



Moving Forward on Parallel Tracks? A New Perspective on the BCIM Initiatives*

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Working papers are in draft form and are works in progress that will eventually be revised and published. This paper has been prepared to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to stimulate discussion. The text has not been edited to official publication standards and ICS accepts no responsibility for errors.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address three interrelated conceptual-cum-pragmatic issues from the standpoint of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) initiative. The first is the relationship between Track II and Track I levels of engagement, in this case between the Track II BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum, founded in Kunming in 1999, and the projected BCIM Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) project, officially endorsed by the formation of a BCIM-EC Joint Working Group in 2013. In common understanding, Track II is merely an experimental or preparatory stage leading to full inter-governmental cooperation, while in another view Track II dialogue is conceived as a substitute for inter-governmental engagement, avoiding the harsh glare of official publicity when relations between the concerned countries are fragile. Alternatively, the relationship may be presented as symbiotic, with Track II functioning as an essential, confidence-building support for Track I. This latter is the perspective that informs much of the revisionist technical literature on the feasibility of the ‘economic corridor’ approach to regional integration. The second issue concerns the specific nature and potentialities of sub-regional groupings, in relation to regional, mega-regional and other types of multi-lateral cooperation formats. In the specific BCIM context, this exposes the complexity of centre / state dynamics in the making of foreign policy in both India and China. The third issue is the more recent dilemma raised by China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for comprehensive Eurasian connectivity, regarding which the Government of India has expressed strong reservations. Here it is argued that a re-envisioned BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum, focused on a project-based approach to shared socio-economic and cultural concerns, could actively promote India’s Act East Policy through the North East region by keeping alive the aspiration for opening up and developing the distinctive sub-region of BCIM at the intersection of Southeast, East and South Asia.

I From the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum to the BCIM Economic Corridor

In May 2013, the process initiated by the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation, founded in Kunming in 1999 and earlier known as the ‘Kunming Initiative’, entered a new phase. The Joint Statement issued at the end of the official visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India contained a momentous clause with implications for both India–China relations and for the architecture of Asian regionalism / sub-regionalism:

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.¹

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the constitution of an inter-governmental Joint Study Group to assess the feasibility of developing a BCIM economic corridor (BCIM-EC) came as something of a surprise even to those deeply engaged in the BCIM Forum process (Uberoi 2016b). Though terms such as ‘growth zone’, ‘growth polygon’, ‘cooperation zone’, etc., had routinely been used to describe the scope and objectives of the sub-regional BCIM Forum (Uberoi 2016a), the concept of a BCIM ‘economic corridor’ had hardly been mentioned through the Forum’s fourteen-year history.² Certainly, the ‘economic corridor’ idea was not prominent in Indian development planning at the time,³ though it would presumably have been high in Chinese consciousness, given that this thrust had been adopted in 1998 as the primary focus of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) project, of which Yunnan Province (the active driver of the BCIM Regional Forum), was a founder member in 1992.

In some estimations, the May 2013 India–China Joint Statement unequivocally elevated the BCIM Regional Forum from Track II to Track I, from being a mere ‘talk shop’ of wishful thinkers to an intergovernmental collaboration. From the very beginning, the BCIM Regional Forum had been struggling to uniformly raise the level of quadrilateral engagement from Track II to Track I (Uberoi 2016a) – that is, to back the nice ‘talk’ by official commitment. While China’s and Myanmar’s participation in the Forum had always been effectively (if not explicitly) Track I, once Bangladesh had accorded the Forum official recognition and raised its level of participation commensurately

¹ ‘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 June 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 June 2014).

² The one exception, and undoubtedly a significant one, was the Joint Statement issued at the end of the 9th BCIM Regional Forum meeting held in Kunming in January 2011 which, in the section on regional connectivity, recorded that ‘[i]t was agreed to enhance the thrust for improved regional connectivity and to focus on establishing the Kunming-Mandalay-Dhaka-Kolkata Economic Corridor’. See ‘Joint Statement on Promotion of BCIM Regional Cooperation’, ¶ 5.

³ The flagship Indian corridor project, the Japan-financed Delhi-Mumbai-Industrial Corridor, was initiated only in 2008.

(2005/2010), India remained, conspicuously, a laggard outlier (Mishra 2015; 2016).⁴ But the long-planned Kolkata-to-Kunming ('K2K') Car Rally that passed through Dhaka in February 2013 to coincide with the 11th BCIM Regional Forum seemed to herald a new ball game, as the India–China Joint Statement just a couple of months later indicates. All the same, the reality as of now [May 2016], is that only a BCIM-EC Joint *Study* Group (JSG) has been constituted at the inter-government level, tasked with the preparation of a feasibility report for the BCIM-EC for presentation to the respective governments for their consideration and, hopefully, their joint endorsement and implementation.

The work of preparing the JSG Report (individual country reports and the consolidated JSG Report) is still in process – albeit slower than originally planned⁵ and certainly not at the pace desired by China, as one might deduce by contrast with the much more rapid institutionalization of the bilateral China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁶ Immediately following his May 2013 visit to India, Premier Li Keqiang had gone on to Pakistan where the two 'all weather' friends agreed 'to jointly develop the Long-Term Plan for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on the basis of thorough study, so as to promote greater connectivity and further development of investment, trade and economic cooperation between China and Pakistan.' The Joint Statement continued: 'Both sides decided to establish a joint working group⁷ under the National Reform Development Commission⁸ of China and the Planning Commission of Pakistan which will study relevant connectivity ventures.'⁹ It must be said that China's coordinated 2013 road-map for China–South Asia connectivity in the east and in the west generated relatively little comment in India, even as the Indian security establishment

⁴ For a more detailed account of the complexities and anomalies of this situation, accommodated under the euphemism of 'multi-track' approach, see Rana & Uberoi (2012: 101-11); also Uberoi (2009). See also the chronological account from a Yunnan perspective in Chen and Kong (2016: 238-46).

⁵ See 'Minutes of the First Joint Study Group of Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor', Kunming, P.R.C., 18-19 December 2013. Available at: <http://www.indianembassy.org.cn/newsDetails.aspx?Newsid=455> (accessed on 20 September 2014); and 'Minutes of the Second Meeting of the Joint Study Group of Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor [BCIM-EC]', Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, 17-18 December 2014, 'Joint Statement.'

⁶ For an account and assessment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, see Ranjan (2015); also Singh (2013).

⁷ Note the use here of the term 'Joint *Working* Group', as against 'Joint *Study* Group' for the BCIM-EC, though the two appear to be conflated in Chinese usage. 'Working Group' suggests that a collective commitment has already been made, while 'Study Group' suggests a project in the initial stages of development.

⁸ Properly called the National Development and Reform Commission.

⁹ 'Joint Statement – Deepening Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan', 23 May 2014, § III. Available at: <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MTIwMA> (accessed on 20 April 2016). Among the 11 agreements signed on this state visit was an MoU on 'Cooperation for Long Term Plan on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor'.

continued to express deep concern with regard to China's leading role in the construction of Gwadar Port, the designated beginning / termination point for the CPEC, but also deemed by some to be another pearl in China's so-called 'string of pearls' spanning the Indian Ocean / Bay of Bengal region.

Events moved fast. In September 2013, within a few months of the twin South Asian economic corridor proposals, both the BCIM-EC and the CPEC were yoked together in President Xi Jinping's grand new vision of overland and maritime inter-Asian and Eurasian connectivity in what is now known as the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) or latterly 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI).¹⁰ As outlined in detail elsewhere (Uberoi 2016c), India's response to this development has been not merely tardy, but piquantly convoluted. As of the time of writing [May 2016], India has endorsed the BCIM-EC project; firmly rejected the CPEC, which traverses India-claimed territory in Kashmir; and maintained a more or less studied official silence on China's BRI through some 18 months of Chinese fanfare, while latterly hinting darkly at the unacceptability of so-called 'unilateral' connectivity projects in India's neighbourhood.¹¹ Needless to say, this concatenation has impacted both the BCIM Regional Forum as well as the incipient BCIM-EC project, fundamentally destabilizing the terms of discourse in India and China, and casting a shadow of uncertainty over the future of both BCIM activities.

At the first meeting of the BCIM-EC Joint Study Group (Kunming, 18-19 December 2013), and with the 12th Forum meeting scheduled to be held in Myanmar in early 2014,¹² the question of the future status or need for the continuation of the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum was discussed informally among those participants present who had earlier been associated with the Forum process. The general feeling was that the BCIM Forum as a TII / 'dual track' or 'multi-track' exercise (Ren 2009; Uberoi 2009) still had an important role to play.

