Rethinking Regionalism: The Idea of China-South Asia Trans-Himalayan Regional Cooperation

RAKHAHARI CHATTERJI

ORF
OBSERVER
RESEARCH
FOUNDATION

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rakhahari Chatterji is Adviser at ORF, Kolkata. He was a long-time Professor in Political Science at the Calcutta University, and is former Dean at the Faculty of Arts. He retired from the university in 2008. He is a Visiting Fellow in Political Science and Associate, Committee on South Asian Studies, University of Chicago; Visiting Fellow in Political Science at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) and University of Virginia (Charlottesville); and Emeritus Fellow, UGC.

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ABSTRACT

Even as globalisation has succeeded in creating a closely connected world, its biggest failure may yet be that it could not produce a stable world. Today there is a widely held view that organising the world regionally may be complementary to globalisation, if not serve as a replacement altogether. Other analysts consider the relationship as more tangled, debating whether to view regionalism as a stepping stone to globalisation or as a stumbling block. This paper examines the alternative approaches to regional organisation and makes an assessment of both successful and failed cases of regionalism in various parts of the world. It highlights the idea of trans-Himalayan regionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream realist theories assume the state as the central actor in regionalism initiatives. The assumption is that sovereign decision-making agencies—i.e., the states—drive the creation of regional organisations in order to negotiate forces within the region or external to it. Such forces need not always be negative, such as a security threat from a potential predator within or outside the region; it could be positive, too, like advantages from trade, foreign investment, infrastructural development, environmental protection, climate action or control of terrorism.

Non-mainstream theorists argue another way. Neo-liberal institutionalism and rationalist functionalism, for example, argue that complex interdependence amongst states makes it imperative that they initiate regional organisations. However, the causal connection between the two (i.e., interdependence and regionalism) is not always apparent and it is not always possible to explain the presence or absence of regional initiatives in such terms.[1]

For its part, neo-functionalism emphasises the role of domestic groups, such as trade unions, organised business interests, and professional bodies which, expecting benefits from regional initiatives, become drivers of regionalism. The idea of a "spillover" effect is assumed: if one set of interest benefits from a regional initiative, the others also become interested in becoming party to such benefits.[2]

Neo-functionalism represents "new regionalism" by challenging the idea of state-centrality in regionalism and considering the role of non-state actors. The role of non-state actors has also been brought to focus by the project on "new regionalism" financed by the United Nations University-World Institute for Development Economics Research (UN-WIDER). The project found that "in the context of globalization, the state was being 'unbundled', with the result that actors other than the

state were getting strength. By implication, the focus of analysis should not merely be on the state actors and formal inter-state frameworks, but also on non-state actors. This is sometimes referred to broadly as non-state regionalization."[3] The free play of such actors in promoting regionalism could in the long run unfold a process leading to "transformation of territorial identities".[4]

While conventional realism, neo-liberal institutionalism and rationalist functionalism take the state as the central actor and the starting point of all regionalist endeavour, and neo-functionalism expands it to include non-state actors for promoting regionalism, both assume that security and stability or economic interest would be the main drivers for regionalism. In contrast, constructivism as an approach prioritises ideational drivers such as ideas, shared norms and values, identities and discourses through which regions are constructed and reconstructed over time.[5]

That is, imagining a community is more important than the existence and recognition of palpable interests in promoting regionalism. It is not quite clear, however, whether the "imagined community" is a prerequisite for regionalism or it is an end-product of the regional endeavour.

To be sure, there are "both continuities and similarities between 'old' and 'new' regionalism.[6] For instance, the 'community' idea in international relations discourse is at least as old as Karl Deutsch. In his *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area* he begins by saying, "We undertook this inquiry as a contribution to the study of possible ways in which men someday can abolish war." He defines 'community' as when individuals in a group believe that "they have come to agreement on at least this one point: that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of 'peaceful change'."[7]

This line of thinking is further reinforced by the conceptual distinction between a 'system of states' and a 'society of states'. According to this formulation, "A *system of states* (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave –at least in some measure—as parts of a whole" while a *society of states* is"…a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions." [8]

Therefore, there are various approaches to the study of regionalism: one can talk about old and new approaches, varieties of realist approaches and functionalist or neo-functionalist approaches, and interest-based approaches or idea and value-based approaches. These are not like straitjackets: they are sometimes contrasting but often overlapping. Ideas from one often flow into another. It is also possible to locate them along the dimensions of state-centric and society-centric regionalism. (See Figure 1)

