

**Can off tracking Belt and Road Initiative
(BRI) cost India's gain from BCIM?**

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Abstract

BCIM began its journey as a “track two” initiative in 1999, with an aim to bring better coordination in the flow of products, services, energy, investments, technology and people to people contact within the countries of India, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. At the heart of the BCIM is the Economic Corridor which covers a distance of more than 2800km which seeks to connect the major nodal points along with the remote areas of the member countries. However, BCIM trajectory is hit hard by the skirmishes that have been between India and China due to rolling of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) and India's subsequent decision to off track from Chinese led BRI. The Chinese Foreign Ministry website no longer list BCIM as a project covered under BRI umbrella.

The fact that BCIM predates BRI and is of extremely significant as an economic venture, this paper takes a close look at BCIM from an Economic Corridor perspective, thereby explaining its ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ views and zones of development in an Economic corridor. The paper will analyse not only the gains that India can have in terms of connectivity and development of its Northeast but also to exploit the complementarities existing in trade amongst the members involved. Also, the paper explores whether BCIM is necessary as a counter weight against the Chinese ambition in South Asia or if the Chinese will be able to join the dots of BRI bypassing India? In the end, the paper will evaluate the situation if India's decision not to join BRI will cost BCIM or BCIM will keep its momentum as a separate track.

Keywords

BCIM, Economic Corridor, BRI, China, India

Introduction

BCIM began its journey as a “track two” initiative with an aim to bring better coordination in the flow of products, services, energy, investments, technology and people to people contact within the countries of India, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Primarily, it was established as a Track II dialogue to create a sub-regional ‘cooperation zone’ or ‘growth zone’ which would link the relatively backward regions stretching from land-locked areas of Southwest China to North-eastern India along with the adjoining Least Developed Countries (LDCs) of Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The idea of BCIM was mooted in the collaborative seminar organized by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts along with the Institute of Chinese Studies and academic partner institutions from Yunnan and Sichuan province of China in 1998. The vision for the BCIM economic corridor was first put forth by Professor Che Zhimin, the then Deputy Director of the Economic and Technological Research Centre of the Yunnan Provincial People’s Government, during a visit to India in November 1998 (The Diplomat 2015). Uberoi (2013) has pointed out that while placing her proposition on the idea of BCIM, Professor Che Zhimin has observed some of the special characteristics of BCIM sub-regional economic corridor as follows:

- (a) BCIM can be termed as the meeting point of ‘the three markets of China, South East Asia and South Asia’ and hence it has huge market potential.
- (b) Though the region is of varied topography and there is acute deficiency of infrastructure, yet the region is rich in natural resources which can become the focal point for large scale development in the coming years.
- (c) As there is difference in the economic levels and endowment of natural resources in the region this presents the perfect condition for complementarities which will ensure the flow of trade between the regions.
- (d) According to Professor Zhimin the region is isolated from the world market and is relatively poor as is found in the southwest parts of China, north eastern parts of India also in the both countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar

- (e) Professor Zhimin further elaborated that each of the countries in this initiative is pursuing regionalism through their own groups like that of ASEAN, SAARC and would further like to get integrated with the world market (Uberoi 2013:7-8)

The forum was formally constituted in a meeting in Kunming in the Yunnan province of China in 1999. Hence BCIM is also known as Kunming Initiative. The establishment of BCIM can be seen as “Growth Zones” initiative. The idea of growth zones implies cooperation amongst countries for development of a geographically contiguous region consisting of a part or the whole of each of the member countries. “It brings together resources of the neighbouring countries to foster economic development of the member countries. They provide a unique opportunity to blend cooperation in trade, investment, transport and communication in a comprehensive manner, in a planned way” (Rahman *et al* 2007:2). Various growth zones like South China Growth Triangle, Southern Growth triangle have figured prominently as vital growth zones. Since China’s South-western province, India’s Northeast along with Myanmar and Bangladesh are contiguous areas, the idea of growth zone for BCIM seems to be most appropriate. The idea was to forward the goals of connectivity, trade and people to people contact in the region.

In 2013, the Kolkata to Kunming car rally which covered a distance of more than 3000km added a huge momentum to BCIM forum. Once the journey was completed the idea of BCIM as Economic Corridor was put on track (Dailystar 2014).

