



The BCIM Economic Corridor: A Leap into the Unknown?

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1. The BCIM Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation

The BCIM Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation, earlier known as the 'Kunming Initiative', was founded in 1999 with the objective of promoting trade and economic development in the sub-region stretching from south west China to eastern India ('Kunming to Kolkata') via Myanmar, India's north east region (NER), and Bangladesh.¹ To date [September 2014], the Forum has held 11 meetings, the most recent being in Dhaka in February 2013. This meeting coincided with the passage through Dhaka of the BCIM Kolkata-to-Kunming ('K2K') Car Rally, a symbolic cartographic inscription of the BCIM project that had been some seven long years in the making.²

Notwithstanding the euphoria generated by the BCIM Car Rally, the mood of the Eleventh Forum was rather somber. It was clear that, unless or until all four countries demonstrated equal commitment to the project at the inter-governmental level, the objective of BCIM sub-regional economic cooperation could be little more than a pipe-dream. Though official Indian support for the BCIM Forum was by no means absent over the years,³ the Indian government appeared wavering and inconsistent and, once Bangladesh up-graded its participation to the Track I level (2005, 2010), India was left increasingly isolated and on the defensive.

Two interrelated factors are held to have constrained Indian official commitment to the BCIM project, even as the much-vaunted 'Look East Policy' (LEP) finally got into stride. The first is the almost over-powering presence of China in the quadrilateral, a reality politely disguised in the formula that India and China are the 'twin pillars' on which the BCIM edifice rests. The fact is that, until very recently, India and China had adopted mutually exclusionary tactics with regard to regional cooperation in their respectively perceived spheres of political and economic influence (see Uberoi 2013: 21, Table 1). China's foundational role in the BCIM Forum was widely taken as evidence that the BCIM Forum had been devised merely to serve Chinese geo-strategic and economic interests in the region and to enable China's unfettered access to the Bay of Bengal.

¹ The precise region of BCIM has been variously defined, broadly and narrowly, in successive accounts and documents over the 15 or so years of the Forum's planning and existence. In some reckonings (as of the market potential of BCIM), China and India are included as whole countries, while in other reckonings (focusing on the BCIM as an instrument for the development of backward border regions), it is the sub-regional aspect that is emphasized. The conceptualization of the sub-region of 'south west China' may also be broad (the four south-western provinces and cities of China – Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou Provinces, and Chongqing Municipality [see e.g. Che 1998]) or narrow (Yunnan Province), while in parallel India's eastern region may be defined to include the NER, West Bengal, Bihar (including Jharkhand) and Orissa, or just the 'seven sisters' of the NER (without Sikkim). For background accounts of the BCIM Forum, see e.g. Bhoothalingam 2013; Chen 2013; Kurian 2005; Laishram 2006; Rana & Uberoi 2012; Ranganathan 2001; A. Thakur 2011; R. Thakur 2006; Uberoi 2010; 2013.

² On the K2K Car Rally, see Ranjan & Uberoi (2013); Ranjan (2013).

³ See the documentation and analysis in Rana & Uberoi (2012: 107-18).

Second was the leading role of China's south western Yunnan province in activating BCIM sub-regional cooperation. This created a peculiar structural anomaly for Indian diplomacy in that no parallel role was conceived (or conceivable?) for India's north east states, singly or severally. The NER constitutes the physical interface of overland infrastructural connectivity with South East Asia, to which it is historically interconnected by reciprocal ties of trade, culture, and ethnicity, but – and this has been a major source of grievance and suspicion – this sub-region has had no formal political role and only minimal influence in the articulation of India's 'Look East Policy' through two decades (Bhaumik 2014; GOI MDONER 2011). Linking these two conundrums is the Gordian knot of 'national security', the mere invocation of which stalls all attempts at creative, out-of-the-box solutions to the so-called 'economic imprisonment' of the NER that had been brought about by the partition of India, and to the many ethnic insurgency movements that have been rife in the NER for decades.⁴

2. The BCIM Economic Corridor

Within just three months of the Dhaka BCIM Forum meeting, the sense of ennui that had beset the Forum suddenly dissipated. To the surprise of many observers, including – or so it is rumored – persons in the very corridors of power, the Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the state visit of Chinese premier Li Keqiang to India in May 2013 in a single stroke raised Indian participation in the BCIM to the level of Track I:

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, the two sides agreed to consult the other parties [i.e. Bangladesh and 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

In the NER, India's strategic 'land-bridge' to South East Asia, this announcement was widely, if also guardedly, welcomed.⁶ After all, opening up the land-locked NE states to trade and interaction with the neighbouring countries had been an abiding aspiration of the region, memorably articulated in the penultimate chapter of the *North East Region Vision 2020* report (GOI, MDONER & NEC 2008; also GOI, MDONER 2011). At the same time, the announcement begged several questions which one must candidly acknowledge.

⁴ For a recent reflection along these lines, see e.g. Anand (2014).

⁵ 'Joint 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 16/06/2014). The proposal was reaffirmed in the Joint Statement issued following the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to China, 22-24 October 2013 ('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 16/06/2014).

⁶ 'Documentation of Media Reports of the State Visit of Premier Li Keqiang to India, 19-22 May 2013' (Institute of Chinese Studies, 2013). 'Interviews with Opinion-Makers in the North East Region' (Institute of Chinese Studies, 2013).

