



BCIM ECONOMIC CORRIDOR: A CASE OF INDIA-CHINA REGIONAL HEGEMONY

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia has a long history of trade routes, particularly the Silk Route. As Yang Bin said that “the ancient silk route originated from China’s Chengdu city, went through Myanmar, and extended beyond India, to the Middle East” (Hussain, 2015). The Southern Silk Route has got immense importance in terms of economic and cultural engagement. Today, Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor has to be placed for the prosperity of South Asia. It is a result of the great past of trade routes. But China's engagement with South Asia through the “BCIM” Initiative has become a part of the concern for India.

A total of 440 million people are expected to live along the 1.65 million square kilometer corridor that would connect Northern India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China’s Yunnan Province (See Fig 1.) (Baffa, 2013). Echoing the institutional development of the BCIM, Yunnan scholars were the first to think about BCIM. As the communication between Yunnan and India began to strengthen in the 1990s, Sino-Indian ties were improved. Yunnan scholars were invited to participate in the "International Conference of Regional Economic Development of India and China" and the "International Symposium on India-China Economic Reform" for three years in a row, from 1997 to 1999, by the University of Calcutta in India and the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in New Delhi (Kondapalli, 2017). Following rounds of talks, all parties concluded that a seminar on Yunnan-India economic cooperation was required. Because of Myanmar's and Bangladesh's distinct positions and responsibilities in the area, Yunnan academia advocated inviting representatives from both countries to attend the conference. Finally, the seminar was dubbed the "International Conference on Economic Cooperation and Development between China, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh" (Kondapalli, 2017). The inaugural conference was conducted in Kunming in 1999 popularly known as the ‘Kunming Initiative’, with approval from the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Yunnan administration.

Fig. 1. Southwestern Silk Road (BCIM Economic Corridor Route)



Source: Asia Briefing, available at <https://www.asiabriefing.com/news/2013/10/bangladesh-china-india-myanmar-economic-corridor-builds-steam/>, accessed on August 4, 2022.

During its initial conference in 1999, the "Kunming Initiative" transformed into the BCIM Forum for Regional Cooperation with the following goals:

1. To establish a forum where key players can gather to address matters related to fostering trade and economic growth in the BCIM region;
2. To determine which industries and initiatives would help the BCIM countries work together more effectively; and
3. To strengthen BCIM ties, the major actors and stakeholders in question should cooperate more and have stronger institutional frameworks.

It is important to understand the political and strategic motivations of BCIM countries. In terms of regional connectivity, it is necessary to assess the regional developments and



implications. India also has various concerns in this flurry of regional implications and this makes the BCIM initiative a significant pot of analysis.

Political and strategic Motivation

The BCIM economic corridor project has been earmarked as the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is a grand strategy of China that aims at restoring China's so-called 'a great power status at the global level. A direct trade route would allow Chinese goods to enter Indian markets while also helping the group's two Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Bangladesh and Myanmar. BCIM has a great place in strengthening regional interconnection. It is a major source of employment besides infrastructure development and connectivity.

Why BCIM is necessary for China?

The engagement of China in South Asia through different cooperations and initiatives may be used to analyse China's regional strategic calculation. One Belt, One Road, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Silk Road Fund are among the most important.

There is one thing that drives China to uphold the BCIM flag is to access the South Asian market and the Indian Ocean sea routes. The development of China's southwest area for more balanced growth and internal stability is also a key component of China's participation in the BCIM plan. Yunnan, China's southwest province, shares a 4,000-kilometer international border with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, and links with the rest of China to both Southeast and South Asia. China has made significant investments in Yunnan, including the Kunming-Bangkok highway, which connects to Thailand, and the Kunming-Hanoi highway, which connects to Vietnam. Moreover, the "Kunming to Kolkata" expressway, if built, would provide China access to the large expanding market of South Asia as well as ports along the Indian Ocean.