¹⁰ For a chronology of the BRI Initiative from its announcement to the release of the authoritative White Paper at the end of March 2015, see e.g. Chen & Kong (2016: 246-49); also, Xinhuanet (2015).

¹¹ See e.g. 'Speech by External Affairs Minister at the Inauguration of Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi (March 01, 2016)'. Available at: <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26432> (accessed on 5 March 2016); and 'Speech by Foreign Secretary at Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi (March 2, 2015)'. Available at: <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26432> (accessed on 5 March 2016).

¹² The 12th BCIM Regional Forum was ultimately held in Yangon in February 2015.

But there was clearly another motivation at work. That is, with the elevation of the quadrilateral dialogue to Track I, the metonymical yoking of the BCIM-EC to the CPEC, and the encompassment of both within the grand design of the BRI, the *sub-regional* rationale that had been the hallmark of the BCIM Forum as initially conceived was seriously undermined. Though some formal niceties were retained, it appeared that Yunnan Province was no longer firmly in the BCIM driver's seat. Section II of this chapter describes the process of Yunnan's loss and partial recovery of agency in the dual BCIM initiatives. In India, conversely, expectations were raised that the BCIM sub-region (India's Northeast region [NER] in particular) was belatedly gaining leverage, in policy and in practice, as the fulcrum of overland connectivity between South, Southeast and East Asia (Section III). This latter development runs parallel to the ongoing re-examination by key players of the economic corridor strategy of sub-regional / regional integration (Section IV); and potentially with new policy formulations of the NDA government under the rubric of 'cooperative, competitive federalism' (Section V). Interestingly, with or without explicit central government imprimatur, stakeholder Indian states as well as civil society institutions have been 'pushing the envelope' of centralized foreign policy on behalf of cross-border sub-regional cooperation. The situation is obviously complex and evolving, with opportunities to be grasped – or equally, to be missed. The final section returns to the question embedded in the title of this chapter, namely: 'Is there a role for the BCIM Regional Forum in parallel to the activities of the BCIM-EC?' Here we argue that there is indeed an important role for the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum, *but* that its format and focus may need to be substantially revised to address changed circumstances including, of course, the parallel institution of the intergovernmental BCIM-EC agenda.

II China: From Decentralization to Recentralization and Back Again?

As is well known, the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum was conceived and initiated within the ambit of China's successive 'Western Development' and 'Going Out' strategies¹³ as a *sub-regional* programme for the social and economic development of the relatively backward, peripheral and landlocked regions of China (specifically, the South Western provinces) and of India (the North East region), along with Bangladesh and Myanmar (both Least Developed Countries [LDCs]). Its lineal coordinates were parsimoniously defined in the acronym 'K2K' ('Kunming-to- Kolkata' / 'Kolkata-

¹³ For a comprehensive early account of the Western Development Programme, see e.g. Lai (2002). Yelery (2014, 2015) provides a neat analysis of the economic rationale of the subsequent, albeit overlapping, 'Going Out' strategy.

to-Kunming’). The provincial government of Yunnan (in particular, its Foreign Affairs Office and its development planning division, now known as the Yunnan Provincial Development and Reform Commission) was the driving force behind the initiative, in partnership with the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences and other academic institutions of China’s western region which had specialized in Southeast and South Asian studies. In its initial conceptualization, the BCIM Forum process drew heavily upon Yunnan’s experience as a foundation member of the ADB-supported Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) project, extending that model into South Asia.¹⁴

Soon after the announcement of the constitution of a Joint Study Group for the BCIM-EC, it became apparent that the BCIM-EC project, like the CPEC, would be operationalized by the National Development and Reform Commission (China’s powerful macro-economic planning body functioning under the State Council), albeit with Yunnan expert participation and cooperation. Though the first BCIM-EC JSG meeting was hosted in the Yunnan capital, Kunming, the leading role of former Yunnan participants in the BCIM Regional Forum appeared to have been taken over by NDRC functionaries.¹⁵ In private conversations, some Yunnanese delegates conveyed that they were eager to restore the BCIM’s original *sub-regional* development agenda and to re-position and expand on Yunnan’s role as a connectivity hub linking East, South and Southeast Asia. Effectively, this entailed emphasis on the advantages of geographical propinquity and the co-development of border zones, border infrastructure and trans-border value chains, in addition to the overarching drive to ‘go out’ and compete globally for investment opportunities and inbound FDI.

President Xi’s BRI proposal took some 18 months to shape into a formal document, which was finally released to coincide with the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) in Hainan at the end of March 2015 (NDRC *et al.* 2015). The intervening months were occupied by numerous visits by the top leadership to countries along the BRI trail; innumerable seminars and conferences, national and international, across the length and breadth of the country; the mobilization of ‘think tank’ forums; and intense jockeying among China’s provinces and municipalities for a share in what promises to be an

¹⁴ Note that Myanmar is also a foundation member of the GMS, and that Bangladesh is a member of the ADB-supported SASEC, comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India (especially the NER and North Bengal) and Nepal – a grouping earlier known as the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), which has now been institutionalized as a SAARC sub-regional grouping (BBIN) with particular focus on water- and energy-sharing, in addition to the conventional issues of connectivity and trade facilitation in which some small but significant gains have recently been made (i.e. the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, 2015). See De (2015).

¹⁵ There was no mention at that time of the OBOR project. To the contrary, presentations on the financing of connectivity infrastructure were made by delegates from the Asian Development Bank (2013) and UNESCAP (2013).

enormous pie (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015; ECFR 2015; Jacob 2015; Krantz 2015a; Uberoi 2016c). In the meantime, China announced the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (a multilateral investment bank [MLB] to which near on 60 countries, including India, have signed up),¹⁶ and a dedicated Silk Road Fund of US\$40 billion set up in December 2014 in support of the BRI.¹⁷ It must be said that the official Silk Road vision document contains many grey areas, anomalies, unanticipated additions (such as a South Pacific ‘spur’) and silences, lubricated by the rhetoric of ‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’ such as had supposedly brought about ‘the progress of human civilization’ along the ancient Eurasian Silk Road (NDRC *et al.* 2015). Perhaps as deliberate strategy, there is still no authorized map of the BRI identifying its component nodes and routes, the CPEC being a case in point. On the one hand, the CPEC appears to be merely a capacious umbrella encompassing connectivity and energy infrastructure projects that were already under way or under discussion bilaterally, while the supposed linear ‘route’ of the corridor (whether along the east or the west sides of the Indus) continues to be the object of bitter internal controversy and official obfuscation (see Ranjan 2015).¹⁸

In the 18-month period between the announcement of the BRI project and the release of the vision document, Chinese delegations and official spokespersons had identified six component economic corridors of the BRI: a China–Mongolia–Russia corridor; a China–Central Asia–West Asia corridor;¹⁹ a China–Indochina Peninsular corridor; the CPEC; the BCIM-EC; and finally, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the latter connecting major existing and planned sea ports across the ancient maritime trading routes. While this formulation remains current and is constantly reiterated,

¹⁶ See Krantz (2015b). The proposal was mooted by President Xi and Premier Li in tours of Southeast Asian countries in October 2013, with the Articles of Agreement finally signed in June 2015. Interestingly, the first project of the AIIB, in collaboration with the ADB, is a highway section in Pakistan.

¹⁷ The first confirmed project of the Silk Road Fund is investment in the Karot Hydropower project and other hydropower projects under the CPEC. We may also note the parallel setting up in July 2014 of the New Development Bank (NDB), an initiative of the BRICS multilateral grouping, tasked with mobilizing resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects.

¹⁸ That recent documents / maps show three distinct routes for the CPEC (Eastern, Western and Central) presumably indicates the rival claims of different stakeholder states (see e.g. Chaudhuri and Ahmad 2015), and possibly also a tussle between the Pakistan army and the civilian government (see S. Rana 2016).