First, despite the immediate media hype and knee-jerk reactions to the prospect of a BCIM Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), there is as yet no consensus on the nature, role and function of an ‘economic corridor’. Or, to be more precise, defining an economic corridor is still very much ‘work in progress’, modulated by empirical experience in a variety of settings around the globe (see e.g. ADB 2014a; Brunner 2013: 1; Wiemer 2009a; 2009b). In Section 4 of this paper we will seek to draw inspiration and lessons from the evolving literature on ECs, keeping in mind the peculiar socio-economic and ecological features of the NER. In particular, we will look at economic corridor projects under the aegis of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)⁷ and the more recently initiated South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) project.⁸ Both initiatives are supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and their respective footprints partially cover the sub-region of the BCIM, suggesting important parallels and synergies. Also relevant to the discussion is the ADB-sponsored Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation project (CAREC) which involves the development of six mighty transcontinental transport corridors linking East Asia, Russia, the former Central Asian states of the Soviet Union, South Asia, the Middle East and Europe.⁹ In this regard it is important to note that the EC development strategy of the ADB has recently undergone a major review and course correction (ADB 2011, 2012a, 2012b), allied with attempts to devise empirical measures for evaluating the present and potential success (or otherwise) of various economic corridors in the Asian region (e.g., ADB 2013a, 2014a, 2014b; Gautrin 2014). There are therefore some advantages to being a Johnny-come-lately in the project of regional economic integration.

Second, it is a matter of record that the idea of an ‘economic corridor’ *per se* had barely been mentioned in the deliberations of the BCIM Forum, being subsumed under or allied with various other more or less interchangeable terms, such as ‘cooperation zone’, ‘growth zone’, ‘growth pole’, ‘growth polygon’, etc., or simply encompassed within the BCIM ‘connectivity’ agenda.¹⁰ In retrospect, this oversight may appear curious, given China’s very active participation in the GMS project, which had adopted the economic corridor approach as its major thrust as early as 1998. Of course, important component elements of the economic corridor strategy (in particular, the emphasis on transportation infrastructure and trade facilitation) had been prominently highlighted in BCIM Forum

⁷ The GMS, founded in 1992, comprises five countries – Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam – along with China’s Yunnan province and (from 2004) the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (see <http://www.adb.org/countries/gms/main>; also Diokno & Nguyen 2006).

⁸ Founded in 2001, SASEC embraces India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, with the Maldives and Sri Lanka added in May 2014. See ADB (2013); also <http://www.adb.org/countries/subregional-programs/sasec>, accessed on 12/06/14.

⁹ The CAREC project encompasses Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghiz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Peoples Republic of China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. See ADB 2012b; also <http://www.adb.org/countries/subregional-programs/carec>.

¹⁰ The Joint Statement of the 9th BCIM Forum on Regional Economic Cooperation, held in Kunming, 18-19 January 2011, included mention of ‘the Kunming-Mandalay-Dhaka Economic Corridor’ in a section on regional connectivity. The relevant paragraph reads:

The Forum discussed the existing and potential routes of roads, rail, air and water to enhance connectivity within the region, reviewed the progress achieved so far and discussed [sic] to call for joint working groups to consider ways and means to further improve the infrastructure regarding connectivity. It was agreed to enhance the thrust for improved regional connectivity and to focus on establishing the Kunming-Mandalay-Dhaka-Kolkata Economic Corridor.

The paragraph went on to record: ‘However, Myanmar delegates expressed their need to submit the matter to the new Myanmar government.’ ‘Joint Statement on Promotion of BCIM Regional Cooperation’, ¶ 5.

meetings over the years.¹¹ But, as we shall observe shortly, these components do not of themselves add up to an ‘economic corridor’, at least, not in the technical sense (or senses?) in which the term is currently sought to be used.

Third, it must be conceded that India has had little practical experience of the ‘economic corridor’ development strategy that is currently in vogue with international development agencies and financial institutions and is now increasingly promoted in India itself as the face of things to come. The flagship project in this mode is the ambitious Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), initiated as recently as 2008 with Japanese financial backing. Billed as a new approach to urbanization and city planning (the ‘smart city’ idiom), the DMIC aims to leverage existing production networks and infrastructure to create manufacturing and services hubs along a 150-200 km belt on either side of a 1483 km Dedicated Freight Corridor stretching from Tughlakabad / Dadri in the National Capital Region to the Jawaharlal Nehru Port in Mumbai, with feeder rail and road connectivity to hinterland markets and western sea ports. Embracing 10 major cities with populations of over one million, the DMIC project seeks to promote the up-gradation of existing industrial estates; the creation of new industrial clusters or townships and export-oriented manufacturing zones; and the development of ‘knowledge hubs’, agro-processing hubs, and IT/ITES hubs and other services-oriented facilities (GOI, Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2007). In the national master plan of corridor development, the DMIC will connect with other major corridors that are already under way or in the planning stages, encircling peninsular India in a ‘Golden Quadrilateral’.¹²

It is still too early to assess the DMIC and the other related corridor projects of the Golden Quadrilateral in terms of their economic, social and environmental outcomes, though there is an emerging critical literature in this regard (Balakrishnan 2013; Levien 2011; Khosla & Soni 2012). At this point one can only speculate on how the experience already gained in other parts of the country may (or may not) translate into a development strategy for the NER. In any case one may note that the NER does not figure in the promotional material for the economic / industrial corridors of India’s 21st century developmental vision.¹³

Fourth, metonymically if not quite explicitly, the India–China Joint Statement of 20 May 2013 links the BCIM Economic Corridor proposal with the Kolkata-to-Kunming (K2K) Car Rally held in February-March that year. It is no secret that the routing of the K2K Car Rally was a matter of intense behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiation.¹⁴ Indeed, it was

¹¹ In many accounts, the BCIM agenda was summed up in the ‘Three “T”s’ of Trade, Transportation and Tourism, or latterly the triad of Trade, Transportation, and Energy.

¹² Apart from the DMIC, the other domestic industrial / economic corridors that were proposed under the New Manufacturing Policy of the UPA government are: the Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Development Corridor, the Bengaluru-Mumbai Economic Corridor, and the Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor. See the publicity advertisement, ‘Corridors of Growth’, issued by the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI (davp 05101/13/0010/1314). The missing link in that quadrilateral is the East Coast Economic Corridor (ECEC), still in the planning stage (see Roy 2014).

