



Dance of the Giants Asias: Indigenous Peoples Between India and China

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Relations between China and India continue to be ambivalent, mired in a cycle of negative threat perceptions. Whether they improve or deteriorate, however, the impact on Indigenous and Tribal communities in highland areas sandwiched between the two powers is likely to be severe.

“We should dance together,” said China’s ambassador to India Luo Zhaohui in a recent statement, part of continuing concerted attempts by both parties to reduce bilateral tensions following the 73 day stand-off on the Doklam plateau. The persistence of strategic mistrust and a cycle of negative threat perceptions addressed in a recent [piece](#) by the Oxford Research Group has substantial implications for the whole Greater Asian neighbourhood.

This is particularly salient for the mountainous and forested region linking India’s Northeast, Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Myanmar highlands. Home to numerous Indigenous and Tribal groups, often with historically conflictual relations with their respective national governments, the region is also the locus of numerous regional initiatives sponsored by both India and China in pursuit of economic and strategic objectives. The most substantial of these is the currently stalled Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Co-operation. Regardless of whether the relations between the two giants improve, or deteriorate, the impact on these diverse groups will be substantial.

“Act East”, OBOR and BCIM: competing visions of regional integration

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Since coming to power, Narendra Modi's BJP Government has intensified the "Look East" policy established in the early 1990s under then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, aiming to substantially expand India's commercial and trade relationships with Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Modi has rechristened this endeavour "Act East" to mirror this heightened emphasis. From the opposite direction, China's "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) strategy entails an enormous infrastructure programme to strengthen China's connectivity overland to Southwest Asia, as well as access to ports in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. The driving impetus is China's quest for energy security and bypassing its dependence on the narrow Malacca straits.

Either bridging the two, or falling between them, is the plan for a Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM – EC). Established as the "Kunming Initiative" in 1999 as a track II endeavour, all of the participating governments save India have since upgraded the process to the track I level. Prior to 2013, this was attributed to India's history as a "reluctant regionalist" and the lack of state government autonomy to engage in sub-regional diplomacy compared with the high levels of discretion afforded the Yunnan provincial government by the Chinese central government. There was also the historical baggage of India's use of its northeast region as a security buffer against China.

2013 marked a major transition for the initiative in two ways. First there was a breakthrough in May of that year, with a joint Sino-Indian declaration creating a Joint Study Group to plan the creation of a BCIM Economic Corridor. Then in September, Xi Jinping announced the "Silk Road Economic belt", (SREB), subsequently re-christened the OBOR. The impact was to strategically bundle the BCIM-EC with the other components of OBOR, including

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the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major diplomatic bone of contention for New Delhi for both the huge investment it entails for Pakistan, and the fact that proposed infrastructure projects criss-cross territory claimed by India.

Since 2013, BCIM-EC has progressed slowly, with New Delhi vigorously pursuing other, bilateral plans for economic connectivity, particularly with Bangladesh and Myanmar. Every success in this regard is projected through the Indian press as an automatic victory against China, reflecting the zero-sum mindset and perceptions that OBOR is nothing less than the operationalisation of China's strategic aims to encircle India and establish hegemony in Asia apparently hard to shake off. That a key theatre in this game of geopolitical shadowboxing is already a fragile geography is a major cause of concern.

The South – South East Asia Borderland: a fragile geography

Map 1: Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China (Yunnan Province).

The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the highland regions of India's Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh states and Myanmar's Chin, Shan and Kachin states are home to a staggering number of Indigenous and Tribal groups. As a result of colonial policy, they were all only **lightly administered** and **weakly embedded** in the British Raj. All of them gave birth to armed movements for greater autonomy or independent statehood following decolonialisation. Many of these groups became chess pieces in the strategic contest between different governments over the years, whenever bilateral relations soured. China was **instrumental** in backing the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) against India. East Pakistan

(now Bangladesh) backed [Mizo rebels](#) against India 1966 – 1971. India backed the Chittagong Hill Tracts autonomy movement, the PCJSS, against Bangladesh from 1975 – 1996. Bangladesh in turn hosted Meghalaya-based Garo and Khasi insurgents as well as Assamese militants until at least 2008. Until the present day, Myanmar has often been a safe-haven for these groups. Today there are over [30](#) active insurgent groups in Northeast India alone.