DIAGRAM - 1 : DEGREES OF REGIONALISM

STATE-CENTRIC REGIONALISM

SOCIETY-CENTRIC REGIONALISM

STRONG REGIONALISM

WEAK REGIONALISM

NO REGIONALISM
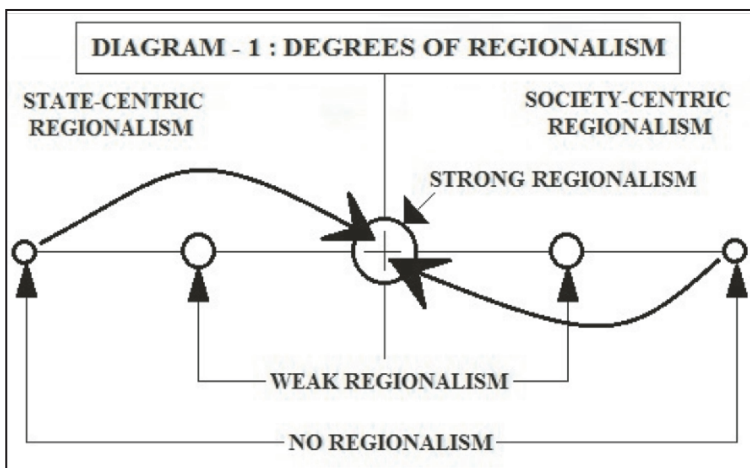
Source: Author's own

Figure 1 shows that the distinction between state centrism and society centrism is significant. In many societies, including democratic ones, vast majorities are consenting to the claims of the state as the only gatekeeper of domestic interests. Yet cultural and linguistic connectivity, flow of trade and people, spontaneous and endogenous processes of formal and informal networks,[9] cross-border religious shrines, social construction of regions especially in the border zones—all these limit the state's claim as sole defender of domestic interests or the exclusive initiator of regionalism.

Border zones are especially susceptible to generating 'micro-level regionalisms' based on "collectively shared beliefs, social conventions, behavioural practices", not depending upon state-initiated formal institutions alone.[10] Indeed, border zones, not always sharing the sense of identity based on the 'Otherisation' of a neighbour, may play a critical role "to temper the nationalist rhetoric" of populist groups on the mainland.[11]

This paper views these two dimensions of state-centrism and society-centrism as complementary rather than contesting. If state centrism acts as starter of the formal process, society's role becomes indispensable in providing a sustainable foundation for it just as the society's belief systems and civil society's initiatives would require legal and institutional sanctions by the state to become sustainable.

ATTEMPTS AT REGIONAL COOPERATION: SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

The European Union (EU)

The European Union (EU), despite the crises it has faced in its 70-year history (if the foundation of the Council of Europe is taken as the beginning), remains a fitting example of a regional organisation that

could work. The EU started with the commonplace idea of smoothening the post-war tensions between France and Germany over the sharing of coal and steel resources; today it is a union with considerable cession of sovereignty by the member-states.

To be sure, the treaties of Paris and Rome did not happen only on the day the signatory states decided to be part of the project; the process started much earlier when individuals were seized with the idea and the imagination of a peaceful community of states in Europe.[12] These pioneers included men like Konrad Adenauer, Winston Churchill, Aleide De Gasperi, politicians who acted on behalf of their respective states as chancellor or prime minister. They were joined by international bankers and businessmen like Johane Willem Beyer of Holland, youth leaders and anti-Nazi activists like Ursula Hirschmann, scientists and teachers like Marga Klompe, farmers like Sicco Mensholt, actors like Melina Mersouri, wine merchants like Jean Monnet, lawyers like Robert Schuman, Holocaust survivors, lawyers and feminists like Simone Veil. They had all committed themselves to the idea of a United Europe for a peaceful Europe and started to advocate the idea through the 1940s in their own capacity.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Unlike the EU, the ASEAN has met with only moderate success. To begin with, the ASEAN has not aimed at integration but as an arena for cooperation amongst sovereign states. Founded in 1967 with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, ASEAN would eventually include Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia. These countries are highly diverse, with a multiplicity of religions,[a] languages and political systems. Yet the region has been relatively peaceful, and as

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a   214 million Muslims, 110 M Christians, 150 M Budhists of both *Mahayana* and *Hinayana* sects in addition to Taoists, Confucians, and Hindus

some scholars have noted, has "achieved the same level of peace and prosperity without going to war, as the Europeans did."[13]