¹³ In the transport sector, a number of transportation projects, also termed ‘corridors’, are under way, including importantly the ‘East-West Corridor’ from Silchar (Assam) to Porbandar (Gujarat). See in particular GOI, Planning Commission, 2014 (Volume III, Part II, Chapter 6, ‘Transport Development in the North East’).

¹⁴ Conventionally there are held to be three main overland routes linking south west China and West Bengal: the North route (i.e. the old Ledo or Stilwell Road of World War II); the Middle route (the eventual route of the K2K Car Rally); and the South route, which in fact by-passes India’s NER, via Meiktila,

little short of a miracle that the BCIM Car Rally took place at all! At issue were concerns regarding the poor state of transportation infrastructure in the border areas of all four countries; the limited number of functioning Land Customs Stations through which to effect border crossing;¹⁵ and territorial disputes, large and small. There were also genuine security concerns in the BCIM sub-region, which abuts the notoriously lawless ‘Golden Triangle’ and has been witness to numerous armed struggles and ethnic assertion movements (e.g. Bhaumik 2009). Under the circumstances, the final K2K route (Figure 1)¹⁶ appears to have been decided by a process of elimination on grounds both political and infrastructural – not-this, not-that – more than by informed calculation of economic viability in consultation with local stake-holders.

If the foundational India–China Joint Statement scripted an associational link between the K2K Rally and the linear trajectory of the proposed BCIM-EC, the first meeting of the newly constituted BCIM-EC Joint Study Group (JSG), held in Kunming in December 2013, appeared to define the scope of the projected BCIM-EC somewhat differently:

After preliminary discussions, all delegations agreed that *the proposed corridor could run from Kunming (China) in the east to Kolkata (India) in the West, broadly spanning the region, including Mandalay (Myanmar), Dhaka and Chittagong (Bangladesh) and other major cities and ports as key nodes*. With the linkages of transport, energy and telecommunications networks, the Corridor will form a thriving economic belt that will promote common development of areas along the Corridor (emphasis added).¹⁷

Introduced in this statement are subtle pointers to the role and functions of ‘economic corridors’ that go beyond just point-to-point linear connectivity of dots on a map: cities, ports, key nodes, and transport, energy and telecommunications linkages. Again, we revert to the seminal question, ‘What is an Economic Corridor?’ And what shape might the BCIM-EC, India’s first projected overland trans-border economic corridor, take?

3. What is an Economic Corridor? The Theory and the Practice¹⁸

In a general sense the concept of ‘economic corridor’ refers to infrastructure – soft and hard – that helps facilitate national and/or regional economic activities. Beyond this, it implies *linear connectivity* along a physical transportation artery such as a road, rail line or waterway within a defined space or location, linking various nodes of production,

Magway, Cox’s Bazaar and Chittagong (see Rahmatullah 2013). Sonadia Island, adjoining Cox’s Bazaar, is the site of Bangladesh’s projected new Deep Sea Port, presently in the planning stage.

¹⁵ Effectively, only Moreh/Tamu in the state of Manipur, has the requisite connectivity as of now. The other functional border crossing point on the 1643 km Myanmar–India border is the LCS at Zokhawthar (Mizoram), connecting with Rhi on the Myanmar side. Road connectivity on either side of this border crossing is said to be very poor, and official trade volumes miniscule (see RIS 2012: 12-13, 74-75; Seshadri 2014: 19-26, 42-46).

¹⁶ Kolkata → Petrapole/Benapole → Jessore → Dhaka → Sylhet → Deola/Sutarkandi → Silchar → Imphal → Moreh/Tamu → Kalay → Mandalay → Muse/Ruili → Tengchong → Dali → Kunming (see Ranjan & Uberoi 2013).

¹⁷ See the Minutes of the First Meeting of the Joint Study Group, 18-19 December 2013, at: <http://www.indianembassy.org.on/newsDetails.aspx?Newsid=455>, accessed on 20/09/2014.

¹⁸ This section relies especially on ADB (2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014); Banomyong (2010); Brunner (2013); De (2013); De & Iyengar (2013); Gautrin 2014; Srivastava (2011); Wiemer (2009a, 2009b).

distribution and consumption,¹⁹ and supported by programmes, policies, institutions and agreements that facilitate cooperation between the economic clusters along the corridor route (see e.g. ADB 2012a: 46).

Transportation routes or networks form the skeleton of an economic corridor. Typically, these are overland (road or rail), like the great CAREC corridors; or multi-modal, combining overland (road/rail), inland waterway or maritime passageways.²⁰ The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMTT) project,²¹ currently under construction under the auspices of India's Ministry of External Affairs, is an example of the latter, as is the proposed Mekong–India Economic Corridor (MIEC) linking southern India with the GMS countries *via* Dawei port in southern Myanmar.²² While cost-benefit analysis in isolation generally appears to favour maritime over land-based routes,²³ commentators argue that the two modalities should be seen as complementary rather than oppositional. On the one hand, maritime freight routes also necessarily entail road, rail or riverine connectivity to inland hubs and distribution centres;²⁴ on the other hand, for 'landlocked' countries and sub-regions, there is no alternative to overland (or inland waterway) routes. In other words, it would appear that complementary seaport development is intrinsic to the sustainability and viability of economic corridors, including those whose orientation is primarily overland. Indeed, the history of the South Western Silk Route passageways that once networked the BCIM countries, linking Tibet and western / south western China with destination ports in the Bay of Bengal and the vast Indian Ocean trade routes, bears out the symbiotic relationship of maritime and overland routes (Rana and Chia 2014; Yang 2004).

A number of features, functions and benefits are routinely attributed to economic corridors. These so-called 'stylized facts' include, *inter alia*: reducing the cost of national, regional, and global trade to enhance the competitiveness of national and regional production networks and promote greater investment; promoting faster economic growth through greater national, regional, and global integration; reducing poverty by improving

¹⁹ A recent re-evaluation of CAREC corridors has usefully classified the 'nodes' of economic corridors into four major categories, as follows: '(i) commercial nodes, where major business activity is carried out; (ii) border nodes, where cross-border movements of goods and services occur; (iii) gateway nodes, where a corridor ends, and the entry and exit points to the corridor are located; and (iv) interchange nodes, where two or more corridors intersect', with the focus of hard and soft infrastructure support on the development of corridor towns (ADB: 2012b: 28).

