

(I) Closer Cooperation in the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Region – A New Success Story of Asian Regionalism?

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The border regions between Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwest China are characterized by close historical, intra-ethnic relations and a developing civil society sector, but also by violent conflicts between rebel groups and army units. In this region several hundred ethnic groups are living, most of them are closely related and their settlement areas are divided by the state borders. Despite these violent conflicts, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwest China are establishing regional institutions and thus adding to another example of different types of Asian regionalism.

In 2013, these four governments agreed to build up a *Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor* (BCIM EC). The aims are a) to expand the infrastructure between Kolkata (West Bengal), Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwest China, which have been blocked for many decades, b) to accelerate the exploitation of the resource-rich region (including hydropower, wood, coal, natural gas, copper, nickel, bauxite) and c) to establish zones of industrial growth. With the consent to BCIM EC, India has – at least officially – ended its years of blockade policy regarding the opening of international borders to Northeast India. Previously, there were concerns that the opening of the border would increase the import of cheap Chinese products and displace Indian producers. There were also fears, that it would ease the weapon supply to Northeast Indian rebel groups and thus would complicate the fight of Indian security forces against them.¹ This BCIM EC is part of the so-called “Look East Policy” strategy of the Indian government, by which the relations to China and Southeast Asia should be enhanced. It is also part of the so-called “Bridgehead Strategy” of the Chinese government, by which China is developing its border regions and their economic relations to Russia and all the other Asian neighbors.²

This BCIM EC project is mainly the result of an improvement of Sino-Indian relations on the diplomatic level. How far the improvement also includes a process to overcome the bilateral security dilemma and replaces a geostrategic security discourse of mutual distrust by a collaborative modernization discourse in practical terms, remains an open question. While the army and other security actors in both countries traditionally focus on the security dilemma complex, big business companies of both countries, parts of the government administration and provincial governments are very much interested in intensifying regional resource exploitation and regional trade. But these exploitation policies can lead to violent conflicts, because they are generally based on a technocratic approach, ignore the economic and political interests of minority groups and in their practical implementation process are often connected to corruption.

Since May 2014 India has a new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). There are signs that the new government will continue to improve the relations to China and stay engaged in the BCIM EC project.

1 Old and new regionalism analyses and Asian regionalism

Analysis of the emergence of political and economic regions and regional institutions were dominated by the EU model during the East-West conflict. This ‘old regionalism’ research was replaced afterwards by the ‘new regionalism’ research, which dissolves the fixation on the EU by describing – among other things – the global diversity of regionalization processes.³ Since 2000, analyses of the so-called third phase ‘of regional studies’ describe in more detail the relationship between regionalization and globalization, the function of non-state actors in regionalization and the emergence of new types of regions.

1 Goswami 2014.

2 Liu 2013.

3 Fioranmanti 2012.

These new types are based inter alia on export processing zones or environmentally defined, regional ecosystems.⁴ Civil society often takes over – so the assumption – a ‘catalyst function’ in these new regionalization processes. International NGOs and networks of migrant organizations establish new non-state forms of regionalization.⁵ Regionalism research can be differentiated between the macro-level (large regions, such as the EU, African Union), the meso (sub-regions such as ASEAN) and the micro-level of domestic areas. Types of regions differ in terms of the depth of integration and the institutional design. Regional integration generally increases the complexity of socio-economic relations as well as the density of civil society networks and leads to regionally structured collective identities. Supranational or intergovernmental regional institutions serve for dispute resolution and decision-making; main sponsors of regionalization include economic, political or socio-cultural groups.

There are numerous different types of regionalization processes. “Asian regionalism” is characterized by the influence of the three regional hegemonial powers PR China, India and Russia and their relations to each other as well as their respective relations to smaller Asian states.⁶ But the scope and influence of civil society organizations (CSOs) networks has extended and in some countries their relationships with governments are increasingly confrontational.