It was not always that way, however. Certain ASEAN members had many conflict dyads both before and after the formation of the organisation; for instance, between Malaysia and the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, Malaysia and Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia.[14] The ASEAN countries have also had divergent positions on controversial international issues, such as the East Timor crisis, South China Sea issue, and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar.[15] Yet through appropriate diplomatic means and multilateralism they have been able to contain the conflicts amongst the members and achieve cooperation "to alleviate intra-ASEAN tensions, to reduce the regional influence of extra-regional actors and to promote socio-economic development."[16]

Members of the ASEAN have preferred to work informally, without developing solid formal institutions and legally binding obligations and with strong commitment to state sovereignty.[17]

It is true that through the SEATO pact, the security of Southeast Asia was guaranteed by the US. But the end of the Vietnam War and communist victory in Indo-China in 1975, followed by the dissolution of the SEATO in 1977, encouraged the states of the region to fend for themselves. This is why although the ASEAN was formed in 1967, the defining moment would come only in 1976 when it held its first summit. This led to the Declaration of the ASEAN Concord and a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South East Asia.[18]

Yet, the external threat was not all that worked as precipitating factor for the ASEAN. Like in Europe, civil society also had a role to play.

As Rattanasevee observed, the development of ASEAN was highly influenced by a set of ideas that were shaped by the regional cultural values and events that "preoccupied politicians, intellectuals and opinion leaders over many years."[19] This is corroborated by Farish A. Noor when she noted, "there are millions of citizens across ASEAN who do in fact have a sense of loyalty, attachment and belonging to their respective corners of ASEAN." She finds, as this paper has noted earlier, border zones as 'grey zones' between states where exists "high instance of cross-border marriages, cross-border extended families, modes of kinship that go beyond national identities and corresponding decline of national fervor."[20]

Amitav Acharya strengthens this view when he writes that a "region-wide" pattern of inter-state relations and "a degree of interaction and interdependence did exist among political units inhabiting present South East Asia today." The end of colonialism came "as an opportunity to revive the lost linkages and identities." He notes that the phrase, 'One Vision, One identity, One Community' has been used in many official statements and documents.[21] There is also a conscious effort to reinvigorate the sense of community within the ASEAN. Acharya deplores the "disjunction between official ASEAN and people's ASEAN" and cited Linklater's view that "the meaning of community involves identity amongst peoples, not just states." He advocates engagements in interactions in a variety of areas like art, education, and tourism.[22]

Therefore, despite various structural and teleological differences, both EU and the ASEAN share something critical: historical and cultural proximity have been reinforced by a conscious effort to imagine a community by ceding/moderating sovereignty sentiments and by bridging the political elite's initiatives at the state level with the desires of the people.[23]

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

South Asia is a more "natural" region owing to geography, history and culture; it is, however, torn apart by religio-political divisions. The mutual distrust between India and Pakistan, for one, exacerbated by the US' military involvement with the latter from the early 1950s, has continued for a long time. China's relationship with Pakistan has further complicated the situation. The strong anti-India lobby in Bangladesh after the end of the Mujibar Rahman regime was not conducive for regional partnership. Long-lasting domestic ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, democracy movement coupled with violent Maoist insurgency in Nepal have made the region volatile. India entered into the organisation with a sense of apprehension, suspecting an unstated anti-India agenda of the smaller states in the region.[24] The institutional procedures adopted for safe navigation of SAARC, like unanimous decision-making, excluding bilateral and contentious issues from agenda, rather than facilitating safe navigation made any navigation impossible. The result was frequent postponement of summits, signing numerous agreements but not implementing them, keeping intra-region trade at a meager five percent for years and increasing reliance on bilateral arrangements.[25] ASEAN was and remains exclusively a state-initiated effort with people having no role to play either in relation to the association or across borders.[26] Instead of reinvigorating the geographical, historical and cultural ties across the states and encouraging their respective citizenry to dream a community, the states decided to jettison these and maintain a distrustful relationship. Pakistan's unfortunate but gradual transformation into a cradle for global terrorism brought all hopes for reworking SAARC to a close.