²⁰ Purely maritime routes, port-to-port, do not generally come under the definition of 'economic corridor'. See Srivastava (2011: 4).

²¹ Formalized in 2008, the KMTT project was conceived as a means of opening up the landlocked NEER states, *via* Mizoram state. It envisages maritime transportation from ports in eastern India to the reconstructed Sittwe deep sea port in the Rakhine state of western Myanmar; inland waterway passage along the Kaladan (Kolodyne) River to Paletwa in Chin state; and thence overland road transportation into Mizoram where it would link with National Highway 54. For a recent assessment, see Seshadri (2014: 29-33).

²² The Mekong–India Economic Corridor (MIEC) envisages a maritime link from Ennore port (near Chennai) to the renovated Dawei port in Southern Myanmar, with road transport through to Bangkok and *via* the GMS transportation network to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. See e.g. De (2014); De & Ray (2013); Gautrin (2014); RIS (2012: 27-28).

²³ However, given efficient surface infrastructure and transit trade facilitation measures, time saving in overland transportation may be a significant factor in comparative cost calculation.

²⁴ See e.g. Bayley (2012: 167) who sees road transport as importantly 'a service supporter to the maritime mode, rather than as a modal competitor.' In the GMS context, he writes, '[r]oad transport carrying international trade is most heavily concentrated in and around the main seaports where the largest flows of road freight transport in general in the subregion are often experienced.'

poor people's access to economic opportunities and providing better access to essential infrastructure services; helping to narrow development gaps among regional economies by providing small, poor, landlocked, and remote countries and areas with better access to regional markets and production networks; and promoting a more efficient use of regional resources, such as gas reserves and rivers with hydroelectric potential, by developing cross-border projects that permit regional energy trade (De 2013: 18; see also Brunner 2013: 1-6). The extent to which such facts represent reality is a matter of opinion – and also of auto-critique, as in the ADB's revision of its EC thrust (ADB 2012a: 47) – and indeed it is only recently that attempts have been made to simulate the economic impacts of improved regional connectivity and to empirically examine the outcomes of current corridor projects.

A quick survey of the literature and public discourse indicates that economic corridors may be expected to fulfill two rather contradictory functions. On the one hand, as we have noted with reference to the DMIC, economic corridors may be designed to link major urban centres of production and consumption, promoting cluster development and agglomeration in a series of nodes along a passage-way to a sea or air port gateway and thereby integrating the sub-region into the global supply chain (Roy 2014). This strategy, based on the demographic presumption of rapidly accelerated rural-to-urban migration in developing countries like India, is projected as a new and comprehensive approach to urban planning through the construction of new urban conglomerates. On the other hand, and contrariwise, economic corridors may be designed so as to promote the opening up and development of isolated border regions, or to provide external connectivity to landlocked regions and countries. The former objective follows the logic of commercial viability; the latter, the logic of poverty alleviation for lagged hinterlands. While extractive industries (mining, timber harvesting, hydropower, etc.) may commend and enable heavy infrastructure investment in remote and underdeveloped regions, as do concerns of national security, long-term sustainable development demands a productive supply / demand relationship between the rural and the industrial sectors, the hinterland and the urban nodes along the corridor. Clearly, achieving a balance between short-term commercial returns and inclusive development, or between the typically uni-dimensional calculus of the international trade economist and a more multi-dimensional perspective involving a mix of geopolitical, strategic, tourism, pro-poor and security considerations (ADB 2012a: 7) presents a major conceptual challenge which policy reformulations are attempting to address. It is also destined to present a practical challenge in a region of sparse population, subsistence agriculture, stagnant industrial growth and deficient infrastructure, such as the NER of India and northern Myanmar, though which the proposed BCIM-EC will pass.

Empirically speaking, so-called economic corridors are seen to be of various descriptions. Economic corridors may be national (e.g., the corridors of the 'Golden Quadrilateral'), regional (e.g., the GMS and CAREC corridors), or international (e.g., submarine telecommunications cables) (cf. De 2013). They may come into being through a top-down process or through bottom-up initiatives; or through the agency of governments, international development agencies, business organizations, or civil society groups (Wiemer 2009b). They may be rated successful in achieving the overarching goal of enhanced trade and economic integration; or they may appear to have been doomed *ad initio* as merely 'a good idea whose time has not come' (Wiemer 2009a: 1). Inevitably, geography plays a significant role in determining what specific economic corridors may

realistically be expected to achieve, as do historical, political and administrative factors (De 2013: 19-20).

At the core of ADB's rethinking of the theory and practice of the economic corridor mode of regional development is the question of how (if at all) a transport corridor is transformed into an economic corridor. It will be recalled here that the original focus of the GMS from 1992 was on the construction or up-grading of physical transportation infrastructure along identified trade routes (see ADB 2012a).²⁵ However, it was soon enough recognized that the construction of a transport corridor does not *of itself* bring about quantitative changes in trade volumes and the end-goal of sub-regional economic integration. It was in this context that, in 1998, the GMS embraced the economic corridor strategy. In one stroke, as it were, the nine GMS transportation corridors were re-designated as 'economic corridors', and endowed with new features, functions, and expectations. The understanding was that a series of trade facilitation (or 'soft' infrastructure) measures would produce a 'trade' or 'logistics corridor', which in turn would effect or catalyze the transformation of transportation corridors into economic corridors (cf. De 2013: 14; Figure 2).

