

CONNECTIVITY THROUGH BCIM-EC: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Sultana Yesmin*

Abstract

The paper examines the status of physical connectivity along the proposed overland routes of the BCIM economic corridor. The study tends to elucidate the areas of common interests of the BCIM countries by and large due to geo-strategic and geo-economic importance of physical connectivity in the BCIM sub-region. The paper, thereby, observes the successive developments of the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum, since its inauguration, towards achieving its goals and objectives. Hence, the paper comes up with some policy recommendations while exploring major threats prevailing across the BCIM-EC.

INTRODUCTION

The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Regional Cooperation Forum has been established with a view to boosting regional integration among the four member countries through intensifying physical connectivity and economic corridor in the region. Connecting three sub-regions together, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, the BCIM- Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) is not only geo-strategically significant but also geo-economically requisite for the member countries to be essential parts of global trade and business in the region. Given the importance, since the establishment, the BCIM-EC has made massive progresses towards the fulfilment of its goals and objectives along with the cooperation of the four countries. Though initially starting as a non-governmental project, the BCIM Forum is now one of the major priority agendas of the governments of the BCIM member countries in order to enhance regional connectivity and multilateral trade relations.

As far as the interests of four countries from three distinct regions are concerned, it is important to specify the areas of their common interests with a view to signifying the common objectives of the BCIM-EC. Simultaneously, it also becomes crucial to explicate common challenges existing in the BCIM sub-region.¹ Given this backdrop, one of the major objectives of the study is to scrutinise the BCIM physical connectivity and its necessity for the BCIM sub-

* **Sultana Yesmin**, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Politics and International Studies (SPIS), Central China Normal University, Hubei, China. email: sultanayesmindu@gmail.com. The paper is based on author's presentation in International Conference on *Construction of BCIM-EC and the "Belt and Road"* organised by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS), Kunming, Yunnan, China, on 17 September 2015.

¹ The paper cites BCIM-EC as a sub-regional forum.

region in the age of globalisation. The paper thus analyses major achievements of the BCIM Forum since its establishment and explores key challenges as well. In line with these, it also recommends some policy imperatives with a view to coming up with proper solutions addressing the key threats to the sub-regional framework. The data for the study has been generated from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through interpersonal interviews conducted by the author during her field-visits at China-Myanmar border areas in 2015.² On the other hand, the secondary literatures used in the study include published books, journals, research papers, reports, newspapers, and online materials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tim Summers discusses China's opening up policy with its Asian neighbours focusing on Yunnan's role in building "bridgehead" to Southeast and South Asia as well as in structuring China's economic and political relations with Asian neighbours. Given Yunnan's opening up policy to Asia and neighbouring territories within China, the author reiterates Yunnan as a "Chinese bridgehead to Asia".³

On the issues of connectivity, in chapter seven titled "Transport Issues and Integration in South Asia", M. Rahmatullah mentions the significance of transport connectivity in the era of globalisation. He exemplifies the fractured transport system and major transport problems in South Asia mainly caused by various historical, political, and economic factors as well as lack of cooperation among South Asian countries. The author cites different cases of transport systems in South Asia to reiterate how trans-border trade and economic cooperation are being hampered due to the lack of transport cooperation in the region. The author, in this regard, focuses on the importance of building transport connectivity in order to enhance regional integration especially in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region. The integration of transport network is especially crucial for landlocked North East India, Nepal, and Bhutan in South Asian region.⁴ Kishan S. Rana and Patricia Uberoi describe the imperatives of connectivity along Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China, and Nepal borders. The authors also mention the economic backwardness of North East Indian states despite having huge potentials which are sometimes referred to as "crisis of development" due to its land-locked

² For more details about author's field-visit: <<http://www.seasas.cn/article-1841-1.html>> (accessed on 29 March 2018).

³ T. Summers, *Yunnan-A Chinese Bridgehead to Asia: A Case Study of China's Political and Economic Relations with its Neighbors*, UK: Chandos Publishing, 2013.

⁴ M. Rahmatullah, "Transport Issues and Integration in South Asia," in *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia: Beyond SAFTA*, edited by S. Ahmed, S. Kelegama, and E. Ghani, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2010.

position and narrow corridor termed “chicken’s neck” because of complex historical factors particularly for partition of India in 1947 and India-Pakistan war of 1965. Along with other geo-economic and geo-political constraints, the authors allude to poor connectivity within and between North East Indian states, such as lack of intra-India connections and poor utilisation of external connectivity. However, Indian Central Government’s plan of improving transport connectivity as well as enhancing external connectivity with South Asia and Southeast Asia signifies India’s vision of developing its North Eastern areas. India’s ‘Look East’ policy is also a crucial part of building overland and multimodal connectivity with Southeast Asia and East Asia. However, insurgency, separatist movements, and unhappy memories of Indo-China and Indo-Pakistan wars remain big challenges to the opening up policy of North East India. The book also elucidates the revival of Stilwell Road connecting Ledo to Kunming via Myanmar, Mekong-India Economic Corridor, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, BCIM-EC, and other projects to revive connectivity between India with her South, East, and Southeast Asian neighbours.⁵

Ko-Lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang explore cross-border drug trafficking in Southeast Asia via the channels of Golden Triangle. One of the major focusing points of the book is to discover the routes of drugs trafficking along the China-Myanmar borders. Myanmar is one of the major opium and heroin producing countries being a part of Golden Triangle. The ethnic groups have continued opium trade in its border areas following the improved relations between Myanmar’s authorities and the ethnic groups particularly in Shan state. The book also elucidates how opium cultivation in Northern Myanmar bordering China’s Yunnan Province is posing threats to China. The book cites some examples of drug trafficking incidents in Yunnan Province in order to clarify how Chinese routes have become popular for transnational drug traffickers. Therefore, the drug addiction was no longer confined to border areas rather spread into Chinese provinces and major urban areas as well. The drug trafficking routes also changed over the years mostly via Yunnan-Guizhou-Guangshi and Guangdong. However, the Chinese authorities have undertaken some concrete initiatives to reduce the production of opium and heroin that in return declined the total opium cultivation from the past three decades.⁶

Regarding insurgency in North East India, Subir Bhaumik refers to that since the beginning of decolonisation period, North East Indian states have been

⁵ K. S. Rana and P. Uberoi, *India’s North East States, The BCIM Forum and Regional Integration*, New Delhi: The Institute of Chinese Studies, 2012, available at: <<http://www.icsin.org/uploads/2015/04/13/aadee7d0caa62c75dcacc3f98658ec6a.pdf>> (accessed on 30 January 2018).

⁶ K. Chin and S. X. Zhang, *The Chinese Heroin Trade: Cross-Border Drug Trafficking in Southeast Asia*, USA: New York University Press, 2015.