2 Sino-Indian relations, Bangladesh and Myanmar

The depth and quality of the regionalization in the BCIM region depends very much on the Sino-Indian relations. Analysis of these relations reflects the basic assumptions of international relations theory. Neorealist analysis state that the security dilemma between the two countries, tensions over the disputed borderline in the Himalayas and harsh competition over economic and military spheres of influence in Asia, will also dominate their relations in future.⁷ Neoliberal institutionalism analysis however point to the existing bilateral cooperation and unused potential to increase it. The potential is not fully used because both countries are in “tough competition”⁸ or in a “conflict” in some policy fields.⁹ The relations of India and China include both the potential of increased co-operation as well as growing security tensions. Hence, the relations are characterized by a parallelism of cooperation and competition.¹⁰ However, meanwhile, both players respect each others’ “fundamental strategic interests” and are politically defusing their border conflict.¹¹ While both countries are “strategic partners” in global issues – like climate change negotiations – their “regional cooperation” is poorly developed.¹² But the effects of the “security dilemma” are decreasing and “complementarities of economic interests” are growing.¹³ Many neoliberal institutionalism analyses are in line with the following cautious statement of Acharya: “It is theoretically possible that the PRC and India could develop and possess both the resources and political will and standing to provide collective goods and lead Asian regionalism, but their mutual rivalry might prevent this.”¹⁴

While India and China belong to the group of internationally emerging countries, Bangladesh and Myanmar belong to the poorest countries of Asia. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on India, whose territory almost encloses the entire border of Bangladesh, while a minor part of the border is shared with Myanmar. Bangladesh tries to reduce this dependence by intensified contacts with China, the U.S. and the EU. The new government of Myanmar tries to reduce its dependence on China by building stronger relations with the U.S. and India. A long period of stagnation of the regional Indian foreign policy was ended when the Indian prime minister, for the first time after 12 years, visited Myanmar in 2011 and

4 Muntschick 2012.

5 Shaw/Grant/Cornelissen 2011: 16–17.

6 Acharya 2014, Urata 2013.

7 Gilboy/Heginbotham 2013, Chellaney 2012.

8 Wulf 2013: 11–12; 2014.

9 Wagner 2012: 5.

10 Gilboy/Heginbotham 2013: 127.

11 Zhang/Li 2013: 8–9.

12 Shisheng/Jing 2012: 365–366, Reinhardt/Senz 2010.

13 Das 2013: 115.

14 Acharya 2014: 19.

Bangladesh after 25 years in 2012. The regional economic and strategic interests of India and China clash in Myanmar, but there are also examples of a “coexistence” of interests.¹⁵ The comprehensive reform process in Myanmar since 2011 has caused a setback for Chinese interests; but China is quickly adjusting to the new political implications of this process.¹⁶

Figure 1: Borderlands between Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwest China and planned road connection Kolkata (West Bengal)–Kunming (Yunnan)



Source: THE HINDU, 14.3.2012, unter www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-lawmakers-propose-all-weather-border-highway/article2992000.ece (Accessed on March 10, 2013).

Cartography: Harald Krähe / Google Earth

3 Troubled border regions, resource exploitation and civil society organizations (CSOs)

There are close historical, intra-ethnic relations and a developing civil society sector in the border region of Northeast India/Bangladesh/Myanmar/Southwest China. But the region is as well characterized by several regional ethno-political, resource and border conflicts:

- a) *Regional ethno-political conflicts:* For over three decades, the armies of India and Myanmar are trying to break up in vain rebel groups in Northeast India and in North and Southwest Myanmar; these groups are mainly recruited by ethnic minorities and demand greater autonomy or an independent state.¹⁷ Some of them have signed ceasefire agreements with local governments, which often failed after some time.¹⁸ Between 2005 and 2012, almost 4,000 people were killed in violent conflicts in Northeast India; a third of them in Assam and another third in Manipur. Since 2008, the total num-

15 Wagner/Cafiero 2014: 2.

16 Hilton 2013.

17 Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2013: 83–84.