¹⁹ It is believed that the original focus of the BRI was on Western China and Central Asia, linked to the strategic goal of stabilizing restive Xinjiang Province, but that ‘China’s south-eastern coastal provinces actively lobbied to be part of the initiative, leading to the drafting of a second route... to be launched concomitantly’ (Krantz 2015a: 9). Some economists are of the opinion that with this dilution and expansion of the Silk Road project to embrace the Maritime Silk Route, China will lose much of its competitive advantage and ‘face much greater difficulties along the maritime Silk Road than it would have if it had focused only on the western route’ (*ibid.*). See also Bhardwaj, who argues that ‘[t]he primary aim of OBOR is to connect China with Europe through Central Asia and Russia’ (2015: 10), in challenge to Western dominance of the sea lanes of communication (SLOC).

one may note that the authorized vision document is more cautious with regard to the status of the CPEC and the BCIM-EC, which are described as merely ‘*closely related to the Belt and Road Initiative*’, and therefore requiring ‘closer cooperation and greater progress’ (ibid.: emphasis added). We can only guess as to whether or not this subtle reformulation may have been a gesture to Indian sensitivities, which were already apparent to informed Chinese observers (Uberoi 2016c).

A more interesting aspect of the BRI vision statement, however, is the section entitled ‘China’s Regions in Pursuing Opening-Up’ which seeks to ‘fully leverage the comparative advantages of its various regions’ in the ongoing process of Opening Up. Encompassed within the overarching BRI framework, the cartographic dimensions of China’s strategy of regional development were tweaked, and ‘regions’ rebranded. For instance, we note that the former ‘western’ region of the Western Development programme was bifurcated into (i) a ‘northwestern region’, which was in turn yoked in an unlikely marriage of convenience with the rust-belt ‘northeastern region’;²⁰ and (ii) a ‘southwestern region’, comprising Yunnan Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the two together positioned as twin pivots for engagement with the ASEAN countries and South Asia.²¹ As the only ‘southwestern’ province with seaport connectivity (the Beibu / Tonkin Gulf), Guangxi was deemed to be ‘an important gateway connecting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, the Venice of the East, if you like.²² Moreover, as members of the sub-regional GMS, both Yunnan and Guangxi provinces had a potentially significant role in BRI coordination with existing multilateral sub-regional, regional and trans-regional cooperation mechanisms and trade promotion Expos, the latter including *inter alia* the annual China–South Asia Expo (Kunming, Yunnan) and the China–ASEAN Expo (Nanning, Guangxi).

²⁰ The NDRC is the office for both the Western Region Development programme (dating from 1999-2000), as well as planning for the Revitalization of Northeast China (initiated in 2003). On the rationale for the project to revitalize the Northeast along the lines of the Western Regions Development programme, see e.g. Dong (2005).

²¹ The other two macro-regions identified are the ‘Coastal Regions’, including Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, building on ‘the unique role of overseas Chinese’; and the ‘Inland Regions’. This new cartography of the BRI differs both from the development index based differentiation of East, West, and Central zones (sometimes adding the North East as a fourth focus), as well as from the conventional 6-fold regional classification that had earlier included Guangxi in a ‘South-Central’ (*Zhongnan*) zone, along with Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Hainan, Hong Kong and Macao. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_regions_of_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China#Economic_regions (accessed on 15 April 2016).

²² It may be noted that in some discourses or cartographic representations, the BCIM-EC (with sea-port connection at Kolkata or Chittagong) and the CPEC (terminating at Gwadar) are presented as North-South connecting links between the East-West continental and the Maritime Silk Routes. A further North-South corridor presently under discussion at the Track II level is the China [TAR]–Nepal–India Trilateral Corridor. It may be noted that Nepal has reportedly agreed to ‘join’ the OBOR initiative, extending the rail-line from Shigatse in Tibet (see *The Hindu* 2015).

Altogether, some 18 of China's 31 administrative units were assigned specific roles in the BRI project, with others mentioned by implication in the context of designated activities, such as port development, railroad corridors, etc.²³ The clear winners, denominated as BRI 'core areas', were the far western border province of Xinjiang and the coastal province of Fujian, the latter beating off stiff competition from other seaboard claimants (Hainan, Guangdong and Guangxi) and both of them successfully leveraging their supposed 'historical roles in the ancient Silk Road and natural geographical advantages' (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015: 2). In the event, it would appear that Yunnan province has been able to resume *in some measure* its self-assumed responsibility in mediating and promoting China's economic engagement with South, as well as Southeast, Asia. In addition to its assigned function in the BRI project through the BCIM-EC, Kunming continues to anchor the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum, which it is due to host in 2016, the China–South Asia Think Tank Forum, the GMS Economic Corridors Forum, the China–South Asia Expo (which, as mentioned, is also coopted as a designated BRI activity), and the Track II 'K2K Forum' (see below), among others. While the situation is obviously fluid, Yunnan province would seem to have regained (or managed to retain) a degree of agency, no doubt allied with a heavy responsibility to bring President Xi's signature BRI initiative to fruition while deflecting competition from other provinces, Sichuan in particular. From Yunnan's perspective, the BCIM-EC is key to this quest, and effective Indian cooperation the *sine qua non* for success. As early BCIM formulations put it, China and India are the twin 'pillars' on which the initiative rests: by implication, if one should falter, the edifice would collapse.

III India's North East Region: Still Waiting for a Place at the Table?

As is well known, the development of India's North East Region (NER)²⁴ was ill-served by the Partition of India and the 1965 war with Pakistan which disrupted the sinews of road, rail and waterways connectivity that had operated under the colonial regime, rendering the region effectively isolated, physically as well as socio-culturally, from the so-called Indian 'mainland'. To this was added the securitization of India's northeastern borders as a 'buffer' zone following the debacle of

²³ In the South Asian context, Tibet was mentioned with reference to border trade, tourism and cultural cooperation with Nepal (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015: 2). See also Bhoothalingam (2016) on trans-Himalayan connectivity through Nepal; and Jacob (2016b), for the potential synergy of China–Nepal connectivity plans with the OBOR design, involving a China (TAR)–Nepal–India economic corridor.

²⁴ In this chapter, the North East Region (NER) refers to the 'seven sister' states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, which are joined to the Indian 'mainland' by the narrow Siliguri ('Chicken's Neck') corridor. The non-contiguous state of Sikkim became administratively a part of the NER from 2002.

the 1962 border war with China, a move in synch with the existing constitutional provisions for the protection of the lands, livelihoods and distinctive cultures of Indian tribal peoples, many of whom inhabit India's North East frontier regions. From being among the more prosperous regions of India in 1947, most states of the NER are now below the Indian average in terms of standard economic indices. Worse still, the economic differential continues to increase, belying the region's impressive endowment of natural and human resources. The reasons for this failure of governance are many and complex, rooted in the colonial and pre-colonial history of the region and in the development planning processes and priorities of post-Independence India (Sarma 2005, 2012). Continuing ethnic unrest and insurgency movements have promoted further militarization, discouraging outside investment (see e.g. Bhaumik 2009; GOI/MDoNER/NEC 2008: 289-94), while new institutional arrangements for the region, including the creation of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971, the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (NEDFi) in 1995, and subsequently the overarching Ministry for the Development of the North Eastern Region (MDoNER) in 2001, along with ample and typically under-utilized central government development 'packages', have failed to put in place the comprehensive connectivity infrastructure required to correct the NER's economic isolation.²⁵ Additionally, the NER lacks adequate all-weather connectivity within and between its component states, as well as with the neighbouring countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal) with which it shares some 98% of its borders.

It has been a matter of adverse comment, particularly in the NER, that India's Look East Policy, formulated in the early 1990s coinciding with the beginning of structural adjustment, did not take India's North East Region into active consideration. To the contrary, overland access to ASEAN countries and East Asia was routinely deemed to be both economically unviable and strategically undesirable, given political uncertainties in Myanmar, the many long-lasting insurgency movements in India's NER and the prevailing Indian *cordon sanitaire* perspective on frontier security. The LEP focus was on maritime trade with the burgeoning economies of South East Asia – Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines and Malaysia in the first instance, and then the wider ASEAN region, including the less developed but now fast-growing CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam). A quarter century on, maritime trade continues to overwhelmingly dominate

²⁵ See for further details, Rana & Uberoi (2012: 21-25); also Bhaumik (2009); GOI/MDoNER/NEC (2008); Das (2015); De & Majumdar 2014: 21-34; GOI/Planning Commission (1997); Haokip (2015a); Sachdeva (2000); and Sarma (2005, 2012).