A decade later, in June 2008, still struggling to achieve the vision and benefits of the economic corridor strategy, the GMS established a new, superordinate institutional mechanism, the Economic Corridors Forum (ECF), designed to coordinate the GMS-EC projects by bringing together the various stakeholders (national and local governments, the business community, international development agencies and civil society organizations) 'to network, exchange views, recommend initiatives, and generally promote corridor activity' (Wiener 2009b: 2).²⁶ A special feature of the ECF, which is obviously a response to a perceived need for the devolution of initiative, is the Governor's Forum, composed of the leaders of the provinces along the border routes. Wiener remarks, however, that 'an annual meeting of high level participants [such as provincial / state governors] is only a small, if demonstrative, part of what must happen to bring the corridors of the GMS to life. The real mobilization of stakeholders', she cautions, 'must take place at the local level and incorporate the private sector and community-based organizations' (ibid.). There is an important lesson to be learned from this observation (see Section 4 below).

A foundational contribution to the ADB's reconceptualization of the EC strategy has been Pradeep Srivastava's paper, 'Regional Corridors Development in Regional Cooperation' (2011). Here, Srivastava proposes a framework for understanding and evaluating the dynamics of regional economic corridor development in terms of two dimensions or basic building blocks, namely: (i) the extent to which the corridors are national or regional; and (ii) the extent to which they are narrow or broad (Srivastava 2011: 3-4; cf. De 2013: 14-18). Ideally speaking, cross-border corridors would be hybrid constructs, that is, 'national

²⁵ Some nine corridors along three primary routes (see ADB 2012a: 1-2).

²⁶ The Forum is supported on the one hand by the GMS Business Forum, and on the other by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) which maintains the ECF Secretariat. To date, six meetings of the ECF have been held, the most recent being in August 2014. Apart from continued focus on transportation, trade facilitation and investment, a special thrust of ECF-6 was on ways and means to develop special economic zones, such as cross-border economic zones, export processing zones, and industrial parks. See 'GMS Economic Corridors Must Yield More Jobs and Investment, Forum Hears', ADB News Release, 11 August 2014. Available at: <http://www.gms-eoc.org/news/gms-economic-corridors-must-yield-more-jobs-and-investment-forum-hears>, accessed on 01/10/2014.

projects with regional implications', with the nodes of the corridor and production activities spanning international borders. In practice, as one observes, national expectations for corridor development may differ in varying degrees from regional objectives. For instance, at the national level, the promotion of trade and industry, the economic development of backward areas, distributive justice, political populism, and security requirements may all be drivers of corridor design and location. On the other hand, the development of regional economic corridors – at least insofar as these projects are underwritten by international financial institutions, as is typically now the case – is expected to be governed by considerations of short-, medium- or long-term commercial viability. As the ADB's recent review of GMS economic corridors suggests, national pressures within a multilateral forum may potentially influence the design and trajectory of economic corridors to the extent that the strategy itself may become discredited in the eyes of potential investors (ADB 2012a: 7). Of course, similar geo-political pressures also operate within national borders.

The second parameter in Srivastava's model – narrow / broad – refers to the width of the corridor along the backbone transport artery, drawing into its field of gravity adjacent commercial, industrial and production centres within a variable band-width. So, while economic corridors must start with physical transport connectivity along a highway, railway or waterway (or a combination thereof), this connecting line between two points on a map is economically (and one may add, socially) meaningful only in so far as areas around the connective infrastructure are implicated to a greater or lesser degree. Visually, this is represented as a wide or narrow 'belt' encompassing the identified nodes of actual or planned commercial and industrial activity – major urban centres and satellite towns, Special Economic Zones (SEZ), export processing zones, industrial parks, knowledge hubs, food processing zones, etc.

In the resulting paradigm in Srivastava's model, four distinct 'zones' of activities are identified: Zone I at the national level is characterized by intensive infrastructure development; Zone II comprises the set of activities that work to broaden the corridor within the national context, including rural road construction, area development, and small and medium industries development; Zone III, includes the slate of trade facilitation and logistics measures, now well-rehearsed in regional and global settings; while Zone IV is represented by the consolidation of cross-border economic zones (Srivastava 2011: 12). In a dynamic model, these four clusters of activities also represent stages of the transformation of a transportation corridor into an economic corridor (ibid.: 10-12), though Srivastava clarifies that Zones II and III are not necessarily sequential, but merely prerequisites for Zone IV, where local products enter regional and global markets *via* production value chains, even as global products in reverse penetrate down to local consumers

As will be evident, the crucial difference from the simple linear model of Figure 2 is the intervening stage of Zone II, a set of 'back-end linkages' encompassing rural road construction, area development, and small and medium industries development, etc., activities that together determine the viability of the economic corridor as a *national* project, albeit within a regional setting. This thrust, now instantiated as the principle of 'widening and deepening' (ADB 2012a), is important in another sense, too. Truthfully speaking, there can be winners and losers in the game of economic corridors, and while it is accepted that all may stand to gain on aggregate, some countries and regions – typically the stronger and better-endowed parties – may gain more than others (Brunner & Prasad

2014: 56-57). Strengthening productive capacity in backward areas, relying on demonstrated comparative advantage, capacity-building efforts and private sector entrepreneurship, is the important prerequisite for inclusive development through the EC strategy (Brunner 2010).

