prioritizing a sub-region of China (the province of Yunnan primarily, along with adjacent south western provinces), a sub-region of India (particularly, India’s NE states and the eastern sea-board state of West Bengal), along with the two intervening countries, Myanmar and Bangladesh. In fact, as a perusal of the record shows, India’s NER is only intermittently, and not consistently, the focus of attention in articulations of India’s LEP. And while individual scholars from the region have contributed substantially to the BCIM dialogue, neither academic institutions and chambers of commerce in the NER, nor state governments of the region, nor the North Eastern Council which collectively represents the NER states have had a formal role in BCIM Forum activities. These, as noted, are conducted from institutions located in New Delhi.²⁵

If India has been slow to embrace regional cooperation, notwithstanding the enabling framework of the LEP, it has been even slower to embrace *sub*-regional cooperation. I will not engage with further with this issue, except to concur with the argument of my colleague, Kishan S. Rana (2013), that much more could be done within the constitutional constraints of India’s federal structure than is presently being done: essentially, as the adage has it, ‘where there is a will, there is a way’.

²³In this light it is curious that, at the Dhaka Forum (2013), Bangladesh proposed that China could become a member / observer in BIMSTEC, in which the other three BCIM partners were already members (Bhattacharya 2013). The proposal was endorsed by the leader of the Chinese delegation (Shen 2013). The explicit rationale for this suggestion was that only some such formal framework could institutionalize the inter-governmental cooperation required to facilitate sub-regional trade and get long-planned connectivity projects off the ground.

²⁴In fact, BCIM is a hybrid species, simultaneously *inter-regional* (i.e. linking East Asia, South Asia and South East Asia); *regional* (linking adjacent countries within a region); and *sub-regional* (in the manner described). See further Rana & Uberoi (2012: 95-101).

²⁵The holding of the Tenth BCIM Forum meeting in Kolkata in February 2012 underlined the relevance and potential of BCIM as an instrument of the LEP, and of Kolkata as a major port-city with historically dense trade links with South East Asia. However, for various contingent reasons, no representatives of the NER made formal presentations at that forum.

The BCIM agenda has also undergone evolution, though not along any very clear trajectory. Conceived as a forum for regional *economic* cooperation,²⁶ the priority items on the agenda of successive BCIM meetings, anticipated in Che's 'proposition', were what came to be called the '3-T's' of Trade, Transport and Tourism. The trans-border issues of drugs- and arms-smuggling appear to have fallen from the reckoning, but the Sixth Forum (Delhi, 2006) saw an effort to introduce regional social and human development issues on to the agenda, including discussion of HIV/AIDS, which is endemic in this trans-national zone of high Injecting Drug Use (IDU). Intermittently, participants have emphasized the importance of handicrafts development through a region where livelihood options remain very limited, and regular tribute is paid to the imperative of enhancing people-to-people contacts, leveraging ethnic overlaps and historical ties. Environmental, climate change and resource-sharing issues have increasingly been brought to the table, as massive infrastructure projects begin to impinge on one of the planet's few remaining bio-diversity hotspots. At the Eleventh BCIM Forum in Dhaka (23-24 February 2013), however, social, cultural and environmental issues found no place on the formal agenda, being squeezed into a packed ('rag-bag') concluding session on 'Institutional Arrangements', while the 3-T's transmuted into TTE (Trade, Transport, and *Energy*), dropping Tourism and focusing on the new 'challenges and opportunities' afforded by recent developments in Myanmar. From this amnesia one might be justified in concluding that the 'soft' social, cultural and environmental cooperation agendas (and tourism promotion as well) are seen as relatively peripheral to the hard core issues of trade, connectivity and (latterly) energy cooperation, and to the task of building the institutional support through which these hard core objectives can be carried forward by the four governments.

To the contrary, I believe that refurbishing the 'soft' agenda is not only more feasible in a quadrilateral framework,²⁷ but also directly relevant to the livelihoods and aspirations of peoples of the borderlands. Unfortunately, there has as yet been no thinking on how existing programmes of border area development could be coordinated and dovetailed to provide better

²⁶By resolution, the word 'economic' was actually dropped from the BCIM Forum's title at the Ninth forum meeting (Kunming, 2011), but if the intention of this gesture was to create space for the elaboration of a broader 'social' agenda, this did not conspicuously happen.

²⁷Cf. Gonsalves (2013): 'For cooperation in both energy and connectivity, the first steps required are likely to be at the bilateral level. ... It should however be noted that for civil aviation and tourism, as well as for social and cultural exchanges, a regional approach might be better from the start.' Environmental conservation is also ideally multilateral, though enhanced by bilateral agreements (see Uberoi & Rawal 2012).

basic services and social protection to the ‘borderlanders’ on both sides of the respective international borders. Present policies enabling so-called ‘border trade’ and ‘border *haats* [markets]’, mired in bureaucratic constraints, go nowhere near this objective. Simultaneously, in various border regions, citizens ‘vote with their feet’ to leverage kinship and ethnic ties to avail of livelihood options and educational and medical services trans-nationally, lubricating webs of illegality.