India–ASEAN economic engagement, with the ambitious multi-modal Mekong–India Economic Corridor (MIEC), albeit still to become operational, as its new signature project.²⁶

The late 1990s saw a change, with the economic development of the NER becoming linked in both public and academic discourse with the restoration of the historic arteries of trade and connectivity in the wider sub-region. In 1994, now pursuing a more ‘realistic’ policy towards the political regime in Myanmar, India signed an agreement with Myanmar to enable limited cross-border trade, and shortly thereafter entered a trilateral partnership with Myanmar and Thailand to develop the 1360 km India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral highway from Mae Sot–Myawaddy on the Thai–Myanmar border through to the Myanmar–India border at Tamu–Moreh.²⁷ It was in this evolving context that the early feelers from Yunnan academic and governmental research institutions for the creation of a sub-regional ‘growth zone’ including provinces of south western China, India’s eastern and north eastern states, northern Myanmar and Bangladesh found a generally sympathetic hearing in India’s NER (see Che 1998; Roy Burman 1998; Uberoi 2016a), as also in Bangladesh, where the distinguished academician, Rehman Sobhan of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, furbished the projected economic integration of East, Southeast and South Asia in the beguiling garb of the historic ‘Southern Silk Route’ (Sobhan 1999, 2000; see also Das 2015: 8-9).

Building on the recommendations of a high-level government committee tasked with examining the infrastructure deficit in the NER (GOI/Planning Commission 1997), and following intensive consultations with the chief ministers of all the NE states (GoI/MDoNER 2007),²⁸ the authoritative and path-breaking *North Eastern Vision 2020* (GoI/MDoNER/NEC 2008), devoted a robust penultimate chapter to arguing the case for a leading role for the NER within the remit of the Look East Policy to put an end to the region’s ‘economic imprisonment’ within its international borders.²⁹

²⁶ Supported by ASEAN, this multimodal project envisages maritime connectivity between the Chennai/Ennore ports in Southern India and the newly developed Dawei deep sea port on Myanmar’s southern coastline, linked to superhighways connecting to Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City. For further details see De (2012); Seshadri (2014).

²⁷ The Trilateral Highway was proposed by Thailand as a major project of its Look West Policy (see Shekhar 2010). See also Bhatia (2015); Das (2016); Seshadri (2014: 46).

²⁸ It would appear that this very interesting document, which is marked ‘Restricted’, became publicly available only recently.

²⁹ See also the subsequent MDoNER policy paper on the potential role of the NE states in India’s Look East Policy (GoI/MDoNER 2011); also GoI/MDoNER (2009, 2010).

In this task, shared cross-border ethnicities and cultural ties could be leveraged as potential assets for sub-regional integration, rather than as self-evident threats to national security.³⁰

On the political stage, it has by now become *de rigueur* for visiting Union Ministers, Prime Ministers and Presidents to endorse the centrality of the NER to India's 'Look East' (now 'Act East') policy, and the necessity of regional integration for the NER's further development.³¹ In parallel, and with increasing velocity, numerous academic volumes and commissioned reports have addressed the interwoven issues of overland connectivity through the NER with South East and East Asia, the region's infrastructure deficit, the current extent and future potential of cross-border and inter-regional trade, the scope for developing trans-border value chains, developments in India's bilateral political and economic relations with neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the rapidly growing role of China in underwriting infrastructure development in India's near neighbourhood.³²

While serious doubts remain in the Indian security and diplomatic establishments on the wisdom of opening up the volatile NER and partnering China in sub-regional development through the BCIM mechanism (see e.g. Sibal 2014), in the NER itself there would appear to be considerable enthusiasm for the BCIM project,³³ and even a measure of competition among NER states to take the lead (see Bhaumik 2016a). This enthusiasm is, however, tempered by concern for the preservation of the many unique cultures of the hill tribes of the NER and for the environmental and social impacts of large infrastructure projects, especially in the hydro sector (Hussain 2008; Rahman 2014); the urgent need for appropriate skill development to ensure that the BCIM-EC translates into meaningful employment;³⁴ the economic impacts of cross-border trade on local industry – usually summed up in the warning of 'Chinese goods flooding the market' (Bhoothalingam 2015: 36-37; 2016); traditional

³⁰ The 'cultural' perspective has been strongly spelt out in the policies and activities of the GoI's Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) project, initiated in 2000 (see e.g., mea.gov.in/aseanindia/about-mgc.htm; also Divya Jeevan Foundation 2015). However, as with India's other regional cooperation initiatives, effective cooperation has been slow to fructify. See, e.g. Arndt (2015).

³¹ See PM Modi's recent speech to the Plenary Session of the North East Council (Modi 2016); also Mukherjee (2013a, 2013b); Sailo 2013.

³² See e.g. among recent publications, ADB & ADBI (2015); Bhatia & Mishra (2015); Bhatnagar & Passi (2016); Bhaumik (2016a); De & Majumdar (2014); Das (2016); Das & Thomas (2016); Datta & Mazumdar (2015); Gogoi (2010); Haokip (2015a, 2015b); Narayan & Sailo (2015); Sailo (2015); Seshadri (2014); Yhome 2014.

³³ In a survey conducted by the Centre for Environment, Social and Policy Research in November 2014 with respondents drawn from NER political parties, bureaucracy, academia and media, almost 89 per cent affirmed that the BCIM has the potential to benefit the NER economy. Some, 88 per cent felt that 'serious human security issues like weapons and drugs smuggling could be better addressed through a multilateral forum like BCIM than at a bilateral level' (*Economic Times* 2014).

³⁴ See articles and references in Kshetrimayum (2013) for a comprehensive coverage of labour issues in the NER.

and non-traditional security threats, especially drugs- and weapons-smuggling on the perimeter of the notorious ‘Golden Triangle’ (Jacob 2010); and the highly emotive and politically inflammatory issue of illegal migration. In other words, the BCIM Economic Corridor should be more than just a physical-cum-logistics passage-way from one point on the map to another (caricatured as the loading of a container truck in Kunming and its unloading in Kolkata / Haldia), but should bring about tangible benefits and improved livelihood prospects for the communities along its path or within its wider sway of influence (ADB 2015: 4; Das 2016: xi, 3-6).³⁵ To this may be added a marked degree of cynicism (often represented as a Centre *versus* North East States disconnect, or as an enduring and incurable ‘governance’ deficit in the NER itself) as much-hyped infrastructure projects fail to materialize on the ground, with mounting time and cost overruns; or simply wash away in the next rainy season.

But the real source of resentment in the NER has been the perceived reluctance of the Union government to proactively and consistently involve the state governments and civil society institutions of the region in the scripting of neighbourhood policy. In interviews conducted by the Institute of Chinese Studies in September 2013 with some well-known opinion-makers in the NER, informants expressed the hope that the BCIM-EC initiative would result in the speedy completion of the many slow-moving or stalled connectivity infrastructure projects. At the same time they expressed concern that the decision on the BCIM-EC, though in itself an apparently welcome step in opening up to the near neighbourhood, appeared to have been made by the Union government (primarily the Ministries of External Affairs, Home and Commerce?) without adequate consultation with the NER state governments and civil society organizations. In their view, the MDoNER and the NEC had failed to adequately solicit and represent NER public opinion with regard to the BCIM-EC; to undertake the comprehensive perspective planning required to make the NER an effective bridgehead for the LEP; and to constructively mediate the various conflicts of interest *between* and *within* the NE states themselves, thereby potentially fuelling rather than mitigating ethnic and communitarian tensions and further deterring investment in the region (ICS 2013).

These sharp reactions underline the need for greater transparency and dialogue between the Union government and the various NER states in the first instance; between the relevant Ministries and

³⁵ Observations at the Stakeholders’ Consultative Workshop on ‘The Role of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor in Regional Integration: Perspectives from Northeast India’, 18–19 July 2014, Guwahati.

institutions of the Union Government (MEA, MDoNER, Commerce and Industry, Finance, Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), Railways, Home, Defence, the Planning Commission [now NITI Aayog], etc.); and with civil society institutions (business interests, academic and expert groups, and NGOs in the field). It appears that such dialogues (even between the central and state governments, or within and between different government departments) tend to be *ad hoc*, personality-driven, intermittent, and relatively uncoordinated – at least insofar as the generation of a coherent ‘Master Plan’ for a transnational project such as the BCIM-EC is concerned.³⁶ As we see in the following section, an ‘economic corridor’ is a particular, and also continuously evolving species of economic activity, characterized by specific objectives and features (see De 2014). While an economic corridor can and should leverage existing national infrastructure projects, it nonetheless needs to be conceptualized *ab initio* as a ‘regional project with national implications’ / ‘national project with regional implications’ (Srivastava 2011), requiring the active support and participation of local stakeholders, both state and non-state actors. As suggested elsewhere, it would appear that the agreed routing of the BCIM-EC, that is, along the alignment of the ‘K2K’ Car Rally of 2013,³⁷ was the outcome of many and complex considerations that may not have been mindful of the specific requirements of a functional economic corridor, though with good perspective planning this alignment may ultimately prove to have been inspired (Uberoi 2016b).