BBIN AND BIMSTEC

India has pointed to the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Co-operation) as "replacements" for SAARC. Compared with SAARC, the BBIN is a geographically and politically closer group with Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal as members. By excluding Pakistan, it is supposed to be a group of more like-minded countries. The grouping is supposed to hold tremendous potential for "bringing about an incremental boost in every sphere of development, from political to economic to cultural."[27] Yet somehow, the BBIN has failed to push the BBIN-MVA (Motor Vehicles Agreement) as Bhutan has been reluctant to implement it for what it fears is a negative impact on its environment. While the BBIN initiative has the potential to help create an environment helpful for cooperation, the process of translating the potential into reality has been slow.

The case of BIMSTEC is similar. It is a grouping of five South Asian and two South East Asian states, located around the Bay of Bengal and held by a historical past and shared heritage. Their location offers them both opportunities for sharing prosperity and conditions responsible for suffering from common problems like inadequate connectivity, low intra-regional trade, insignificant level of civil society or people-to-people connectivity, threats from climate change, under-explicated security issues and scarce resources. However, the member-states remain hesitant to invest in pushing forward the regional body.[28]

Making BBIN and BIMSTEC functional requires focused leadership on the part of India. After all, as the biggest partner in these groupings, India needs to invest the most while keeping a low profile. Further, since the countries involved in both of these organisations share social and cultural ties, it is in order that civil societies in these countries are encouraged to play a bigger and more explicit role in developing a sense of the region as a community.

TRANS-HIMALAYAN REGIONALISM: A POSSIBILITY?

In 2014, the Chinese ambassador to India, Wei Wei, proposed the novel idea of trans-Himalayan regionalism through trans-border cooperation with India. He called for a Trans-Himalayan Economic Growth Region which would be led by India and China. Some analysts in India easily saw potential in the idea. "Instead of being defensive," C. Raja Mohan wrote, "Delhi must seek more details on this very interesting idea and offer a vision of its own for productive engagement with Beijing all across the Tibetan frontier."[29] It could be expected that under trans-Himalayan regionalism both India and China would be keen to have stronger North-South connectivity through Nepal which would vastly expand access to and from China to the Hindi-speaking states of UP and Bihar in India. In this connectivity Nepal could play an important role.[30]

Although not much has been heard about it in the Indian media since then, Nepal for obvious reasons, both economic and strategic, was charmed to the idea. In 2017, Nepal expressed its willingness "to act as the Himalayan land-bridge between Central, and South and South East Asia."[31] Nepal's officials also said they would welcome "Southern OBOR" and the extension of the Chinese railway to Kathmandu and Lumbini. In fact, in 2010 Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) as prime minister of Nepal coined the concept of "trilateral strategic relations involving India, China and Nepal" and thought it would be of utmost importance to Nepal to take advantage of 'Mid-Hill-East-West Highway' and to link it with Uttarakhand and Sikkim to create a Greater Himalaya Economic Corridor.[32]

Scholars have analysed the case of Rasuwa district in the mid-North of Nepal bordering China as an example of Nepal's trans-Himalayan partnership with China.[33] The district, which had historically been in the periphery both geographically and politically, has recently become

"central to Sino-Nepal relations in the context of bilateral investments in hydro-power and transportation infrastructure." It not only enhances Beijing's influence in Nepal, it helps the Nepalese state to extend its authoritative presence in a distant area, reinforcing its state-making process, and in the long run, serving to restructure the strategic relations among China, India and Nepal. As Murton et al, say, "Through construction of roads and dams, Chinese development pays dividends in cash for local citizens, contracts for Chinese firms, legitimacy for Kathmandu leadership and diplomatic leverage for Beijing in Nepal."[34]

This is another instance of inter-state bilateral relationship around investment for development and infrastructure building which does not presuppose any "regionalist" content. Such activities can take place between any two countries, whether or not they are geographically and culturally contiguous. Further, this is, strictly speaking, inter-state and not inter-people relations: in this sense, it belongs to the arena of conventional diplomacy and not new regionalism. The editor of the volume cited earlier, Emily T. Yeh, in her introduction to the volume, corroborates this point when she notes "… the fact that Chinese aid is welcomed by elites is no guarantee that local populations see it the same way." She finds a lot of "Sino-phobia" among the people.[35]

Notwithstanding this, Nepal, which signed the BRI agreement in 2017, continues to have a cordial relationship with China. The recent visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal is a milestone for Nepal-China relationship.[36] During this visit, Nepal and China signed some 20 agreements, the most important of which was that on conducting a feasibility study for a China-built railway across the Himalayan crescent from Shigatse/Lhasa to Rasuagadhi, Kathmandu and beyond. Of these 20, four agreements are security-related: they aim at "greater engagements between the security agencies of the two countries,

particularly among the police forces, intelligence outfits, border management organizations and law enforcement authorities."[37]