18 Das/Goswami 2014.

ber of fatalities continuously decreases throughout Northeast India.¹⁹ But in 2012, the Heidelberg Conflict Barometer was still assigning violent conflicts in Northeast India to its category of ‘limited wars’.²⁰

- b) *Resource conflicts*: Land use conflicts between immigrant Bangladeshis and local groups are contributing to conflicts in Northeast India for over two decades. The unregulated interstate use of rivers, rising in the Himalayas, has caused tensions between China, India and Bangladesh. The construction of hydroelectric power plants and the exploitation of mineral resources (including oil, natural gas, coal, wood, nickel, uranium) in Northeast India, North Myanmar and Yunnan caused conflicts over land use rights and environmental issues; in some cases local – “partly violent” – protests have delayed or prevented these projects. Climate change will affect extensively the BCIM region and will partly contribute to these conflicts.
- c) *Border conflicts*: The Government of India has set up a fence at three-quarters of the common border with Bangladesh, which has a length of more than 4,000 km. China lays claim to nearly the entire surface of Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and named it as ‘Southern Tibet’; it is part of the Chinese territory on official maps.²¹ The border regions between Northeast India and Myanmar and between Yunnan and Myanmar are affected by extensive trafficking of drugs, weapons and other goods.

Central governments and also companies from India, Myanmar and China are jointly implementing some resource extraction projects. Most of these projects stand in the tradition of a technocratic or technocratic militarized-based project policy, which aggravate non-violent as well as violent conflicts. It remains an open question, to which extent the BCIM governments will follow these technocratic policies or orientate towards new regional, cooperative oriented project policies based on the participation of local governmental and social actors and socio-environmental sustainability and thus, contribute to conflict transformation. While intergovernmental cooperation is growing, regional cooperation between civil society organizations (CSOs) is still very weak. But local CSOs and social movements are at least temporarily able to hinder, impede or transform some of those projects that threaten to have negative impact on local livelihoods.

4 Three BCIM institutions: Forum, Business Council, Economic Corridor and perspectives

In 1999 the *Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation* (short “BCIM Forum”) was established in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, by the Institute of Chinese Studies (New Delhi), the Centre for Policy Dialogue (Bangladesh), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Myanmar and the Yunnan provincial government. The Government of Yunnan province was since the beginning and still today is one of the main promoters of the BCIM process.²² Since 1999, the aim of this Forum is the opening up of new border crossings and the expansion of infrastructure and regional cooperation in the fields of economy, energy and science.²³ In 2012, the *BCIM Business Council* was established by the four most important national trade associations of the respective countries – among others the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). In 2013, as mentioned above, the four governments agreed on the establishment of the *BCIM Economic Corridor* (BCIM EC). The objectives of the BCIM EC include the promotion of regional “physical connectivity”, “environmentally sustainable development”, “trade in goods, services and investment, including finance” and “people-to-people contacts”.²⁴ In December 2013, these governments established a “Joint Study Group BCIM EC” to conceive projects to achieve these objectives until the end of 2014.²⁵ In February 2014, for the first time, the Indian central govern-

19 Haokip 2012.

20 Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2013: 73.

21 Zhang/Li 2013.

22 Bhoothalingam 2013.

23 BCIM Forum 2013.

24 Embassy of India/Beijing 2013.

25 Ibid.

ment, the CII and all governments of Northeast Indian states held together a conference on the topic “Unlocking North East India’s growth potential through Infrastructure and Connectivity” in Guwahati, the capital of Assam.²⁶

At least on the level of diplomacy, India and China are in the process to overcome their bilateral security dilemma and to replace a geostrategic security discourse of mutual distrust by a collaborative modernization discourse and by a joint implementation of regional projects. While the four central governments and the *BCIM Business Council* have similar interest in developing better regional infrastructural connectivity, border trade and resource exploitation, there is no single platform in which civil society actors of all four countries cooperate. There is only very few bi-national peace, human rights and environmental co-operation of NGOs in the BCIM region. NGOs and other civil society actors are only able to prevent technocratic or technocratic militarized-based unsustainable resource projects in exceptional cases. There is a big unused potential for closer “people-to-people” contacts as well as academic and NGO cooperation. The use of this potential would be one crucial precondition to solve regional violent conflicts, to establish structures for a sustainable use of the rich regional resources and to eliminate poverty.

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