For a variety of reasons, including the only recently revised arcane restrictions on ‘border trade’,³⁸ trade volumes across India’s northeast borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar remain sub-optimal. At the same time, illicit trade continues to flourish following traditional trading routes and leveraging ties of kinship, culture and community.³⁹ Obviously, the large volumes of unrecorded and

³⁶ This is evident from the Minutes of a meeting of central ministers and NER state chief ministers convened in October 2007 by the MDoNER to discuss issues relating to the LEP vis-à-vis the North Eastern Region (GoI/MDoNER 2007). For some notable reported examples of inter-ministerial dialogue, especially related to NER connectivity issues, see GOI/MDoNER (2007, 2009, 2010). A half-decade later, as timelines shift, many promises are still to be fulfilled. Cf. K.S. Rana (2016:111).

³⁷ Kolkata→Petrapole/Benapole→Dhaka→Sylhet→Sheola/Sutarkandi→Silchar→Imphal→Moreh/Tamu and on to Mandalay, entering Yunnan Province at Muse/Ruili (Ranjan & Uberoi 2013). For an informative account of the impressive infrastructure at the Muse/Ruili border crossing by way of contrast with the two functioning LCSs linking the NER and Myanmar, see Seshadri (2014: 46-51).

³⁸ For a summary of these restrictions with respect to NER-Myanmar trade, see Das (2016: 10-11); and Seshadri (2014: 51-56). It is still too early to assess the impact of important changes in November and December 2015 in the India-Myanmar trade regime, including the abolition of the ‘barter trade’ that had facilitated exchange of locally produced commodities, along with the transition from ‘Border Trade’ to ‘Normal Trade’ (Das 2016: 10-11).

³⁹ Estimates of the value of informal trade in 2014 vary widely, e.g., from Rs. 100 crores to Rs. 3,600 crores at Tamu/Moreh (Seshadri 2014: 40-42). At the Zokhawthar LCS in Mizoram, almost all trade is informal and unrecorded, with ‘miniscule’ officially recorded trade (ibid.: 44-45; Levesque & Rahman 2007). Volumes of illicit trade with Bangladesh, including cattle-smuggling, are also reported to be considerable (see Ghosh 2014).

unregulated trade through the NER come with security, health, safety and other risks, beyond revenue loss and the unfair competition of third-country goods – mostly Chinese and Thai – with locally manufactured products. But, while there is no denying the grim reality and security risks of weapons-, drugs-, and people-smuggling through well organized criminal and insurgent networks (Jacob 2010; Nag 2010; Seshadri 2014; Sur 2013), we may also concede that the primordial ties of kinship and community are equally essential to the building of robust trans-border cooperation zones ('border nodes'), as well as to the creation of a sense of cross-border or sub-regional community or identity, transcending local / parochial ethnicities (Jacob 2010). Vague as it may seem, the latter is an emotional/psychological component of sub-regional integration which should not be underestimated, nor misconstrued as evidence of a want of Indian patriotism in the NER (cf. K.S. Rana 2016: 110).

IV Reassessing the 'Economic Corridor' Development Strategy⁴⁰

In 1998, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) project, sponsored by the Asian Development Bank in 1992, had adopted the 'economic corridor' modality as its basic thrust. In one sweep, the ADB re-designated its ongoing and planned transport connectivity projects as 'economic corridors', creating thereby a new template for projects of regional and subregional economic integration. However, a decade or so later, in the sobering context of global economic downturn, the ADB initiated a critical review of the GMS 'corridor' experience. The outcome was the promulgation of a new 'strategic vision' for the GMS as it entered its third decade (ADB 2011). This re-formulation had several components which we have rehearsed in other contexts (Uberoi 2016b: 199-202) but will summarize briefly here.

Firstly, based on empirical experience, it was now recognized that transportation connectivity is a *necessary*, but certainly by no means a *sufficient*, condition for an 'economic corridor' as this institution is now sought to be defined. Simply put, an economic corridor needs to have a significant *economic* rationale and demonstrated potential over and above the mere connection of dots on a map. In a hard-nosed cost-benefit analysis, the short- or medium-term economic returns of investment in transportation infrastructure must be seen to justify the investment. By this calculus of viability, most of the GMS economic corridors proposed or under development – including,

⁴⁰ This section draws on the argument presented in Uberoi (2016b: 195-202). See also ADB (2015).

significantly, economic corridors connecting Myanmar with India's NER – would need to be re-designated as mere transportation corridors serving local or national, rather than sub-regional or regional development imperatives (Gautrin 2014; Srivastava 2011).

Secondly, and not unrelatedly, the new strategic vision sought to re-conceptualize the process whereby a transportation corridor is transformed into an economic corridor proper. In the early formulation, the transformation was seen to be enabled and catalyzed by 'logistics facilitation', that is, the implementation of the various 'soft' infrastructure measures that enable the speedy and efficient cross-border movement of goods and services (De 2014: 16).⁴¹ Trade facilitation measures remain an indispensable component of the new vision, of course, but along with these was added the development of the so-called 'back-end linkages' of rural infrastructure and small and medium enterprises in the hinterland of the corridor to 'widen and deepen' the productive capacity of the region through which the economic corridor would pass, and thereby make the impact of corridor development more inclusive and people-friendly (ADB 2012a; Brunner 2010, 2013; Srivastava 2011: 11). Indeed, more recent self-assessments of the outcomes of the various GMS Strategic Action Plans (SAPs) go further to emphasize such goals as the 'effective integration of less developed areas' (ADB 2015: 8), poverty alleviation projects focused on the control and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases (ibid.: 13), biodiversity conservation, and capacity-building, for the tourism sector in particular (ibid.).

Thirdly, and again drawing on the GMS experience, the new model emphasized the importance of local level trans-border collaboration involving local governments, business chambers and civil society groups (see also Wiemer 2009a, 2009b). This new way of thinking was institutionalized in 2008 in the GMS Economic Corridors Forum (ECF), head-quartered in Kunming, which aimed 'to enhance collaboration among areas along the corridors and among GMS forums and working groups', through 'improving interaction between public and private sectors and between central and local levels of governments.'⁴² Innovatively, the ECF included a Governors' Forum designed to

⁴¹ The non-tariff trade barriers and procedural obstacles to efficient cross-border trade are particularly in evidence in the South Asian region, one of the world's economically 'least integrated' regions. For a contemporary assessment, see UNESCAP & ADB (2014).

⁴² For a summary of the successive proceedings of the GMS Economic Corridor Forum, see: <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/related/31979/ECF-4-Synopses-Past-ECF-Meetings.pdf> (accessed on 21 April 2016).

‘enable coordination among governors or equivalent authority of the provinces along the economic corridors.’⁴³

Reviewing progress after a full round of ECF meetings among the six GMS partner countries, the 7th ECF Forum held in Kunming in June 2015 affirmed the importance of the ECF and its Governors’ Forum in the transformation of the original GMS transport corridors into ‘full-fledged economic corridors’ (ADB-GMS-ECF 2015: ¶ 5), and in ensuring ‘*the ownership of corridor development initiatives by local authorities, communities and private sector*’ (ibid.: ¶ 13, emphasis added; see also ADB 2015: 20). Moving ahead from the establishment of physical transportation and logistics corridors, the ECF-7 Joint Ministerial Statement recommended the establishment of Special Economic Zones at selected borders between GMS countries ‘to facilitate and attract the flows of people, goods, capital, technology and information and other factors of production, with [a] view [to] speeding up the development of these priority border areas and the sub-region as a whole’ (ibid.: ¶ 6). And, looking even further ahead, the ECF-7 proposed a path-breaking cross-border e-commerce initiative ‘to help Medium, Small and Micro-sized enterprises to better integrate into [the] international market, and increase the chance for SMEs to better participate in global supply chains with lower cost’ (ibid.: Annex B). This pronounced focus on the development of ‘border nodes’⁴⁴ in the typically under-developed peripheries of nation-states is necessarily a collaborative effort of local communities (state and civil society) on both sides of the international borders (see also ADB 2015: 20).