It is noteworthy that the outcome of Xi's visit to Nepal follows closely the lines set forth in China's neighbourhood policy, as enunciated by the president in 2013-14. In a speech on neighbourhood diplomacy, Xi emphasised that diplomacy in this area "must serve the Two Centenary Goals and our national rejuvenation" and "to achieve these strategic aims, we must create and cement friendly relations and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation with neighbouring countries, maintain and make the best use of the strategic opportunities we now enjoy and safeguard China's state sovereignty, national security and development interests." These will require China, among other things, "to further security cooperation...develop a comprehensive security strategy' with the neighbouring countries."[38]

Analysing Xi Jinping's speeches, William A. Callahan points out that Beijing needed a new strategy to improve its management of relations on its periphery because it was encountering "increasing tensions with neighbouring states." Beijing felt it was necessary to deepen friendly relations "first through economic cooperation" (often called Beijing's second "charm offensive" following the first one during mid-2000s) and "beyond economic strategy, China need to build security ties with its neighbors." Callahan also points out that "most interestingly, Mr. Xi proclaimed that regional cooperation must expand from "mutual benefit to shared beliefs, norms of conduct for the whole region"— i.e., Beijing is on a moral mission to improve the world through its ideas, aspirations and norms, socialising the regional countries to build, as Xi said, the "community of shared destiny."[39]

Indeed, these ideas resonate in many of the agreements reached between Nepal and China during the trip of the Chinese president. For

instance, going beyond the security-related matters, it has been decided that China will organise 100 training schemes for Nepalese law enforcement agencies over the next three years. Although the proposed extradition treaty was shelved for the present, China has secured an agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters which many believe would likely be a precursor to an extradition treaty. China has committed to support the establishment of a multidisciplinary university and a Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University. These indicate the implementation of the idea of "socialising" the neighbourhood with its own norms and values. This may be easier now as Nepal has a government run by the communist party.[40]

Be that as it may, Nepal also will have a number of issues to ponder. The Nepalese people have shown remarkable grit in transforming their kingdom into a republican democracy through years of struggle, Maoist violence and enormous hazards including massive natural disasters. They have a small but strong civil society with an alert and vocal press. Despite the dominance of the communist party at present and increasing Chinese authoritarian influence on party and society, it would not be easy to move the Nepalese people away from their native democratic ethos. Secondly, although Nepal happens to be one of the poorest countries in the world and in need of massive external assistance, it has to worry about the debt trap which may entail BRI investments. Its trade deficit with China is massive. Therefore, new projects with Chinese assistance need not add to its economic strength. They also realise that despite Nepal's closeness with China, it is the Indian market which China is ultimately targeting through direct transportation facilities and the north-south corridors to be built around Nepal. One should not lose sight of the fact that the Nepalese people are fiercely independent-minded. Just as they hated unwelcome pressures from India, they would refuse to become a "land-linked

country" from a land-locked one, as Mr. Xi has promised them, only to find themselves as a conduit between China and India. Ending up with bilateralism in a massively unequal relationship while chasing trans-Himalayan *regionalism* is not something they need to bargain for.

It remains to be seen how the Nepal-China relationship would take shape and how far it would be functional for bringing about a trans-Himalayan regionalism. For now, these developments in Sino-Nepal relations do not augur well for India. Yet, as Raja Mohan suggests, India needs to stop "whining about China's growing presence in Nepal" and resenting the loss of its importance in Nepal. In its dealings with Nepal India has not always done the correct thing. It can yet try to reset its relations with Nepal founded on the natural geographic and cultural linkages between them."[41] India has not responded to Pushpa Kumar Dahal's proposal mentioned earlier regarding a trilateral project involving India, Nepal and China; nor has it looked seriously at the Chinese Ambassador Wei Wei's idea of a trans-Himalayan regionalism. Just as India's security concerns have made its officials hesitate about BCIM-EC proposals despite having occasionally shown interest, the country's view of the Himalayas as a natural barrier has kept it from encouraging infrastructural developments across the Himalayas. Indeed, India has been unresponsive to the trans-Himalayan proposals for various reasons, including issues related to BRI/CPEC, the Doklam standoff with China,[b] as well as the perceived threat of renewed Chinese support to insurgencies in India's north-east.[42]

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b   "what is Doklam issue all about?" https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article22536937.ece

What of trans-Himalayan regionalism then? Is it a possibility?