The Concept of Economic Corridor

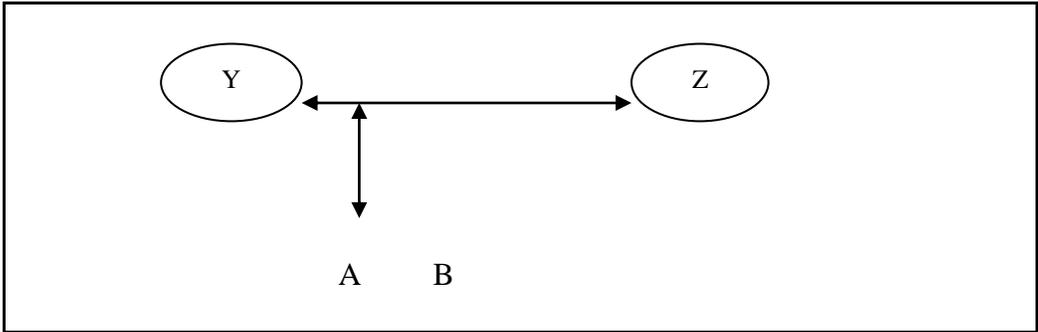
According to the Brookings (2013), Economic Corridors are meant to generate economic activities by attracting business in a contiguous region based on an efficient transport system.

Apart from efficient transportation and development of infrastructure, in long term there can be the benefit of efficient access to industrial production units with decreased transportation cost along with improved delivery and low inventory cost. Establishment of a corridor is a holistic approach which leads to cooperation not only in transport but trade, energy and communication of the concerned region. Thus, the political boundaries in an economic corridor cease and development steps in.

The concept of Economic Corridor primarily gained the attention of the policy makers with Asian Development Bank’s(ADB) support to the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The major flagship programmes of Greater Mekong economic corridor consist of the East-West Economic Corridor, North-South Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridor which criss-crosses the region connecting border areas, production centre and demand centres. The major achievement of the GMS program is not only restricted to improved transport connectivity and development of infrastructure but also taking those benefits to the land remote and geographically disadvantageous locations of the region (ADB 2018:2).

In the development of economic corridor there are five stages. The first stage is that of a Transport Corridor, followed by Transport and Trade Facilitation Corridor. The third stage is Logistics Corridor, the fourth Urban Development Corridor, and lastly the fifth stage is an Economic Corridor (ADB 2011:1-2). The journey from Transport to Economic Corridor happens through improved infrastructure and logistic. However, the stages may not mutually exclusive to each other (Ibid). In understanding the concept of Economic Corridor, it is relevant to identify the narrow and the board view of the corridor. A corridor starts with the development of a tool of physical connectivity which may be a road or a highway connecting two or more nodes. It is therefore natural to see the highway or road as a corridor. While this view of the corridor appears practical, yet it is narrow. The broader view explains that a corridor comprises not only the highway or the roadway connecting two or more nodes but also development of the areas surrounding the highway that uses it. (ADB 2011:6-7). Figure I show the narrow and broad view of an Economic Corridor.

FIGURE I: BROAD AND NARROW VIEW OF ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

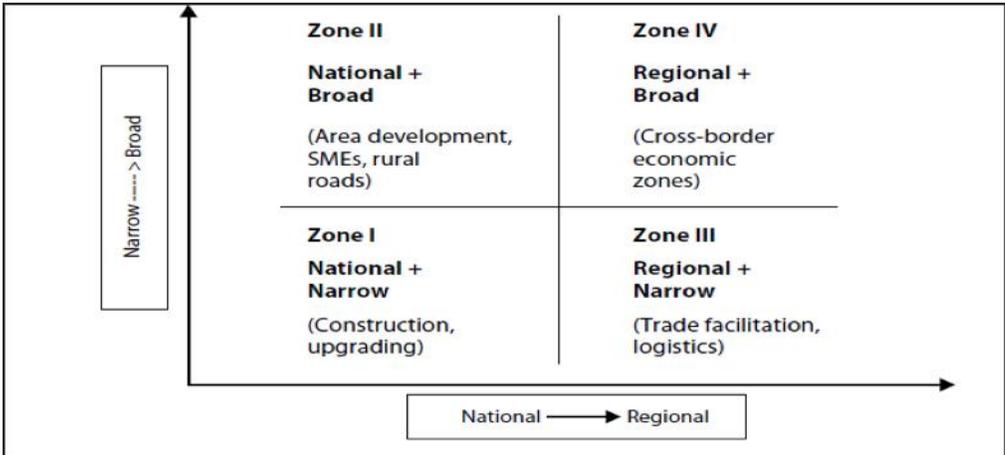


Source: Regional Corridors Development in Regional Cooperation, ADB 2011, pg-6

In figure I, there are two points Y and Z as the nodes that the highway (shown by arrow) connects. A narrow view of the Economic Corridor would be that the highway connects just the two nodes with each other. A broader view would mean that, if someone wants to travel from the point A to point B, which are lying off the highway, there are two options which are available. Firstly, there is a choice of going directly in between the points of A and B or availing the highway for reaching the same. One can only take the highway when the cost of travelling from A to B on highway is less than the cost of going directly from A to B otherwise. Therefore, all the points off the highway like A and B that satisfy the same relation will be deemed to be part of the Corridor, which takes the broader view of the corridor. (ADB 2011:6-7)