The 2013 Dhaka Forum also brought a new focus to the BCIM ‘connectivity’ agenda in the form of an expansion of the idea of ‘multi-modal transportation’. At this meeting, Bangladesh unfolded ambitious and stupendously costly plans for the construction of a new deep sea port (or ports), beyond the long-planned renovation of the old Chittagong and Mongla Ports. Several possible sites were mentioned, but the main emphasis was on Sonadia island, offshore from Cox’s bazaar (Rahmatullah 2013).²⁸ Presuming political will, this development (along with the re-development of Chittagong and related connectivity projects) would have potentially huge benefits for India’s NE region – which is, in part at least, where Bangladesh sees its pay-offs from the exercise.

A second and related proposition, mentioned by the Bangladesh Foreign Minister in the text of her inaugural address (Moni 2013), was the development of coastal shipping for small volume cargoes along the Bay of Bengal coastline. Given the history of this region during the colonial period and earlier as an integrated coastal network linked with inland water transportation along the great rivers of the region, this suggestion commends serious reflection.²⁹ As it is, Inland Water Transportation (IWT) between India and Bangladesh appears beset with arcane obstacles. As road and rail connections between Bangladesh and India’s NE region are re-established, a new regime for IWT facilitation would appear to be called for, with undoubted benefits also for the tourism industry in Assam. Additionally, from another direction, the India-Myanmar Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMTT) project, though slow to get

²⁸ Given China’s interest in constructing and / or bankrolling this port development, the Indian media tend to construe this project as another pearl on the notorious ‘string-of-pearls’ of China’s supposed strategic encirclement of India. Reportedly, India is bidding for a role in the project, along with five other countries including China.

²⁹ In his address at the ICSSR-NERC conference on India’s Look East Policy (March 2013), Meghalaya Governor, R.S. Mooshary, called for the development of a ‘Brahmaputra-Irrawaddy’ perspective on regional connectivity for India’s NE.

off the ground, is set to provide a river-way cum road link from the Myanmar port of Sittwe through to the NE state of Mizoram.³⁰

Superficially, IWT and port development projects and the promotion of coastal shipping may appear to be diversions from, or in contradiction to, the promotion of overland ‘continental’ links by road and rail. In fact, the traditional trade arteries and silk routes as well as the infrastructure of colonial mercantilism were all associated with outlets to the Bay of Bengal and linked to further maritime networks in the Indian Ocean (cf. Yang 2004). Their reactivation in the present, unlocking land-locked nations and regions, should surely lead to greater and more inclusive prosperity in the BCIM region.

IV THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The mood at the Eleventh BCIM Forum in Dhaka in February 2013 was one of both elation and despair: elation, in witness to the successful initiation of the long-planned Kolkata-to-Kunming (K2K) Car Rally; despair because, apart from that major, one-off exercise, it was patently clear that the basic objectives set out in the foundational documents in 1998-99 were still to be met.³¹ Altogether, the BCIM appeared to have plateaued, with its sustainability under a cloud. A clear road-map had been repeatedly laid out,³² transcending the habitual ‘security mind-set’; but how and when this agenda would translate into action on the ground was uncertain. Among many contributing factors, as noted, was the Indian government’s seeming reluctance, firstly, to open out its northern and north eastern borders to trade with neighbouring countries and secondly, not unrelatedly, to engage with China officially in a *sub*-regional cooperation framework. Albeit in an indirect and cautious way, and without commitment to time-lines, the Manmohan Singh–Li Keqiang Joint Statement of May 2013 and its October follow-up promise to end the stalemate. The break-through at this moment is even more remarkable in the light of

³⁰For information see <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/content/introduction-1#intro>; also Jacob 2013; Rana & Uberoi 2012: 56-58.

³¹This is not to discount the importance of the launching of the *BCIM Newsletter*(2011) and the BCIM Business Council (2012), the modest school exchange programme between schools in the NCR and Yunnan, and the activities of the independent, Kolkata-based K2K Forum (see Mishra 2011, 2013).

³²See e.g., Prabir De’s definitive presentation at BCIM-11 (De 2013).

the difficult circumstances surrounding the Chinese Premier's May visit, namely, the flare-up in the Ladakh sector of the India–China border (see e.g. Acharya 2013).

Welcome as the commitment to a BCIM Economic Corridor might be to the many who have long argued for the de-securitization of India's borders, it undoubtedly presents a new set of challenges. We saw these challenges instantiated in the contrasting reflections on the possibility of BCIM regional cooperation presented by Che Zhimin and B.K. Roy Burman some fifteen years ago, the one arguing the 'economistic' case, as I have rather crudely labeled it, the other speaking for a more people-centric, inclusive approach, mindful of local social realities.