Historically, neither China nor India has proved to be effective in forging regional identities. The SAARC grouping has failed, and both BBIN and BIMSTEC remain in a limbo. For China's part, the SCO is not a regional organisation *per se*, but at best a security device with member countries across more than one region. This applies similarly to BRICS, although it is not a security device.

Yet trans-Himalayan regionalism is indeed a possibility—for China and the South Asian states to join together in a common endeavour to help each other, to compensate for each other's shortcomings, to partake in each other's development and to cooperate in finding solutions to shared problems. Table 1 shows the countries which can constitute such a regional entity.

Table 1 Profiles of Potential Members of Trans-Himalayan Region (2017-18)

	Population	Nominal GDP	Per Capita Income (USD)	3 Years Compounded Annual Growth Rate (%)	Regime Type
China	1.4 billion	13.608 trillion	8,234	5.2	Communist/ Authoritarian
India	1.3 billion	2.72 trillion	1,715	4.5	Electoral Democracy
Bangladesh	163 million	274.03 billion	1,339	11.1	Electoral Democracy
Nepal	28.09 million	29,040 million	759	5.0	Electoral Democracy
Bhutan	8,16,000	2,528 million	2,805	5.6	Electoral Democracy

Sources: (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=IN)

(https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-s-per-capita-income-growth-lower-than-china-bhutan-117110200109_1.html)

Making such an idea happen requires well-intentioned leaders both in politics and in civil society who are capable of looking beyond narrow nationalisms, and with the capacity to define, identify and serve benevolent national interests. They must be willing to concede to others' sensitivities and make compromises, behave with utmost respect for rules, institutions and procedures, and harbour a vision to look far and wide, working for peace. Both Europe and, to a large extent, Southeast Asia have shown what is *possible* in the realm of creating enviable regions of cooperation and peace.

In the case of trans-Himalayan regionalism, to go beyond rhetoric and to make it happen, it is necessary first of all to take stock of reality. India's reservations cannot be wished away just as Nepal's ambitions (or for that matter, of any other South Asian state) cannot be ignored. If China desires to take the lead, as it can, and promote trans-Himalayan regionalism, it has to take India along. South Asia cannot be without India, and any purported leadership over such a hollow territory will be vacuous. No respectable country, let alone China, can aspire for such a position. China's bilateral relations with Nepal may be beneficial for both states but they fall short of creating *trans-Himalayan regionalism*, where peoples of all the countries within the region can flourish and the idea of a region can become a living reality. To do that, China has to address India's concerns. As a leader, it will be China's responsibility to create mutual trust amongst all. This is not impossible.

To be sure, the first that comes to mind when considering India-China relations is the open hostility, especially the border war of 1962. Today, however, it would do well for both sides to focus on what could be done. India and China have already entered into many important agreements to regulate their mutual relations and to control hostilities. For instance, the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993, CBM agreement of 1996, Protocol on the Modalities for the implementation

of CBMs in 2005, Memorandum of Understanding between two Defence Ministries for high-level military exchanges, joint exercises, counter-terrorism, anti-piracy co-operation in 2006, establishment of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Co-ordination of border affairs in 2012, and Border Defence Co-operation Agreement (BDCA) in 2013.[43] India-China relations in recent times have been guided by these agreements even though occasionally events of cross-border intrusions or an incident like Doklam standoff have happened. If an agreement like BDCA can be arrived at, China and India can go a long way in managing their differences. Viewed from whatever standpoint, India-China relations would be critical for conceptualising trans-Himalayan regionalism and China needs to be clear about that.

Both India and China should learn to temper their sovereignty sensitivity by a strong and explicit commitment to settle issues between themselves, as well as with other smaller South Asian countries, peacefully through accommodation. China, especially, as the bigger and more powerful and resourceful member of such a possible region, should tame its tendency to label as "core interests" any of its claims whenever contested by neighbours. Claims to leadership of a new regionalist effort do not go well with such desires as "to make the best use of the strategic opportunities" China now enjoys or "safeguard China's state sovereignty, national security and development interests."