Apart from the narrow and the broad view of the Economic Corridor, there is the national and regional dimension. The national economic corridor is those that are country specific and are limited within the territorial limit of a country. Whereas a regional project would comprise projects that embody ‘cross-border spill overs’ which may require joint or coordinated actions by two or more countries in the region. (ADB 2011:4). Putting together the broad-narrow and national-regional dimension, Economic Corridor are divided into four zones. The figure 2, shows the four zones of the Economic corridor:

FIGURE II: ZONES OF ECONOMIC CORRIDOR



Source: Regional Corridors Development in Regional Cooperation, ADB 2011, pg-11

Figure II which is based on ADB (2011) represents the quadrants/zones in the making of an Economic Corridor. Zone I represent the initial stage for the establishment of the Economic Corridor where there would be construction of new roadways and up gradation of the existing roads. The intensity of such construction is massive and the duration lasts long. This enables the possibility of linking the country to the region. Zone II represents those initiatives involving the national Government for widening the corridor. Main focus rest on Area Development Programmes through urbanization, improving and promoting urban infrastructure generating industrial development along with enhancing business climate and also creating capacities for Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Improvement in rural roadways which can be connected to the Corridor is also included. Zone III in the above diagram represents ‘transformation of national into regional corridor’. The major objective is to improve the mobility of people, goods, and resources ‘from point to point’, where the points are usually urban centres located across the borders. This zone represents a narrow view because the focus is on the node or urban centres as areas in between the nodes do not have high priority. Hence as a result there is less focus on the rural and semi-rural areas. Zone IV is the last stage of the development of the Economic Corridor, in this transition from national and narrow corridor to that of broad and regional corridor. This process is not very easy to achieve and hence requires coordinated efforts from the countries involved.

BCIM -The Economic Corridor

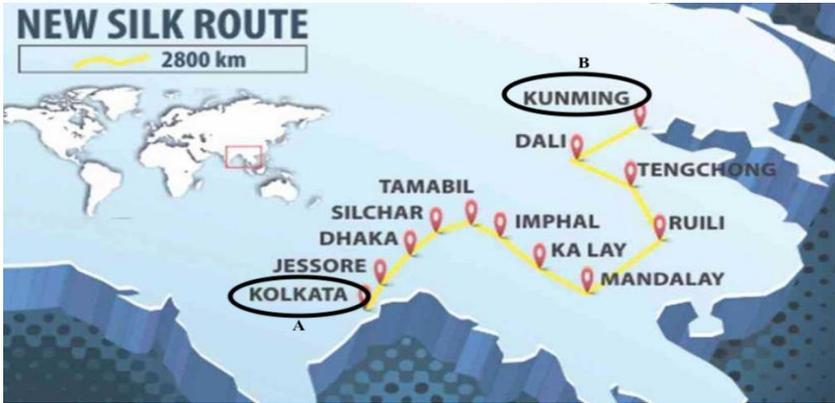
The region of BCIM represents a total geographical area of 13.7 million square covering 9 percent of world area. The population of the region is estimated to be 2.7 billion roughly constituting 40 percent of the world population. Together the GDP of the four constituent countries is estimated at US\$5.7 trillion representing 10 percent of the total GDP of the world (Rahman and Kim 2012:167). Two economies of India and China in the grouping, happens to be among the largest economies of the world.

At the heart of the BCIM initiative is the route connecting Kolkata (In India) with Kunming (in China). The connection between the two countries will be made by crossing over the countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar. The aim of the corridor is facilitation of connectivity and trade linkages between the underdeveloped and landlocked areas of India’s North-eastern region and

South-western region of China. The idea to link was made way back in 2006, when the Indian PM Dr. ManMohan Singh, proposed the same during the Chinese President’s visit to India (Observer Research Foundation 2017). Thereafter the idea received more importance during the visit of Chinese Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Mr. Li Keqiang, in 2013 and agreed to establish a Joint Study Group (JSG) taking into consideration other parties of BCIM. Later on, with Dr. Manmohan Singh’s visit to China, both the parties agreed to hold the first meeting of the JSG (Government of India, 2013). As of now, the JSG has held three Joint meetings, the last one being in Kolkata in 2017 (The Hindu 2017).