The concern for the encouragement of local stakeholder’ involvement and SME development shown in the reformulated ADB sub-regional integration strategy appears a far cry from the ‘*tianxia*’ grandiosity of the OBOR vision of land-based and maritime Eurasian connectivity (Jacob 2015) in which, as noted, Yunnan province had been officially assigned a bridgehead role. It is equally a far cry from Indian ‘establishment’ thinking on the potential of cross-border economic integration which has habitually been more comfortable pursuing pragmatic goals in a bilateral (country-to-country) context than within a consciously designed regional or sub-regional framework (see e.g. Arndt 2015;

⁴³ Joint Communiqué (‘Kunming Consensus’), First ECF, Kunming, 6 June 2008.

⁴⁴ The literature on economic corridors identifies four types of ‘nodes’ for development along the linear corridor pathway: ‘gateway nodes’ (at the beginning and end of the corridor); ‘border nodes’; ‘commercial nodes’ (industrial or agro-industrial); and ‘intersect nodes’ (where corridors intersect). See Uberoi (2016b: 212, n. 19); ADB (2012b: 28).

Lama 2011; K.S. Rana 2008, 2016: 115-17); and, more importantly has seen the charting of foreign policy, in its diplomatic, economic and security dimensions, as the exclusive prerogative of the central government in the constitutionally authorized division of labour between the Centre and the States.⁴⁵ Realities are more complex, however, as Jabin Jacob has pointed out in a recent article, and appearances deceptive (2016a): ‘communist’, ‘authoritarian’ and ‘ostensibly centralized’ China ‘has been far more open to decentralization than is commonly assumed’, and ‘in fact witnesses a constant cycle of centralization and recentralization of powers between the centre and the provinces under the Communist Party of China’, reminiscent of centre–province relations in imperial times (ibid.: 254, 256), while ‘democratic’ and ‘federal’ India ‘has been far more unitary than its federal structure mandated’ (ibid.: 254). In other words, it is increasingly evident that the balancing and reconciliation of local, state / provincial, national and global development imperatives is an ongoing challenge for both countries (Zhang 2015).

Meanwhile, from the early 1990s, coinciding with the almost simultaneous rise of ‘regional parties’ in coalition governments at the Centre, structural adjustment of the economy, and the articulation of the Look East Policy, Indian states have begun to play an increasing role in the scripting of foreign policy, with both negative (obstructionist) and positive (‘win-win’) outcomes (Bhaumik 2016b, 2016c; Tharoor 2016). Under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, this emerging reality has been provided with both a patina of theoretical respectability, and an institutional framework for conducting pragmatic ‘Act East’ activities.

V ‘Cooperative Competitive Federalism’: An Opportunity for the Eastern and North East States?

Just a year after the NDA won the May 2014 general election with a massive majority, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a well publicized visit to China.⁴⁶ The Prime Minister was widely applauded in the Indian media for taking a ‘firm’ stand on contentious strategic issues even as he successfully garnered some US\$22 billion in Chinese investment agreements (GOI/MEA 2015c). Curiously (or not so curiously), President Xi’s pet OBOR project found no public mention, but the BCIM-EC was invoked in several contexts and endorsed, albeit rather tepidly, in the final Joint

⁴⁵ *Constitution of India*, Seventh Schedule. See also Bhaumik (2016a); K.S. Rana (2016: 112); Tharoor (2016).

⁴⁶ For an assessment, see e.g. Mohanty (2015); K.S. Rana (2015); Uberoi (2016c: 33–36).

Statement (GOI/MEA 2015a: ¶ 36) which also agreed to expand the ‘positive list’ of tradable commodities through the three India–China Land Customs Stations at Nathu La (Sikkim), Lipu-Lekh Pass (Uttarakhand) and Shipki La (Himachal), and to designate Nathu La as a new route for Indian pilgrimage to Kailash-Mansarovar (Uberoi 2016c: 33).

One of the innovative aspects of this state visit was the inauguration of a dialogue forum, the India–China State / Provincial Leaders’ Forum (ICSPL).⁴⁷ The first such meeting held by India in any country, the ICSPL was described as ‘a new vehicle’ for advancing cooperation between the two countries through State / Provincial level cooperation in the fields of ‘trade and investment, agriculture, skill development, smart cities, urban planning, clean energy, education, tourism, [and] people-to-people exchanges’. The ICSPL Forum mechanism awarded official recognition and a positive ‘spin’ to emerging realities on the ground. Over the last decade, as noted, China’s ‘Going Out’ strategy had increasingly seen Chinese provinces and municipalities wooing the governments of industrialized or resource-rich Indian states and pressing for sister-state/province and sister-city relationships; and, conversely, some Indian states (Gujarat under Narendra Modi’s leadership notable among them) responding gleefully to the Chinese blandishments.

Present at the ICSPL Forum from the Indian side were the Chief Ministers of the states of Gujarat⁴⁸ and Maharashtra, the Mayors of Ahmedabad and Chennai, the Administrator of Hyderabad (Telengana) and the Acting Chairman of the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (CPAFFC 2015).⁴⁹ This empowerment of the states and union territories as active agents in the conduct of foreign (economic) policy was signaled institutionally by the creation of a Division of Liaison with State Governments within the Ministry of External Affairs, and doctrinally promoted as the external

⁴⁷ The ICSPL Forum mechanism was institutionalized in MoUs signed between the Ministry of External Affairs and the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and between the Ministry of External Affairs and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC). See GOI / MEA (2015b: ¶ 5, ¶ 18); also Roy (2015).

⁴⁸ The Gujarat Chief Minister, Ms Anandiben Patel, went on to lead a large business delegation to the highly developed coastal province of Guangdong, a denominated ‘sister-province’ of Gujarat, and to nearby Hong Kong. For a detailed account, see e.g. ‘Gujarat CM Takes Concrete Steps towards Fostering Ties with China.’ Available at: <http://www.thehoteltimes.in/index.php/directory/news-a-reports/1410-in-presence-of-honble-pm-of-india-gujarat-cm-signs-I-mous-in-hong-kong-and-china> (accessed on 25 May 2016).

⁴⁹ The Chief Minister of the state of Andhra Pradesh had visited China in the month preceding PM Modi’s visit in what was seen by some commentators as a curtain-raiser for the ICSPL (see e.g., Maini 2015).

dimension of the principle of ‘cooperative, competitive federalism’ (Keshavamurthy 2015), the internal dimension of which was the partial devolution of planning from the Centre to the States, registered in the replacement of the Planning Commission by a new institution, NITI Aayog, whose Governing Council includes all state Chief Ministers and Lieutenant Governors, among others (Uberoi 2016c: 32).

Understandably perhaps, given the unresolved India–China border dispute in India’s NE, none of the NE states were participants in the ICSPL Forum, lending weight to allegations of ‘double standards’ in the Union government’s investment strategy ‘that makes Chinese investments in Gujarat acceptable, but not acceptable if they are made or intended for [the] Northeast’ (Bhaumik 2014). Be that as it may, it is clear that the opportunistic and fortuitous investment partnering of Chinese provinces / municipalities and Indian states / union territories under the aegis of the ICSPL Forum is of a different order to the cooperation of border states and districts under the purview of the GMS Economic Corridors Forum mechanism which, as noted, primarily seeks to bring together local-level state, business and civil society interests to promote the development of ‘border nodes’ and efficient physical and logistic infrastructure for trans-border trade. Nonetheless, the ethos and goals of economic corridor development are also served by the co-promotion of non-proximate ‘gateway’, ‘commercial’, and ‘interchange’ nodes along the linear corridor route. Thus, Kunming has established sister-city relationships with Mandalay, Chittagong (on a BCIM ‘spur’) and, from 2013, a much-awaited partnership with Kolkata, the terminal gateway of the BCIM-EC. In fact, Kunming and Kolkata were already partnered in a civil society-led Track II dialogue forum, known as the Kolkata-to-Kunming (‘K2K’) Forum, founded in 2002 as a common platform for representatives of government departments, business chambers and interests, and academic and cultural organizations from West Bengal and other Eastern and North Eastern states.⁵⁰

But whether or not the NE states find a place, individually or collectively, at the high table, they have continued to press for the opening of more Integrated Check Posts, Land Customs Stations and

⁵⁰ See Borah (2014). Apart from areas of commercial cooperation (the tea industry is a notable example), the relatively ‘soft’ agenda of cooperation in tourism, culture, the arts, and education has had a prominent place in the K2K Forum. The K2K Forum is now a programme of the Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD), Kolkata, a think tank that has for many years been engaged in policy research on the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). For further details, see the CSIRD website at: www.csird.org.in.