For the same reason, India needs to view the idea of trans-Himalayan regionalism with more optimism. It would mean that India must not privilege distrust—after all, distrust is not a value to be preserved, it is only a problem to be overcome. Taking advantage of existing agreements with China, India should proceed to overhaul its relations within the region, including with China. For one, India must aim to reset its relations with Nepal, and the best way to do that could be through the trans-Himalayan idea in which it could become a major player.

As Acharya observed about the ASEAN, "Regional identity building in South East Asia is an act of building an 'imagined community'." He talks about the importance of "significant and *self-conscious* effort at regional identity building."[44] The same should apply to the case of trans-Himalayan regionalism perhaps to a greater degree as the region is not a natural geographic or cultural region. The leaders of the countries willing to be part of such a region would have to work hard to create the moral foundation of the region through the identification of a set of common values.

Moreover, society's role in conceptualising a region and imagining it as a community is immensely important. An 'official trans-Himalayan region' created through state action, if it materialises, will cry for a 'people's trans-Himalayan region', to paraphrase Acharya. This will be more difficult to achieve because the region is not a naturally contiguous space: it is divided by the mighty Himalayas. The connections created through traders and itinerant seekers of religion of the past will not be enough to hold this space together as a region today transcending the Himalayan barrier. Therefore, it will be important to fathom how the people in the different states in this area view each other. That will constitute the foundation from where to begin imagining the region.

India, with its popular democratic system, could drive the mobilisation of civil society forces along with democratic Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. If China comes along as the leader as it must, trans-Himalayan region could become a case for experimenting with convergence of democratic and authoritarian systems even if on a restricted agenda, at least to begin with. At the same time, sooner rather than later China should be prepared to grant its civil society institutions the degree of autonomy that would enable them to interact with similar groups from other countries on an even footing.

Here it may not be out of place to refer to studies on perception of China by Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata. Its report on "Regional Media's Perception of China" discusses the editorial perception projected by the *Assam Tribune* and the *Arunachal Times* during 2012 and 2014. The report points out that while both newspapers highlight the themes of 'a rising China' and 'border dispute', they do not exhibit a pathological concern with these issues. They pay significant amount of attention to China as measured by a standardised attention score yet they are 'not overwhelmed by the presence of a globally muscle-flexing China'.[45]

Further, ORF's research based on an opinion survey in three northeastern states of India on the same issue points out that while the respondents identify the border issue as the most important pending issue between India and China, a large proportion of the respondents showed readiness to consider China as a friend rather than as an enemy. Despite the fact that they share apprehension about China's expansive behaviour they do show some confidence in thinking that territorial aggression from China could be unlikely within the foreseeable future.[46]

Both these studies indicate a shifting public perception of China in India, if we assume that the perception was wholly negative in earlier decades following the 1962 conflict. Neither the press nor the public—as may be inferred from ORF's survey, are unwilling to consider business as usual as impossible with China. That is, the civil society's windows are opening as far as India is concerned. It will be interesting to know what is happening on the other side and whether both China and India are ready to make the best of it.

Finally, it is noteworthy that while the idea of a trans-Himalayan regionalism has been advanced by China, countries in this region including India would have much to gain. Institutionalisation of the

rules and procedures, of norms and values within such a regional body would demand rules-based behaviour and less adventurism on the part of all members. Predatory behaviour—either with respect to repayment of loans or unsettled border or any other issue—would be considered as subversive for the stability of the organisation.

CONCLUSION

While this paper has addressed a number of broad issues, the central concern was to examine the possibility of a trans-Himalayan regionalism. There are many hurdles towards such a grouping but with younger, more educated and more informed people assuming positions of responsibility in the countries across the Himalayas in the years to come, there will be occasion for novel formulations. In all likelihood, popular thinking is changing for the better. The present generation's responsibility is to initiate, or at least to encourage the populace to start thinking anew. For India, it must cease privileging distrust, and instead find ways to overcome it. For China, meanwhile, self-reflection is necessary. Trumpeting the cause of development for people in the neighbourhood is not enough. It must compare its development counsel with those of the colonial empire builders of the past and ask itself whether its own development discourse does not unwittingly resemble the unsought for advice of the imperialists. If it does, it has to be discarded.

The choice therefore is between encouraging more people-to-people contacts, movement of tourists, teachers, students and other academics in larger numbers, greater information flow, more frequent contacts among civil society representatives, more balanced trade and larger investments among the states in this region—or alternatively, sealing borders and entertaining animosities and distrust. The former will encourage peoples of the countries in the region to imagine the region

as a community for development and peace; the latter will teach people to suspect each other. ORF

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