The proposed route of 2,800-km long Economic Corridor will traverse from Kolkata via Benapole/Petrapole on the India-Bangladesh border to Dhaka and Sylhet before again entering India near Silchar in Assam. Thereafter the route will touch Imphal in Manipur and merge with Tamu-Kalewa friendship road located in Myanmar. After crossing Mandalay and Lashio the road will reach Kunming via Ruili, Longling and Dali (Observer Research Foundation 2016). The road is currently motor able except for two stretches of 200 km each. The first stretch is from Silchar to Imphal in India, while the second one is from Kalewa to Monywa in Myanmar. Both sectors are under repair. (ibid). It is intended that the four nations wants to revive the ancient route known as the “Southern Silk Road”, which made journey between India and China shortest and also served as the highway for merchants carrying gold and valuables in the Twelfth century. Therefore, the four nations are aiming at transforming the route into a profitable economic corridor (IDSA, 2014).

FIGURE III: Proposed route of BCIM Economic Corridor



Source: Dailystar.net (Nodes A and B shown by author)

In figure III, the two node points are depicted by A and B representing Kolkata and Kunming respectively, besides connecting the above nodes, other major nodes that are significant on the route is Dali in China, Mandalay in Myanmar, the route then crosses over to enter India through Imphal in Manipur and crosses through Silchar in Assam and enters Bangladesh to connect major centre of Dhaka. The route finally ends at Kolkata in West Bengal, India. As it is evident from the above diagram that the route links several of the important centres which are considered valuable for trade because these major centres can serve as a connecting link for other smaller or remote production sites with major trading hubs. The robust connectivity can enable smooth flow of inputs and outputs in the region.

As one of the main aims of the BCIM forum is to uplift the major underdeveloped areas out of their present state of condition, the Economic Corridor when materialised would provide vital connectivity and trade linkages to the underdeveloped regions of India and China. For India development of northeast is of vital to lift the region out of poverty. A major reason for the underdeveloped nature of the region is that of poor connectivity. Therefore, if the BCIM EC is able to link northeast India with the Southeast Asian and East Asian market then this can create lots of opportunity for the people of the region. Northeast region is endowed with natural resources and represents a plethora of various ethnic tribes. The region can be the benefiter of the Economic Corridor as it can create more opportunities in tourism, agricultural trade and also people to people contact. Similarly, for China, Yunnan province is land locked and is isolated from the growth and development of the coastal areas. The region of Yunnan shares about 4000km with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Therefore, the Chinese side seeks to make Yunnan as the bridgehead of their policy to connect with South and Southeast Asia. (Rana& Uberoi, 2012). As Myanmar and Bangladesh are concerned, these countries provide the much-needed connectivity with the region. Much needed port connectivity to the north eastern and Yunnan province can be provided through the Sittwe port of Myanmar and Chittagong port of Bangladesh.

The implementation of the BCIM Economic Corridor will provide the member countries to exploit the complementarities that exist amongst them in trade. China is world famous in manufacturing goods, for India service export is its forte, Myanmar is exporter of primary and

forest-based products and has abundant labour. Bangladesh specializes in export of garments and clothing (Sahoo & Bhunia 2014). Thus, the countries involved are expected to gain from more extensive market access for the goods and services. Through the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers along with development of supply and value chains, based on comparative advantage, can bring huge benefit to the region of BCIM (The Daily Star 2014). Tables 1,2,3,4 shows top 5 products that make up the trade profile of the BCIM countries.

Table 1: Bangladesh’s top Export and Import from BCIM group *

COUNTRIES	EXPORT		IMPORT	
China	Textile and clothing Hides and Skin Footwear	Plastic and rubber Animals	Textile & clothing Mach and Elec Metals	Chemicals Plastic and rubber
India	Textile and clothing Vegetables Metals Fuels	Food product	Textile & clothing Vegetables Mach & Elec Chemicals	Transportation
Myanmar	Chemicals Textile and Clothing Fuels Food Product	Plastic and rubber	Woods Vegetables Animals Food Product	Textile & clothing

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), World Bank, *Data available for 2015