While improving ties between Dhaka and New Delhi has helped in reducing the intensity of conflict in India's Northeast in recent years, the recent influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh has already had a negative knock-on effect for ethnic minorities. There are many reports of harassment and a new pejorative racial epithet, "[Burmiya](#)", to describe the Indigenous Peoples of the CHT. There is also the risk that the [Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army \(ARSA\)](#) may find convenient bases and a supply of willing recruits in the new refugee camps [springing](#) up in Cox's Bazaar district. Elsewhere in Myanmar, the historic Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015 between the Government and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an umbrella platform comprising the majority of Myanmar's insurgent groups, remains fragile and has yet to be [translated](#) into a comprehensive peace process. Low level violence continues between the Government and those groups who did not sign the NCA, including the Kachin Independence Organisation.

A second important issue concerns the systems by which land is managed in the region. Most Indigenous and Tribal populations practice some variant of customary tenure, based on notions of communal or group ownership and management. The extent to which these systems are securely embedded in the wider administrative systems of their respective states varies. Even in the northeast Indian region however, although de jure safeguards are probably

stronger compared with Myanmar or Bangladesh, they remain fragile. Finally, the region is also home to substantial natural capital, including dense forests and rare species.

The impact of different visions of regional economic integration

Regardless of which vision for regional economic integration wins out, the impact on this fragile geography will be substantial. The huge infrastructure requirements common to each initiative will be land-hungry. Roads, hotels, water supplies, electricity: the list is long. Then there is the question of whether imported labour will be required, where they will live, and how they will integrate with local populations. Who will control project funding and who will decide how it is allocated, and with reference to which stakeholders? The potential for disruption is enormous. Whether local populations are involved actively in these decisions, or are even asked for their opinion, is an open question. There is every reason to be pessimistic.

Patricia Oberoi, a leading Indian academic closely associated with the BCIM-EC, has [warned](#) that “mechanisms for consultation with and the empowerment of local stakeholders...are yet to be effectively institutionalised,” in the case of India’s Northeast. In the global context, there is the observed trend of states employing eco-tourism projects and associated governmental technologies to increase and enforce their control over territory, peoples and resources. The result is often environmental degradation and social conflict. Prominent examples come from [Guatemala](#) and the Democratic Republic of Congo ([DRC](#)). From the South Asian region, the most recent scholarship by Hana Shams Ahmed [addresses](#) this problem in Bangladesh’s CHT region.

In 2015, the then Indian Minister for External Affairs, V.K. Singh **argued** that insurgency in the Northeast would not hold back the BCIM-EC. First, it is not clear that this is a safe assumption, in light of the **delays** caused to the renovation of the Stillwell Road linking Arunachal Pradesh and Yunnan province by insurgents in Myanmar's Kachin state. Secondly, and more importantly, the question remains open as to whether the BCIM-EC's poor implementation might further stoke insurgency. Even if it does not, the project still has the potential to do considerable damage to local livelihoods and social structures as well as the environment.

This, to reiterate, is the best-case scenario, where China and India co-operate effectively in pursuing the joint BCIM-EC vision, in a positive diplomatic context that has escaped the cycle of negative threat perceptions that currently exists. Currently there is little sign of this occurring. While the leaders' **statements** following a bilateral meeting between Xi and Modi at the BRICS summit stressed the need for bilateral co-operation, they gave no specifics concerning these initiatives. Immediately following the summit, Modi headed to Myanmar and lauded the new Kaladan project connecting Mizoram with the Paletwa terminal in Chin state. He made a point of **contrasting** India's "no strings" investment with China's mercantilist approach. Assuming that connectivity projects between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh go ahead either ignoring or in competition with OBOR, against a backdrop of continuing animosity between New Delhi and Beijing, the situation might spark higher intensity conflict in the region.

The Indian journalist Rajeev Bhattacharyya's 2014 **book** details his journey to meet insurgent leaders from the Northeast, camping in western Myanmar, where they maintain contacts with the Chinese intelligence services. Other

camps are located on the Sino-Myanmar border, [where](#) insurgents are reported to have sourced arms from the black market in Yunnan. This is in a context where, under a new security rubric of “surgical strike” Modi has ordered [direct retaliation](#) against insurgents inside Myanmar, informing authorities in Naypyidaw after the fact.

The need for economic development in a region still afflicted by very high poverty levels is not in doubt. The manner in which major infrastructure projects are implemented is hugely important *per se* in order to ensure local communities are not disenfranchised and excluded from the gains of such initiatives. In view of the specific circumstances of the South / Southeast Asian borderland, with its politically marginalised populations, fragile customary land management systems and active insurgencies, this is doubly important. Placed within a regional strategic context of suspicion between the two great powers, India and China, alarm bells should be ringing.

Image credit: [Rusty Stewart/Flickr](#).

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