

Being Connected
Logistic Visions to the East and West of India

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Comments by Binoda Mishra

Articulations of regions, more than anything, reflects the preference of the dominant actor thinking and dealing with that region. All such articulations have strategic significance that are spelt out sometimes in economic terms. The latest of such initiatives is the OBOR of China. This initiative, arguably the largest ever economic diplomatic endeavour of any single country, has both land and sea corridors. If one looks at the alignment of both the land corridor and the sea corridor one can notice that one of the stated objectives – bringing development to the relatively underdeveloped provinces of Western China – is certainly absent. Neither the land corridor nor its maritime counterpart touch the Southwestern provinces of Tibet and Yunnan.

The OBOR has four stated objectives, viz. enhancing policy coordination across the Asian continent, trade liberalisation, financial integration, and connectivity including people to people links. Owing to the Chinese economic might, China sees a possibility of enticing the smaller economies of the Asia to join the Chinese bandwagon and thereby shape the rules regulating the economy of the region. Trade liberalisation and financial integration would invariably bring the region under Chinese sphere of economic influence which can be translated into strategic sphere of influence. The economic intent of China is suspect also because of the unexplained avoidance of the other most developed economy of Asia, i.e. Japan.

One is not surprised to see the mixed response to this Chinese initiative from other important countries in the region, particularly India. India has been non-committal to OBOR. Of course India has joined the AIIB, the financial institution created to support infrastructure development along the OBOR. Joining the AIIB is a prudent financial move but resistance to the OBOR is more due to strategic anxieties. India also fears relative economic loss vis-à-vis China as evident from her resistance to the BCIM Economic Corridor. The fear stems from the possibility of Southwest China turning into an economic core, in case of economic integration of BCIM region, turning Myanmar, Bangladesh and Northeast India into perpetual peripheries. The other fear about China that concerns most countries in the Chinese neighbourhood is its political culture. In the whole of Southeast Asia, China's economic and strategic backyard, there is a fear of China exporting its political culture into the region that promotes authoritarianism in the name of (rapid) economic development.

Indian initiative of Project Mausam, is not seen as a complement or supplement to the Chinese OBOR; rather is seen as a counter to it. Thus, it is too early to answer with any

certainty that logistic vision such as OBOR will prevail over the political and strategic preferences of the other countries of the region. The Chinese would of course succeed in establishing infrastructure facilities along the land and sea corridors of OBOR and would benefit from such investment, but the dream of turning the entire regions covered by the OBOR into an integrated financial zone is distant at least for now.

Comments by Suchandana Chatterjee

India's present political dispensation has carved a niche in business economics and is aspiring to reach new global standards through a new set of engagements in East Asia and Southeast Asia. India's business initiatives in 2014 and 2015 were flagged off with prime ministerial visits-- not just to flaunt the idea of an Asian lobby in the influential corridors of BRICS and Eurasian Economic Union-- but also to explore alternative resource options in the East, especially uranium in Mongolia. The direct benefit of collaboration with Mongolia was a uranium deal. But there were indirect benefits which were of greater significance. Modi's Mongolian agenda in May 2015 was perhaps to dilute competition of the two major resource players in East Asia: China and Russia. Mongolia's strategy of recalibrating its 'third neighbour policy' has also appealed to India. Mongolia is teaming up with Germany as well as Japan and Korea. For India, these nations are fresh baits vis-a-vis her traditional competitor, China. India's overt interest in South Korea is infrastructure development which was bound to take off in a major way in the 'Make in India' programme of early 2016. To ensure India as a safe haven for Korean companies was a promise that was made to Seoul during Modi's 2015 visit. As far as Japan was concerned, the promise of financial assistance was to India's advantage. The purpose was to strengthen India's manufacturing base with Japanese assistance and take credit for creating smart cities, introducing bullet trains and revving up the Clean Ganga project. But, to have a country like Japan on board for upgrading defence relations in the Asia-Pacific region with none of the military and trade tensions like China was also a diplomatic gain for India.

India's engagement with East and Southeast Asia was primarily driven by the urge of responding to the Chinese challenge. Towards the end of 2015, India took this Southeast Asian partnership to another level: the India+ASEAN partnership with priority areas like defence, security and culture. Another platform of cooperation was East Asian Summit (EAS). All these initiatives were definitely not trendsetters, but did enhance the idea of an Asian connectivity. The gravitational pull was towards the maritime waters of Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. The current political dispensation in India realized the significance of the shift of economic gravity from north to south and from west to east.

Another smart act was to bring to the table a Buddhist collective. In his address to the Mongolian Parliament, Modi expressed his commitment to the Buddhist heritage of India and Mongolia. The Indian leadership's commitment to the rejuvenation of Buddhist

pilgrimage routes on the eastern reaches of the Himalayas that connected Mongolia was appreciated. But policy experts feel that in Modi's vision, Buddhism was an outreach programme to build bridges among leaders in the Indian subcontinent and Asia, from Nepal to Japan and China to Myanmar. Such experts have explained the advantages of Buddhism as a model of India's cultural diplomacy. What animated India's engagement with Southeast Asia are cultural and spiritual connections, grounded in history and a shared civilizational space. It is common knowledge that Buddhism moved to Southeast Asian countries from India and Buddhists from the region undertake pilgrimage to the revered Buddhist sites of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. Nalanda University in Bihar has been showcased as the epitome of cultural and spiritual linkages between India and Southeast Asia. India has signed several pacts with ASEAN and East Asian countries to revive Nalanda University's past glory and transform it into an international knowledge hub.

Summing Up

The 'Act East' policy has become the most talked about affair in terms of business deliverables. Very recently, the attention has shifted to West Asia and the Modi government has started new ventures with its 'Link West' programme. The new policy seeks to navigate the changing situation in West Asia: from Turkey to Iran and from Egypt to Saudi Arabia.