‘border *haats*’⁵¹ along the borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and China (TAR), ‘pushing the envelope’ of established central government policy and supposed security constraints to engage economically, socially and culturally with their neighbours. Two recent examples must suffice here.

A major historical trading route linking Kunming and Kolkata is the so-called ‘Ledo’ or ‘Stilwell Road’ which was built at great human and financial cost during the last years of the Second World War to carry supplies from India to Free China (Pattnaik 2016; Thomas 2016).⁵² From the railhead of Ledo in Assam, it passes through a short stretch of the present state of Arunachal, crossing from the Nampong Land Customs Station through the Pangsau Pass into Myanmar, thence to Myitkyina (Kachin State), Bhamo, and along the wartime ‘Burma Road’ to Baoshan and Kunming. This was the so-called ‘Northern’ route of the three potential BCIM routes from Kunming to Kolkata. While the re-opening of the Stilwell Road to trade and traffic has been a long-term demand of the NER states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam,⁵³ and also strongly advocated by Yunnan delegations at BCIM Forum meetings over the years, it was consistently rejected by the Indian Government, ostensibly on grounds of China’s territorial claim to Arunachal Pradesh as ‘Southern Tibet’, as well as the disturbed state of Myanmar’s adjacent Kachin province and the presence there of insurgent groups from the Northeast, some of them purportedly nurtured by China. Other commentators have claimed that it was Myanmar that was hesitant to open this route, again on grounds of insurgency movements; and latterly that China, too, had reservations, despite the huge investment by Chinese firms in highway development in Northern Myanmar. Against this background, it came as a great surprise to many to learn of the arrival on 30 December 2015 at the Nampong Land Customs Station of a truckload of horticultural and other exhibits from Baoshan (Yunnan), destined for the Assam International Agri-Horti Show in Guwahati.⁵⁴ While this development was scarcely reported in the national media, it will most surely have had a demonstration effect: just 3-4 days overland journey from Baoshan to Guwahati!

⁵¹ Officially notified local markets, held at regular intervals, for the exchange of products and necessities between people on both sides of the border. Essentially the border *haat* is a skeuomorph institution, imitating the functions of traditional rural markets.

⁵² I thank Ambuj Thakur and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman for responding to my queries on this unprecedented event.

⁵³ Personal communication, Pradyut Bordoloi, former Congress MLA from Tinsukia Division in Northern Assam and Minister of Industries in the Tarun Gogoi Government. See also Jacob (2016a: 265).

⁵⁴ The Yunnan delegation had been invited by the North East Federation on International Trade (NEFIT). For reports and comments on this extraordinary event, after some 70 years of disuse, see e.g. Arpi (2016); *Arunachal Times* (2015); Barooah Pisharoty (2016); and Pattnaik (2016).

Another example of sub-national initiatives shaping Indian foreign policy comes from the state of Tripura, bordered by Bangladesh on three sides. Leveraging the commonality of Bengali culture and the goodwill generated by the historical role of Tripura state in supporting the Bangladesh Freedom Struggle in 1971, Tripura has managed to achieve the seemingly impossible objective of enabling the transit of goods from the Indian ‘mainland’ into India’s NER, initially on a case by case basis,⁵⁵ while simultaneously providing an outlet to the sea for North East products via the port of Chittagong. According to Subir Bhaumik, who has dignified this ‘proactive’ cross-border engagement with the title, ‘the Agartala Doctrine’, the Tripura case illustrates how Indian states can have a greater say in the conduct of national foreign policy as ‘responsible stakeholders’, especially on issues that affect them directly, without undermining larger national interests, as had been perceived to be the case far too often in the bygone era of coalition politics (Bhaumik 2016b: 5; Tharoor 2016).

In fact, initiated by the state, by private institutions or by civil society organizations, cross-border contacts between the NER states and neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar are rapidly growing, whether in the cultural field (as in the Pangsau Pass winter festival in Arunachal Pradesh, or the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland), or in the social sector (as patients from Myanmar seek to avail of medical treatment from well-known hospitals in Manipur, or patients from Bangladesh travel to Kolkata or to Shillong for medical treatment). Similarly, many Myanmar students are studying in schools and institutions in the NER. There is clearly a huge scope for local-level cross-border cooperation in services and in the social sector, even as the security- and politically-driven fencing of borders against ‘infiltrators’ proceeds apace. The project of ‘border *haats*’ (markets) for the exchange of local produce (Ranjan 2014), enthusiastically welcomed by state and local governments, holds the promise of restoring or legitimizing traditional systems of exchange, and contributing to social development on the national peripheries.⁵⁶ Regrettably, the pace of development of the requisite infrastructure for border *haats* appears to be slow and half-hearted, the positive rhetoric notwithstanding, with the result that the ‘informal’ cross-border exchange of commodities and necessities continues relatively unchecked, with all the risks involved.

⁵⁵ Huge machinery for the Palatana power plant in 2012 (see *The Economic Times* (2016); and urgently required diesel and food-grains, including 35,000 tons of rice, in 2015.

⁵⁶ For instance, the infrastructure created for the border *haats* could also be utilized for clinics for the local population from both sides of the border, as could facilities provided under the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), handled by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

VI The BCIM Economic Corridor and the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum: Does the Forum still have a Role to Play?

At this point, after our long peregrination, we return to the pragmatics of BCIM cooperation and the specific question of whether or not the Track II BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum has become redundant following the official-level commitment of May 2013 to explore the potential for creating a BCIM Economic Corridor. The answer depends to an extent on one's understanding of the role and function of so-called Track II dialogue. In this regard, it must be said, there are varying and contradictory views.

In one perspective, the major function of a Track II dialogue is to prepare the ground for Track I inter-governmental engagement. Once the latter objective is achieved, the scaffolding can be safely removed, leaving it to official mechanisms to get on with the job. In the case of the BCIM, this track-change transition has been unusually slow, for reasons rehearsed in other contexts,⁵⁷ with uncertainty remaining even now [May 2016] as to whether or not the Indian government is fully committed to the project. Indeed, the signs are somewhat ambivalent and, as mentioned, the encapsulation of the BCIM within China's OBOR project has undoubtedly complicated both public and official perceptions (Uberoi 2016c).

Alternatively, some authorities argue that the conduct of Track II dialogue independently or parallel to official-level dialogue can serve a useful function, encouraging creative 'out-of-the-box' thinking, and generally acting as a confidence-building mechanism. This is particularly so in conflict situations or when the relations between the countries concerned have been strained,⁵⁸ as has intermittently been the case between India and the three BCM partners, China in particular, in the years since the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum came into being, as well as between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Rohingya issue, and more recently between China and Myanmar. It is a matter of observation that both China and India over the last quarter century have each endeavoured to exclude or marginalize the other from the regional and sub-regional forums in which they have

⁵⁷ See e.g., Mishra (2015, 2016). For an early comparison and contrast of the BCIM initiative with the Russia-India-China (RIC) Trilateral dialogue, which also started as a Track II project about the same time, see Uberoi (2008).

⁵⁸ See in general Kaye (2007); also the excellent and still relevant analysis by B. Raman (2003) in reference to India-Pakistan relations.

membership or a leading role, even as they may cooperate opportunistically in various global forums (Arndt 2015; Rana & Uberoi 2012: 71-90). This is one of the reasons why the founders of the K2K Forum (see above) insist that the Track II status of the K2K Forum and its *sub-national* state / province cooperation framework are positive assets which to some extent, if not entirely (see Bhaumik 2014), serve to insulate the project from the inevitable ups-and-downs of the state-to-state relations of two rising Asian powers, thereby enabling ‘graduated’ and ‘sectoral’ progress, step-by-step, towards the still-distant goal of BCIM sub-regional integration (Mishra 2011; 2015; 2016).