So much for the theory of ECs, still in the process of (*ex post facto*) articulation. What of the practice? Parallel to the ongoing re-conceptualization of economic corridors and of the processes whereby transportation corridors are transformed first into trade corridors and then into economic corridors there have been a number of hard-nosed exercises intended to develop the requisite tools to assess the relative costs and benefits of existing and proposed transportation and economic corridors. In the process, in the South East Asia region for example, some of the nine GMS economic corridors, or portions thereof, have been recognized as approximating the 'ideal type' of an EC. Others have been deemed to be mere transportation corridors, potentially valuable in themselves for the development of isolated and landlocked regions but lacking the capacity for transformation in the short-to-medium term into fully functional economic corridors. Still others are deemed unviable as ECs, in part or *in toto* (ADB 2012a; cf. Banomyong 2010). The last category, it may be noted, includes a section of the GMS Western Corridor in Myanmar from Meiktila to Tamu-Moreh, as well as a section of the GMS Northern Corridor from Mandalay to Tamu-Moreh (the latter being a crucial section of the proposed BCIM-EC as well as of the flag-ship India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project) (ADB 2012a: 9, 43-44). Here, the formidable mountainous terrain and under-developed road and bridge infrastructure, along with relatively sparse population and presently low levels of economic development, indicate high costs vis-à-vis anticipated benefits.²⁷ Similarly, recent cost-benefit analyses of transport corridors linking the SASEC countries with South East Asia *via* West Bengal, Bangladesh and India's NER, pose questions both for the physical routing of the BCIM-EC as well as for the time-frame for its realization, given typical Indian project over-runs (e.g. Gautrin 2014).

4. Lessons from Comparative Experience

It will be evident from the foregoing, albeit sketchy, exposition that the economic corridor strategy for enhancing regional trade and integration is still very much work in progress, both in theory and in practice. Nonetheless, certain general observations may be made as a setting for some final reflections on the proposed BCIM-EC.

- (1) *The principle of 'national projects with regional implications'* should guide transportation planning in the border states

²⁷ This assessment has been made from the perspective of the development priorities of the GMS countries. It does not necessarily discredit either the IMT Trilateral Highway or the proposed BCIM-EC projects, which may be independently evaluated as economic or economic-cum-strategic projects from the perspective of India, Myanmar and Thailand on the one hand, and India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and PRC (Yunnan Province) on the other. It appears that the recommendations of the ADB Consultant's Report on GMS transport and logistics (ADB 2012a) have now been refined further, altogether eliminating ECs in Myanmar with the exception of the tail-end of the GMS East- Economic Corridor from Myawaddy to Mawlamyine, and a possible segment on the North-South Economic Corridor between Kunming (PRC) and Chiang Rai (Thailand). See the ADB report, 'Development of Economic Corridors' at: <http://www.adb.org/print/countries/gms/sector-activities/multisector>, accessed on 27/09/2014. Presumably, the earlier EC sections in Myanmar are now re-classified as transport corridors.

and districts. For too long the issue of regional connectivity has been bracketed off from state and national plans for transportation infrastructure, while the infrastructure plans of neighbours, especially if these are underwritten by third country funding, are typically viewed with suspicion. In other words, the objective of regional connectivity cannot be a mere peripheral ‘add-on’ to national development plans. Nor can it be realized in the absence of consultation with the regional partners, implying the need for the coordinated and consultative formulation of national and regional Master Plans (cf. ADB 2012b: 17).

- (2) *The establishment of economic corridors is a long-term project.* ECs are not built in a day, or created simply by top-down fiat. A number of building blocks need to be in place as prerequisites for economic corridor development; or, as the model visualizes it, an economic corridor rests on the prior institution of transportation and logistics (trade) corridors (Figure 2). At the same time, as the ongoing review of the GMS Economic Corridors has shown, efficient transportation arteries are a necessary but not a *sufficient* condition for the making of a functioning EC. Many of the present so-called ECs are deemed scarcely viable as such. They remain transport corridors, albeit usefully linking local and national centres of production and consumption and providing accessibility to isolated areas.
- (3) *The feasibility of economic corridors as investment priorities is typically calculated in terms of economic costs and benefits, in the short-, medium- and long-term.* Among the criteria of corridor cost evaluation may also be proxy values for levels of security risk and problems of land acquisition, compensation and resettlement, etc., which may cause delays in the implementation of projects or adversely affect investor confidence (see Gautrin 2014: 16). Beyond this economic calculus, however, it is also important to try and anticipate the likely social and environmental impacts of corridor development in particular settings, and to simultaneously put in place the requisite mechanisms for mitigating ill effects and ensuring sustainable and inclusive benefits so far as possible (see e.g. ADB 2010, 2013b).
- (4) *Spatial planning of the EC requires the prior identification of the corridor nodes* (commercial nodes, border nodes, gateway nodes and interchange nodes) for priority development along or linked to the main transport artery. In other words, the trajectory of the transport corridor must have an inbuilt commercial rationale, actual or potential: it is not simply a line joining random dots on a regional (political) map.
- (5) *Even as a best-case scenario, supposedly successful or promising regional ECs are rarely found to be functional ECs over their full length* (often amounting to thousands of kilometers). Rather, given different levels of commercial activity, income levels and population density along the corridor route through varying terrains, it is likely that a lengthy trans-national economic corridor will actually comprise an uneven series of more or less efficient mini-corridors which will typically be densest at border-crossing points and in the vicinity of major sea ports (ADB 2012a: 53).
- (6) *The most successful economic corridors, at least in the GMS region, typically begin and / or terminate at sea ports.* Investment in infrastructure to relieve congestion around port cities is therefore of special importance, and infinitely more efficient than investment in long stretches of highway in sparsely populated and economically unproductive areas (Bayley 2012).

- (7) *The potential stakeholders need to be identified from the start, and involved as participants in the EC planning process.* Ideally, cross-border coordination should extend down to the localized level of adjacent provinces / states, districts, towns and border-crossing points (Wiemer 2009a, 2009b). While the building of the hard infrastructure of a transportation corridor and the soft infrastructure of trade facilitation measures is typically the work of central and provincial / state governments, the success of the EC will also depend on the extent to which the business community, severally and through the business chambers, responds to the opportunities offered by enhanced regional integration. Also important is the support of ‘development partners’, such as international financial institutions and aid-giving bodies.

Allowing that ECs are a heterogeneous phenomenon, how might these several lessons be found relevant in the case of the proposed BCIM-EC?