Table 2: China's top Export and Import from BCIM group

COUNTRIES	EXPORT		IMPORT	
Bangladesh	Textile and Clothing Mach & Elec Metals Chemicals	Fuels	Textile and Clothing Hides and Skin Food Product	Animals Footwear
India	Mach & Elec Chemicals Metals	Textile and Clothing Plastic & rubber	Chemicals Glass and Stone Minerals	Metals Textile and Clothing
Myanmar	Mach & Elec Textile and Clothing Metals	Transportation Chemicals	Fuel Minerals Metals	Plastic and Rubber Vegetables

Table 3: India's top Export and Import from BCIM group

COUNTRIES	EXPORT		IMPORT	
Bangladesh	Textile and Clothing Transportation Mach and Elec	Fuel Chemicals	Textile and Clothing Metals Plastic and Rubber	Transportation Food Product

China	Chemicals Fuels Mineral	Textile & clothing Mach and Elec	Mach and Elec Chemicals Metals	Plastic and Rubber Textile
Myanmar	Chemicals Fuel Food Product	Animals Mach and Elec	Vegetables Woods Metals	Plastic and Rubber Animals

Table 4: Myanmar's top Export and Import from BCIM group

COUNTRIES	EXPORT		IMPORT	
Bangladesh	Vegetables Metals animals	Woods Food product	Chemicals Textile and Clothing	Metals Transportation
China	Vegetables Fuels	Food Product Metals Animals	Mach & Elec Chemicals Textile and Clothing	Metals Transportation
India	Vegetables Woods Metals	Food product Plastic and rubber	Chemicals Food Product Fuel	Mach & Elec Transportation

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank, (2018)

From the above tables 1,2,3,4 shows the export and import of top five products which are traded amongst the BCIM countries. From the tables, it is evident that majority of exports of Bangladesh and Myanmar are agricultural products, though Bangladesh exports considerable textile as well. For Myanmar, vegetables and wood product make up the trade basket. As far as India is concerned, the major exports of India are of textile, chemical products and machines to

the region, while China's export mainly consists of machinery and electrical goods and textile and clothing. Hence there is complementarity of goods that the BCIM region trade. Thus, textiles and clothing and machinery and electrical goods (marked in bold) consists substantial portion of the trade in the region. Thus, the countries in the region can increase their export capacity by connecting with each other, this can happen especially in the Textile and Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector. There are significant value chain linkages between India and Bangladesh and between Bangladesh and China in the above sector. The sector is important due to the large-scale employment generation and export. China and India have the world's largest and second largest textile industry (Ministry of Textile, Government of India 2020). Bangladesh is the world's second largest Readymade Garment (RMG) exporter, after China. 81% of the country's exports are from the RMG sector, and the textile and apparel sector contribute around 20% to Bangladesh's GDP (Sultan et.al 2020). Further value chains can be made robust by reducing cost of imports by reducing the time of clearances in exports and import. For Bangladesh-China, the investors from China get quota free market, tax exemption facilities, tariffs advantages for RMG sector investment, plus the low cost of labour has attracted the Chinese investors (Hossain et.al 2018). In a big move to boost trade between China and Bangladesh, the former has announced that 97 percent of the Bangladeshi goods will be marked at zero tariff from July 2020. (The Economic Times 2020)

The strategic location of Chittagong port in Bangladesh is of special importance. Chinese land locked South-western region is located closer to Chittagong in comparison to the Chinese port of Guangzhou. However, in 2020 Chittagong port was opened to container cargo ship from Kolkata to reach Agartala. This reduced the distance and time considerably. Agartala is just 200km from the port of Chittagong (The Week, 2020). Thus, the Chittagong port will open up new vistas for the land locked North-east India.

BCIM has huge potential in terms of earning revenue from tourism and energy trade. Energy trade can be possible in the region because the south-western provinces of China (Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan), the North-eastern region of India, Yadana and the Shwe gas fields in Myanmar have huge reserves of natural gas. In addition to natural gas, these sub-regions have huge reserves of other fuel like coal, petroleum. There is existence of abundant water resources in the sub-region, which could be utilised to generate hydroelectricity for the industrial sector. Numerous streams dotted in the entire Northeast of India can be successfully utilised for this

purpose. Therefore, in this regard, the BCIM region has an opportunity to establish a regional forum to assess electricity generation capacity and mechanisms, and suggest the forms and norms of electricity cooperation and generation in the region.