First, what is implied by the notion of 'Economic Corridor', and are there parallel examples in the neighbourhood from which we might draw instructive lessons?³³ Is the BCIM Economic Corridor to be conceived as a transnational zone of commercial engagement, enabled by physical and soft infrastructure? Or is it to be merely the shortest and most economical route between two end-points (say, between Kunming and Chittagong, or Kunming and Kolkata). One poses this question recalling that the final route of the K2K Car Rally (a matter of negotiation between Bangladesh and India) does not follow the meandering Asian Highway-1 route from Imphal through the Assam Valley and Meghalaya to Bangladesh, but cuts directly across the Barak Valley through Silchar-Karimganj-Sutarkandi. Historically a major trade and migration artery, no doubt, this routing actually skirts the populous and industrially developed Brahmaputra valley and altogether bypasses most NE states (Nagaland, Arunachal, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, as well as Sikkim).³⁴

Second, in what way can the people of the NER be assured of *benefit*-sharing, and not merely *risk*-sharing, as infrastructure development and resource extraction proceed apace? History holds many lessons, and they are not altogether encouraging (cf. Sarma 2012). Indeed, is the NER ready for its new role as a transnational *entrepot* and, if not, how can it be made ready through skill creation and entrepreneurship training? Here, we would do well to keep in mind B.K. Roy Burman's cautions regarding the unique social, cultural and ecological features of India's NER as a relatively poor and increasingly marginalized region within the Indian Union.

³³The Greater Mekong Sub-region project should command our attention, for both its positive and its negative lessons.

³⁴Developing the Silchar route for the more direct benefit of the NER would require perspective planning for radial roads and highways, coordinating connectivity development in the NER with transnational infrastructure projects.

Third, given the existing so-called ‘governance’-deficit³⁵ in the region, will sub-regional development ensure inclusive growth or exacerbate existing social tensions, which are in plenty? In other words, what will be the anticipated social consequences of unprecedented growth (on gender relations, inter-ethnic relations, and the relations between hills- and plains peoples, between indigenes and ‘migrants’, etc.) in a region already fraught with conflict? The reigning neo-liberal paradigm of development projects that economic development along trade corridors will automatically trickle down for the inclusive benefit of the local population, compensating for adverse environmental and displacement effects. That will surely happen to some extent, but goals of social equity and distributive justice, and of cultural and ecological conservation, must be part of the advance planning process.

Fourthly, how and in what format can the NE states script their transnational destiny and participate fully, individually and collectively, in the formulation and actualization of India’s Look East Policy? As the LEP gains renewed traction, other economic corridors to East and South East Asia, such as the proposed Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC),³⁶ may well appear to be more practicable and profitable, avoiding the twin challenges of (i) ‘integrating’ the habitually troubled and sullen North East region with the so-called mainland and its transnational neighbourhood, and (ii) the challenge of meeting China literally half-way in sub-regional cooperation.

To repeat the point made at the outset of this essay: The special and uniquely valuable feature of the BCIM Forum, from the Indian perspective, is the complementarity of the goals of developing and opening up an economically backward and land-locked region of the country, and engaging constructively with the China in its own parallel effort to unlock the potential of its relatively backward Western Regions. Shutting and battening the doors and looking the other way will not change the reality of China as the largest presence in the neighbourhood. Ideally, this cooperation should go beyond the installation of trade corridors across the region – the neoliberal development agenda, as it were – but extend to trans-border projects of human and

³⁵A shorthand for corruption, rent-seeking, and collusion between the political authorities, border security agencies and the numerous insurgency groups in the region.

³⁶The Mekong–India Economic Corridor (MIEC), supported by ASEAN, is premised on the development of Dawei Port in Southern Myanmar, creating an industrial transport corridor from Ho Chi Minh City through Phnom Penh and Bangkok to Dawei, and thence via international shipping to Chennai, to link with industrial hubs in southern India. For details, see De (2012: 131-37); Umezaki (2012: 11-19).

social development that would be a true marker of the potentiality of processes of sub-regional integration to create prosperity and stability on the margins. India–China cooperation is essential for this, and for peace and stability in the neighbourhood. As a former Secretary of the North Eastern Council, Falguni Raj Kumar put it in his presentation at the conference in which this paper was originally presented, from the perspective of India’s North East region, India requires a more ‘holistic’ neighbourhood perspective. By this he meant that, besides its Look East policy (from Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram to Myanmar), India needs also a Look North policy (from Arunachal and Sikkim to China-TAR); a Look West policy (from Arunachal and Sikkim to Bhutan, Nepal and TAR); and a Look South policy from Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura to Bangladesh (Raj Kumar 2013).

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Table 1
India and China: Membership of Select Asian Regional Organizations

	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Member</i>	<i>Observer</i>	<i>Neither Member/Observer</i>
Track I	ASEAN (1967)			India China
	• APT (1997)	China (1997)		India
	• EAS (2005)	China (2005) India (2005)		
	SAARC (1985)	India (1985)	China (2006)	
	BIMSTEC (2000)	India(2000)		China
	GMS (1992)	China (1992)		India
	MGCI (2000)	India(2000)		China
	SCO (2001)	China (2001)	India (2005)	
	RIC* (2001)	China (2001) India (2001)		
	Track II	BCIM(1999)	China (1999) India (1999)	
<i>* Parallel Track I / Track II from 2006</i>				

Adapted from Rana & Uberoi (2012: 89).

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