5. The BCIM-EC: Thoughts for the Future

As the title of this paper suggests, the BCIM-EC proposal was a diplomatic coup, but perhaps also a giant leap in the dark. While the erstwhile security-driven embargo on frontier infrastructure development has clearly been relaxed over the last decade or more and while bilateral agreements with Bangladesh and Myanmar and multilateral agreements under SAARC, SASEC and BIMSTEC, etc., have incrementally addressed issues of border trade and connectivity, a properly ‘regional’ perspective on trans-border connectivity still appears to be lacking, hostage to concerns of security, economic domination, illicit migration, etc. These concerns need to be addressed, but constricting the space for licit connectivity is surely not the answer to the cross-border movement of armed insurgent groups, the influx of cheap Chinese and Thai goods into NER markets, or the desperate movement of peoples in a troubled and ecologically fragile neighbourhood in search of livelihoods, work, or security.

In a way it might be claimed that the background work for the BCIM-EC has already been done. Albeit belatedly, massive work is in progress under various schemes to enhance connectivity infrastructure in India’s NER (GOI, Planning Commission 2012, 2014). Simultaneously, and again belatedly, the GOI’s Look East Policy has undergone a revival. Connecting India / South Asia with the ASEAN countries, whether overland or through maritime or multi-modal routes, is the flavor of the day (see De 2014; RIS 2012). Indeed, given that the famed ‘road to Mandalay’ of the Asian Highway and the IMT Trilateral Highway is also a segment of the K2K route to Kunming, it remains only to acknowledge the palpable reality of the elephant that was already in the room – and move forward.

But, to revert to the lessons for the BCIM-EC that might be drawn from comparative EC experience:

- (1) Planning for the BCIM-EC, and particularly for the routing of the backbone transport corridor, must be simultaneously grounded in a national and a regional perspective.
- (2) As of now, the K2K route does not qualify as a serious transport corridor. There is serious congestion between Kolkata and Petrapole and along several stretches of the route in Bangladesh; bad road conditions in sections between Silchar and

Imphal,²⁸ congestion around Imphal, and poor road conditions in the hilly sections from Thoubal to Moreh in Manipur.²⁹ While substantial work on transportation infrastructure rehabilitation, realignment and green-field construction is currently under way or planned by various agencies in West Bengal and the NER,³⁰ and also on much of the K2K route in Myanmar, these projects will obviously need time for completion. Similarly, with regard to the logistics corridor, numerous trade and transit agreements are incrementally coming into being in bilateral agreements with Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as under multilateral auspices. Along the K2K route, Integrated Check Posts (ICP) are under construction or planned at Petrapole (West Bengal), Sutakandi (Assam) and Moreh (Manipur), but none is so far operational.³¹ Altogether, there would appear to be a long way to go for completion of the logistics infrastructure of a functional BCIM ‘trade corridor’.

- (3) From the very outset, reservations regarding the BCIM initiative have been expressed by opinion-makers and public intellectuals in the NER, even by those who in principle welcome the project as a re-animation of the region’s historical role as a gateway to East and South East Asia (cf. Roy Burman 1998; Uberoi 2013). This is the more so, given that the BCIM-EC project has come into being ‘top-down’, with minimal consultation with local stakeholders. What is the guarantee that the benefits of the BCIM-EC will be equitably shared – between countries, between ethnic groups, between classes, indeed, even between men and women? Addressing the potential social, human and environmental costs of corridor development and suggesting mitigating measures must necessarily be part of the planning process *ab initio* – for the BCIM-EC, as for the other national and transnational corridors on the drawing board.
- (4) As remarked, while the K2K route through the NER may prove to have been an inspired choice, it is also a fact that this choice was based on many contingent factors besides commercial rationale. It is a matter of observation that this route avoids the heavily populated and more industrialized belt of the Brahmaputra valley on the one hand,³² as well as the southern NER gateway to the Bay of Bengal (Chittagong Port) on the other. However, to include these promising commercial or potential gateway nodes in the spatial design of the BCIM-EC would make nonsense of the linearity principle implicit in the EC concept.³³ On the other hand, it may be possible to see the ‘middle route’ as enabling after all by focusing precisely on the potential role of the city of Silchar as an ‘interchange node’, linking the Brahmaputra Valley and the southern NER states. An historical

²⁸ There were several breakdowns on this section of the route during the K2K Car Rally, provoking a participant to ‘blog’ that this stretch would be more easily accomplished on horseback than in a 4-wheel drive vehicle.

²⁹ For a summary of road conditions along the K2K route, see the chronicle of the K2K Route Survey of February 2012 (Misra 2012).

³⁰ See for instance ADB 2012a; GOI, Planning Commission 2012: 24-35, 2014: Ch. 6; Seshadri 2014: 20-24.

³¹ Of the 5 Land Customs Stations (LCS) at the NER–Bangladesh and NER–Myanmar borders scheduled for early up-gradation to Integrated Check Posts (ICP), only the one at Agartala (Tripura) is operational (GOI, Planning Commission 2014: 527-28).

³² Of the 11 urban centres with populations of more than 100,000 in the NER, 6 are in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Silchar, in the Barak Valley, is an outlier. Other major urban centres in the NER region are Dimapur (Nagaland), Imphal (Manipur), Agartala (Tripura), Shillong (Meghalaya) and Gangtok (Sikkim).