But there is a third and mediating model to be considered. In this model, Track II dialogue is not necessarily rendered redundant by Track I engagement; nor is it simply a stand-in for Track I, in cases where inter-state relations are fraught and fragile, or too tendentiously in the eye of the public media. It is rather conceived as a valuable supplement and complement to Track I activities – perhaps even the key to ultimate success – by mobilizing and leveraging regional public opinion. Interestingly, an initiative of this type has been evolving, quite independently of the global economic corridor discourse (discussed in Section IV above), in an NER civil society organization known as the Asian Confluence (see DJF 2015), one of several such efforts in different domains that seek to encourage cross-border dialogue and engagement outside the narrow security and diplomacy paradigms. Reflecting on the slow progress on the ground of several of India’s regional and sub-regional projects of the last two decades (the LEP, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, etc.), this conclave calls for ‘complementary and supplementary efforts by the Civil Society at the level of the community and the people’, to draw on the ‘common history’ of the NER with the South East Asian neighbourhood so as to ‘catalyze the process of restoring our shared heritage of close socio-cultural, spiritual, economic and strategic bonding that existed not too long back, prior to colonization by foreign powers’ (Shrivastav 2015: ii). As articulated by spokespersons for the Asian Confluence, ‘government’ (central, state and local) in the ‘first space’, and ‘business’ in the ‘second space’ are both built on and sustained by the ground-swell of the ‘third space of the people’ (civil society initiatives), working together towards the common goal of integration with the near neighbourhood (ibid.).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Kishan Rana (2016) records other instances wherein Track I initiatives have sought the support of non-governmental organizations.

But, to return to our theme of the future of the BCIM Regional Forum. Initially it had appeared that the BCIM Regional Forum had *de facto* become redundant with the announcement of the BCIM-EC project, with financial stringency a sufficient excuse.⁶⁰ But there are also some sound pragmatic reasons for the continuation of the Track II sub-regional dialogue under present circumstances.

To begin with, the inter-governmental BCIM-EC Joint Study Group is an *ad hoc* body whose work will come to an end with the submission of the Joint Study Group Report for approval by the respective governments. Moreover, if and when approved by all four countries, the physical and institutional creation of the BCIM-EC would inevitably be a long-term process, involving many steps and intense negotiations among the four partner countries, along with a massive financial outlay. In the meantime, it would be important that the momentum of discussion among the partners be kept up, the BCIM-EC project promoted to – and defended among – a wider circle of stakeholders, and new ideas generated in the process.⁶¹ In other words, the BCIM Regional Forum can play a vital mobilization role, both internally and externally.

Secondly, and relatedly, the BCIM-EC is fundamentally an economic project, conceived within, let us say, a broad ‘trade facilitation’ / ‘ease of doing business’ framework, and ultimately to be assessed on this basis. To be sure, the terms of reference (ToR) of the BCIM-EC Joint Study Group Report are not narrowly economic, but include address to issues of sustainable development, human and social development and poverty alleviation, and people-to-people contacts, including in the tourism sector. While such themes are typically construed as ‘soft’ and well-meaning ‘add-ons’, subsidiary to the ‘hard’ issues of trade facilitation, connectivity, and finance and investment to be tackled at the inter-governmental level, we have noted that recent rethinking on the economic corridors development strategy has emphasized the importance of the back-end development of the corridor hinterland on the one hand, and the sense of ‘ownership’ of the project by local stakeholders on the other (Section IV).

⁶⁰ As it happened, with the work of the BCIM-EC JSG still under way, it would be another two years before the scheduled 12th meeting of the BCIM Regional Forum took place in Yangon in February 2015, concluding the 3rd round of quadrilateral meetings. The mooted 13th Regional Forum meeting in Kunming, originally scheduled for January 2016, is pending [as of May 2016] and, it must be said, not for want of effort on the part of Yunnan provincial government officials.

⁶¹ That China is well aware of the importance of media awareness and exposure is evident, e.g., in the recent media-focused international conference on ASEM (see Ramachandran 2016), and in the resolve of the Yunnan government to press for a second, but this time ‘media’-focused, BCIM Car Rally (see 12th BCIM ‘Yangon Statement’).

Thirdly, and again relatedly, when observed through the lens of Centre–State/Province dynamics in both India and China,⁶² the original *sub-regional* rationale of the BCIM Regional Forum, namely, the co-development of the relatively backward peripheral areas of contiguous nation-states through the opening up of cross-border trade has merit in its own right from the perspective of the inclusive development of border regions (KPMG-FICCI 2015). This can and should extend to consideration of other important areas of cross-border cooperation, such as disease control, environmental and heritage conservation, the promotion of sustainable eco-tourism, water- and energy-sharing, human resource and skill development, and the recovery and documentation of the palimpsest of shared arts, crafts, cultures and ethnicities in a sub-region that is now divided by national borders.

Finally, coming into being long before China's OBOR project, the BCIM has by now become a highly visible test case of India's sincerity in pursuing the much-touted ideal of regional / sub-regional connectivity in a multi-lateral cooperation format. India's credibility is seriously at stake. At this delicate point in time, as the Look East Policy (LEP) takes on a more robust shape as the Act East Policy (AEP), India should surely not risk incurring the opprobrium of the partner countries and of the sub-region of India that is centrally involved (NER and West Bengal) by conspicuously soft-pedaling the BCIM Regional Forum process. Neighbouring Bangladesh in particular is deeply invested in the BCIM-EC project of opening overland communication with the markets of southwestern China, in the associated redevelopment of the port of Chittagong (a traditional outlet of southern NER states to the Bay of Bengal), and in the long-term development of new Deep Sea Ports in the Cox's Bazaar area.⁶³ In other words, as some commentators have argued (to my mind convincingly), the pre-existing BCIM roadmap may actually provide an excellent opportunity for India to *cooperate* at a sub-national level in one small but significant segment of China's OBOR project (Bhoothalingam 2016; Saran & Rej 2016) which, albeit proposed and propelled by China (Yunnan Province), has been genuinely consultative over a decade and a half and where, with forethought and planning, India's economically disadvantaged NER has potentially much to gain.⁶⁴

⁶² Arguably in Myanmar, too.

⁶³ The geographical anomaly of the inclusion in the Joint Statement of the First BCIM-EC JSG Meeting of Chittagong as a BCIM-EC node has already been noted, but there is no doubt that the multi-modal road/rail/waterway connectivity between Chittagong and Agartala, which is now becoming a reality, would be a major gain for the two southern states of the NER, Tripura and Mizoram.

⁶⁴ This was also the general consensus of two roundtable expert discussions conducted soon after the 'official' OBOR vision document was unveiled at the end of March 2015: 'China's Silk Road Proposal, the BCIM Economic Corridor and Related Issues: A Discussion Meeting', Institute of Chinese Studies, 16 April 2015; and 'One Belt One Road Initiative of China', Indian Council of World Affairs, 25 May 2015.

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The Manmohan Singh–Li Keqiang Joint Statement of May 2013 was an ‘in principle’ acceptance of the idea of a BCIM Economic Corridor. Its realization will be a question of resource mobilization on the one hand, and political will on the other. In the face of widespread mistrust of China’s strategic and economic ambitions in the South Asian neighbourhood, complicated now by the OBOR factor, political will cannot be taken for granted: it will need to be promoted and sustained by the ‘groundswell’ of public sentiment, particularly in the sub-region of India that is directly involved. The basic road-map for the BCIM-EC project, i.e., putting in place adequate physical transportation infrastructure, a slew of trade facilitation measures and intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms, is already at hand in a range of economic corridor projects in Asia and globally (see De 2013). The BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum has done its job, and set the ball rolling. But, having reached this point (after an inordinately long gestation), the BCIM project should not be allowed to wither on the vine of bureaucratic indifference and diplomatic timidity. The BCIM Forum has an important role to play in fostering the idea of a BCIM subregion, in keeping the BCIM project in the public mind, in confidence-building through the quotidian ups-and-downs of bilateral relations, and in initiating modest demonstration projects (such as the K2K Car Rally of 2013) to that end.

Participants in the 12th BCIM Regional Forum (Yangon 2015) had privately confided that the old format of Forum meetings appeared to have run its course. They felt that if the Forum were to continue as supplement or complement to the long-term project of creating the BCIM Economic Corridor, its focus and format would need to change accordingly. To this end, a pragmatic, project-based approach to issues of common sub-regional concern would appear to be the best way forward, keeping up the spirit of dialogue and pressing on with a range of practical and publicly visible activities that would create the enabling environment and requisite momentum for sub-regional integration at this geo-strategic and geo-economic junction of South, Southeast and Eastern Asia.

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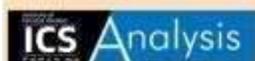
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