Moreover, China's commercial channels, particularly those that cross the Malacca Strait, remain vulnerable to US naval superiority, and as a result, CPEC and BCIM corridors are components of BRI, which are aspects of Beijing's programme for "self-extrication" from the "Malacca Dilemma" (Hussain et al., 2021). The Straits are one of the world's oldest and

busiest trade waterways in addition to being rich in marine resources. They act as the main transportation route for people and goods between the Indo-European region and the rest of Asia and Australia. The Straits of Malacca and other related shipping lanes comprise a region through which billions of euros worth of goods and services transit each year. For international trade and local development, the Straits of Malacca are strategically significant. The Straits of Malacca are used to ship the majority of European trade with China and Japan (Evers et al., 2006). Consequently, the BCIM route will act as a major shipping route which will minimise China's high dependence on the Strait of Malacca (see Fig. 2).

Fig.2. Strait of Malacca



Source:QuickGS, available at <http://quickgs.com/malay-peninsula-on-world-map-related-countries/>, accessed on August 4, 2022.

India's Stand in BCIM

A stronger presence in regional economic and political sectors may be a primary driver for India's effort in the BCIM. The BCIM Economic Corridor has made headway in fostering cooperation between India and China. India and China have each created "a Study Group on the BCIM Economic Corridor" (Prime Minister's Office, 2013). Both parties referred to "the second Joint Study Group" of the BCIM Economic Corridor meeting and decided to keep working to put the agreements made there into practice (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015)



However, India's perceptions of China are skewed by fear of Chinese hegemony; at the moment, many persons in the Indian security establishment regard China as a larger threat than ever before. India sees Chinese One Belt One Road initiatives as an encirclement of India with the construction of projects in neighbouring nations as part of China's "Peripheral diplomacy" agenda. The notion of 'periphery diplomacy' has become an important part of China's official diplomatic rhetoric. Beijing has shifted its emphasis away from traditional great power diplomacy and toward periphery or neighbourhood diplomacy. Further, it has been said that "both China and India hope to rekindle their economic relations after bilateral trade activity fell by 12 percent in 2012. India has also expressed concern over its growing trade deficit with China, which reached US\$29 billion dollars last year. As an incentive for greater capital inflows, PM Singh extended an offer to establish Chinese industrial parks within India's industrial hot spots, which will be better served by the BCIM Economic Corridor's enhanced connectivity" (Baffa, 2013).

On the pros of having the BCIM initiative, India can get much out of it. Despite rivalry with China, India can get huge in making better relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh. If China gains a dominant position of influence in Myanmar, it might serve as a springboard for China's goals in South and Southeast Asia. The development of the Northeast is a primary motivator for India to participate in the BCIM programme. Moreover, India is also interested in acquiring transit through Bangladesh territory in order to connect its northern states and provide them with access to the country's seaports, considering that they are far closer to the country's northern area than its port in Kolkata.

However, it is viewed as a concern for Indian national security and interests by policy professionals in India. Understanding what the opposing party believes and why is the beginning of wisdom in foreign policy. Some Indians are concerned that the BCIM corridor would provide China unrestricted access to South Asia. China is expected to dominate regardless of the eventual economic arrangements proposed by the BCIM-EC. On the other hand, China's purpose into India's Northeastern region and access to the Bay of Bengal may only serve its geostrategic goals, perhaps at the expense of India's. Indeed, while Beijing vigorously pursues its MSR policy, New Delhi remains cautious of China's rising economic influence in South Asia.



CONCLUSION

The proposed “2,800 km-long BCIM initiative” offers tremendous possibilities for hitherto unheard-of cooperation with the potential to boost the region's economic development. China's rivalry with India may be a stumbling block in establishing the BCIM economic corridor in a full-fledged manner. The fact that India is already a member of the BCIM demonstrates that the two states have the potential for multilateral collaboration. India should adopt a more constructive engagement strategy with China and begin addressing the parameters of its BRI participation.

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