³³ A ‘hub-and-spoke’ model does not seem appropriate either, though this spatial design is one that works well in the context of airway connectivity.

trading centre in the region (see Barbhuiya n.d.; Rajan and Uberoi 2013), Silchar is already a multi-modal transport hub, with rail, road, air and waterway connections with other centres in the NER and Bangladesh (the nearby Sutakandi-Karimganj LCS, Karimganj Inland Water Port).³⁴ As the gateway node of the East-West road corridor (Silchar to Porbandar), it commands both road and rail connectivity north to the state capital, Guwahati, and south to Agartala, capital of Tripura state and Assam's second largest city. Abutting the Bangladesh border and some 200 km from Chittagong Port, Agartala in turn boasts a functional ICP, and road, rail (Akhaura) and inland waterway (Ashuganj Port) connectivity to Bangladesh.³⁵ At this point it would appear important to have detailed technical assessments of (i) the potential role of Silchar as a NER 'interchange node' for the BCIM-EC, and of (ii) the feasibility of routing the BCIM-EC (or a BCIM-EC 'spur') through Agartala. As far as one is aware, preparatory work of this nature, looking simultaneously to Bangladesh and to Myanmar, has not yet been done.³⁶

Whatever be the case, it is clear that the spatial planning of the BCIM-EC needs very careful thought with respect to the larger design for networked and multimodal connectivity within the NER, between the NER and the rest of India, and between the NER and the neighbouring countries that comprise 98 % of the region's borders. Again we revert to the need for a Master Plan for BCIM-EC transport connectivity, with priorities and time-lines for the short and the long term. As a first step in this process, the various technical expert assessments of the comparative viability of different trajectories of transport and trade connectivity between South and South East Asia must be carefully re-evaluated (e.g. ADB 2013a; Gautrin 2014), along with the feasibility of alternative proposed routes between the NER and West Bengal – including that through Agartala, Dhaka and southern Bangladesh (GOI, Planning Commission 2014: 493) – and between NER and Myanmar through other border crossing points, both existing (Zokhawthar, Mizoram) and proposed.³⁷

- (5) The key nodes in the development of mini-corridors are the border crossing points, gateway nodes (very often sea-ports) and interchange nodes, along with commercial nodes, both industrial and agricultural. In this, and in the development of value chains along the corridor, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) will have a special role to play as the fulcrum of local enterprise and entrepreneurship (Brunner 2010: 24-28; 2013). Capacity-building in this sector is therefore crucial.
- (6) The BCIM-EC conforms to the ideal type of an economic corridor insofar as it is intended to link an inland gateway (Kunming, Yunnan Province) with a major port and industrial area (Kolkata / Haldia). However, the approaches to Kolkata port are highly congested, and the port itself already working to full capacity.

³⁴ The recent *India Transport Report* in fact strongly recommends making nearby Badarpur in Karimganj district one of two multi-modal hubs for connectivity with Bangladesh. See GOI, Planning Commission (2014, Vol. 3, Pt. 2: 533).

³⁵ See e.g., Department of Industries and Commerce, Government of Tripura, 'The Tripura Advantage'. Available at: http://industries.tripura.gov.in/tripura_advantage, accessed on 01/10/2014.

³⁶ It may be noted that Gautrin (2014: 19) finds the Chittagong-Saigon transport corridor (via Dhaka, Agartala, Silchar, Imphal, Moreh, etc.) to be a relatively promising connection between South and South East Asia.

³⁷ See Seshadri (2014) for a detailed assessment. The economic potential of the 'Northern' Stilwell Road should not be dismissed out of hand, even as security concerns (Myanmar and India) apparently render it unthinkable at the present moment. See RIS (2012a: 77-78).

While the same is said to be the case for Chittagong port in Bangladesh, the transportation of goods to and from the southern states of the NER through Bangladesh's Chittagong port would seem to make some logistic sense (cf. Gaudrin 2014), while the planned development of the Sonadia Deep Sea Port further south near Cox's Bazaar would make the proposition even more attractive (Rahmatullah 2013). It was perhaps for this reason that mention of Chittagong was included in the Minutes of the first meeting of the BCIM-EC Joint Study Group (December 2013), though it is a geographical anomaly, far off the K2K route proper.

- (7) Finally, mechanisms must be devised to enable the active involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the BCIM-EC agenda. This includes not only the governments of the states bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar (this has been happening to some extent since about 2007), but also officials at the district level and below, as well as business interests. In the latter regard, it may be noted that a BCIM Business Forum was established at the 10th BCIM Forum meeting in Kolkata (February 2012), linking the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII, Eastern) with counterparts in the other BCIM countries, and that the CII has mobilized stakeholders in West Bengal and the NER to discuss the business potential and the challenges of the BCIM-EC.³⁸ This dialogue with business needs to be sustained, and to reach down to local organizations. Aside from the cooperation of business chambers, there is surely much scope for cooperative interaction at the local level at border crossing points and at the sites of the actual and proposed border *haats*: for instance, in social sector programmes, agricultural extension projects, environmental conservation, etc. (Ranjan 2014). Indeed, local cross-border cooperation in commercial, social, environmental and also cultural activities could and should be an end in itself for the sustainable development of the hitherto isolated border regions of neighbouring countries.

In 2012, reviewing the experience of GMS economic corridors since 1998, the 4th GMS Economic Corridor Forum had summed up its new strategy for 'widening and deepening' the GMS ECs in the following four tasks:

- (i) [EC] realignment and / or expansion ... linked to GMS trade flows;
- (ii) promoting the economic viability of corridor development by strengthening links with maritime gateways and trade;
- (iii) developing economic and / or urban centers in and around the corridors; and
- (iv) enhancing the connectivity of rural areas to the corridors and their urban nodes (ADB 2012a: 3, order changed).

The foregoing discussion has presented some speculative thoughts on the first and second of these strategic tasks – that is, linking the physical alignment of transport corridors to potential cross-border trade flows, and ensuring connectivity with maritime gateways (in this case, Chittagong-Sonadia and Kolkata). We note in conclusion that the third and fourth of these strategic tasks echo the several activities of Zone II of Pradeep Srivastava's model of economic corridor development (Figure 3) – the hitherto missing link in the conceptualization of the roles and functions of economic corridors. In the ultimate analysis, the promotion of productive relations between agriculture and industry in the BCIM region, along with focused efforts at human capacity building to leverage the opportunities afforded by subregional integration, are not only prerequisites for the

³⁸ BCIM-EC Stakeholders' Workshops held in Kolkata (1-2 May 2014) and Guwahati (18-19 July 2014).

BCIM-EC, but important objectives in themselves in a region of the world which, in recent times, has been sadly disadvantaged by both history and location.

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