

Representations of Connectivity: The Politics and Economics of Routes in the Asian Context

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Connectivity projects that create new logistical spaces, span frontier regions, and connect far-flung territories are the defining feature of contemporary Asian international relations. Seen as addressing key concerns like development, geopolitical influence, security, status and prestige of Asia's major states (e.g. India, China, Japan) as well as states with stakes in Asia (e.g. the United States, Turkey), they are remaking Asia anew. Their ambitious scale and potential impact on people and spaces inspire comparisons with 20th century initiatives that shaped the Euro-Atlantic world. Against this background, this paper comes as a salient and timely intervention, and one that also fits nicely within the overall framework of the project.

The paper is empirically rich and exhaustive in terms of mapping the crisscrossing connectivity projects that span territorial and maritime Asia. It brings together in conversation not just the Chinese and Indian connectivity projects – which occupy centrestage – but also the American, the Turkish, the Japanese, the Korean and the Russian ones. A brief stock taking of these projects serves as a background to an elaborate discussion of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The author discusses threadbare the ambition, rationale and the potential limitations/roadblocks of the project. The paper then catalogues the various intellectual responses to the BRI and discusses further the Indian attempts at connectivity building. A strength of the paper here is that it is able to locate the regional picture within the continental one. The paper concludes by underlining the need for *policy connectivity* to complement *infrastructure connectivity* and identifies a role for India.

An empirically rich and conceptually insightful paper, it merits few substantive recommendations. Nevertheless, I share the following notes with a view to improving the paper.

1. The paper could be restructured – with a shorter background discussion and a more even-length discussions of the Indian and Chinese projects to begin with. The section on scholarly/expert readings of the projects can either be taken out or turned into a “review of literature” type intervention at the beginning of the paper.
2. The paper could benefit from more attention to the idea of *representations* of connectivity projects: for both India and China, their transnational infrastructure projects represent statements of intent to the continent – how it will be shaped, and on what will it be shaped. They also expect others to grant them respect and status that comes from being able to achieve much, have great influence and impact etc. in the manner of great powers. The competition between the two for Asian influence via connectivity projects is also worth mapping and analysing. A final point here is the distinct Indian attempt to take lead in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) over China. Deeper conceptualization of the idea of representation will add value to the paper.
3. A couple of paragraphs that bring in the Act East policy and various connectivity intersections in the Indian Northeast and Southeast Asia could be inserted. These two overlapping regions are marked by a network of subregional processes and institutions. Connectivity is central to the sub-regional moment in this part of Asia, and a focus on it is, therefore, desirable. The author must especially seek to outline the problems in translating connectivity vision into projects on the grounds.
4. Maps to all the connectivity projects mentioned in the paper should be added. In addition, a map that juxtaposes a connectivity and a political map of Asia.

5. The question of Asia's historical background of connectivity and infrastructure projects can be addressed. China has examples of large-scale infrastructure projects (e.g. the Grand Canal) in premodern times, which provide a precedent to the BRI. A reference could be made to the public works of the India and Chinese empires.
 6. Drawing upon the works of historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam (writings on connected histories), Andre Wink (the *Al Hind* volumes), Janet Abu-Lughod (*Before European Hegemony*) and Indian Ocean Studies (of M.N. Pearson and K.N. Chaudhuri), the author could perhaps point to the connected nature of the Asian landmass as well as deep waters, that actually became disconnected due to the arrival of the sovereign states. In particular, Subrahmanyam's work on the Eurasian connections seem vital to this paper. Pre- and early modern Asia was a richly connected world of worlds across which flows of people, goods and ideas took place much more frequently than it did once colonial territorial empires came from the West. Their bid to secure imperial possessions resulted in transformation of zones of transition into boundaries that arrest people. The author could mention examples of those mobile networks that had to stop because of national-state boundaries and which are being opened once again.
 7. It would be useful to speculate on the creation or emergence of natural regions due to these projects. For instance, the BBIN and BIMSTEC together represent regions that have much in common. When natural regions are enabled, they generate positive knock-on effects. SAARC, in contrast, expresses an artificial region that functions ineffectively and grows little. In addition, it would be useful to contrast these natural regions with the constructed regions of the West to see what the comparison bears out.
 8. Are connectivity projects a remedy for a problem that western analysts of Asia have been long pointing out, namely that given the immense concentration of power, multiple flashpoints and crisis zones and weak institutionalization of interstate interactions, the continent is prone to eruptions of conflict? Can connectivity projects replace the functions performed by a network of robust international institutions?
 9. The economic and security implications of the connectivity projects have been talked about. But is there a political cost to these projects that hasn't been appreciated until now? One of the hallmarks of these projects is that as a developmental gesture, there is very little expectation they have of non-democratic political systems to reform. A great part of Asia is undemocratic with regimes not really enthusiastic about democratization. The connectivity projects may bring economic progress and physical infrastructure – but they contain no incentives to reform politically and create democratic governance. With the West declining and liberal democracy retreating, there is lesser incentive still to democratize. This may not be an altogether welcome development.
- The author may use any of the suggestions I have made here. Overall, the paper reflects considerable appreciation of details and grasp of the import of connectivity projects.