As far as tourism is concerned, member countries could reap benefits through sub-regional cooperation. The entire region of BCIM is dotted with number of tourist destinations. Particularly these destinations are spread through India, China and Bangladesh. India-China and India-Bangladesh can develop a circuit of religious tourism. Rich biological resources along with wide range of cultural diversity can attract tourists not only from the region but also around the world. By developing and facilitating travelling among the member countries, this sub-regional cooperation could also play an important role in developing eco-tourism and religious tourism

Belt and Road Initiative and BCIM

A connectivity road map linking Asia with Africa and Europe was projected in September 2013, by China under the 'One Road One Belt' (OROB) Initiative which subsequently came to known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative is the brainchild of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Initially the OBOR policy was meant to be a framework for better cooperation between Central Asia and China's western provinces. As China's western provinces are economically behind its eastern provinces, the new 'Silk Road' strategy was a way to increase trade and cooperation for its western provinces. However, the policy has evolved into a broader strategy for China's engagement with the world (Chibber 2017:3). The OROB blueprint encompasses over 60 countries, which account for 60 percent of the world's population and a collective GDP of 33 percent of the world. Six important economic corridors are identified to be included in the OBOR project. These include New Eurasian Land Bridge, China - Mongolia - Russia Corridor, China - Central Asia - West Asia Corridor, China - Indochina Peninsula Corridor, China - Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar Economic Corridor (China-British Business Council 2015). It also includes the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) that links East Asia and Southeast Asia with West Asia and Africa across the Indian Ocean (Uberoi 2016:1).

Though the Chinese have insisted India to join the BRI, the Indian side has decided to refrain from the BRI project. India boycotted the first Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in 2017 and also second Belt and Road Forum held in 2019. India is the only South Asian country having to do so. In the second BRF, the BCIM has not been enlisted by the Chinese side to be considered a part of the BRI. Most recently in the Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO) meeting held in November 2020, India did not join the other members of the SCO in backing the Chinese lead BRI (India Today 2020).

The resistance of India stems from the fact that there are apprehensions that Chinese might misuse BRI as a geostrategic leverage. India has refused to be part of BRI is due to involvement of China with Pakistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, (CPEC) which is a flagship project under BRI between Xinjiang in China and Gwadar in Balochistan that goes through PoK and Gilgit-Baltistan. Second, India looks at CPEC as a ‘unilateral’ initiative from China and thus directly transgresses its sovereignty (Singh 2019:72-73). According to Baruah (2018) New Delhi is worried that Chinese-funded infrastructure projects may run afoul of accepted international standards and norms; grant China greater geopolitical influence and undue economic and diplomatic leverage over the policymaking decisions of India’s neighbours in ways that disadvantage India (Baruah, 2018:13) More over the Maritime Silk Route which the Chinese are talking about as part of the OBOR is also seen by India with apprehension, because Maritime Silk Route is often equated with the ‘string of pearl’ strategy that has been adopted by China to dominate the Indian Ocean. As China has committed some port projects with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, Indian side is apprehensive of Chinese presence in India’s backyard.

Given the fact that BCIM predates BRI and was conceived with the idea of sub-regional development, India should continue with those aim. Being on board with BCIM India can take advantage of the economic ties in the region. Therefore, it would be wise to relook at the opportunity to boost the BCIM forum.

India’s central geostrategic position being one of the world’s largest economy, will add a momentum to the Forum in terms of tangible outcome. A holistic approach to analyse and increase business between South, Southeast and East Asia through BCIM should be emphasised upon. India should be a proactive player in the forum for its own benefit. India

should not miss out on the opportunities generated by BCIM, especially in light of China's bilateral connectivity projects around the region. (The Diplomat 2018a)

Apart from CPEC, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is also strongly taken ahead by the Chinese. The corridor will be Y-shaped corridor, which will start from China's Yunnan province and go towards Mandalay in Myanmar. After reaching Mandalay, the corridor could extend to Yangon city and towards the Kyaukphyu SEZ in Rakhine State. With CMEC the Chinese will have access to the Indian Ocean, which can be cause of concern to India. For Bangladesh, the country officially has been part of BRI since 2016, China has made massive investment in Bangladesh amounting to more than US \$ 38 billion (The Diplomat 2018 b). Apart from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan, Chinese massive investment in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives, have not gone well with India. The option that seems to be most viable to India at this point is to either "catch up" or seek claim in the transformations. While catching up might require considerable time and resource, being part of the transformation with better coordination and cooperation can be a way forward.

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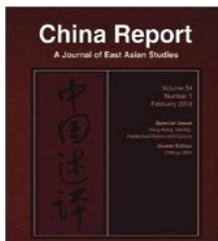


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