

Abstracts

Being Connected

Logistic Visions to the East and West of India

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An abiding feature of the modern world is its complex connectivity. This is perhaps best exemplified by the networks of interconnections and interdependences that characterize every aspect of modern social life. It is this connectivity that pervades all accounts of globalization. Connectivity can be simply taken to imply global-spatial proximity in the sense of the shrinking of distances through the dramatic reduction of time taken to cross them. At another level of analysis connectivity shades into the idea of spatial proximity via the idea of “stretching” of social relations across distance. The creation of globalized spaces also inevitably implies the creation of a degree of cultural “compression”. The resulting de-territorialization is then taken to fundamentally transform the relationship between the places that one inhabits and cultural practices, experiences and identities. Logistics is integral to both the material and cultural aspects of connectivity and the dynamics generated by contesting logistic visions is likely to create competing networks that will reconfigure the way in which the world is imaged. In fact it could also fundamentally transform the way in which ‘areas’ or ‘regions’ have traditionally been conceptualized. When the world was analyzed in the categories of bipolar interaction the presence of regional or sub regional subsystems was subordinate to the logic of a global division into two worlds. This exclusivity is today challenged by logistic visions reflecting contemporary geopolitics which is likely to recreate the context within which regions and ‘regional’ organizations are perceived.

This is reflected in Kazakh President NursultanNazarbayev’s definition of Eurasia. He argues

If we look at a geographical map then it is easy to notice that there is a consecutive vertical row of countries of Eurasia from Russia in the north to India in the south (Central Asian countries, Iran, Pakistan) that does not yet link either with the east or with the west. I would call this continuous belt of countries situated along the meridian of the centre of Eurasia the ‘belt of anticipation’.

Nazarbayev’s “belt of anticipation” is interesting particularly since it indicates a vertical definition of the Eurasian space that is generally visualized as a horizontal expanse. This is essentially the logistic vision of a landlocked state which wishes to move out of the confines of traditional east-west routes of transportation. Much of the transportation linking Asia to Europe was historically conceptualized as east-west epitomized by the Silk Route. Of course this east-west corridor frequently had smaller north-south off shoots leading to southern ports.

The definition is also significant in terms of the actual states that are included, Russia, India and the countries in between, that is the Central Asian republics, Iran and Pakistan. The silences are, of course, more than important. The definition excludes Afghanistan, a state that is now sought to be identified as a link within the Eurasian space. In a sense, of course this vertical definition has

precedence in a vision where a north-south linkage was conceptualized as an alternative transport route that would link Russia, Iran and India. The corridor was conceived as stretching from ports in India across the Arabian Sea to the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas where goods would then transit Iran and the Caspian Sea ports in the Russian sector of the Caspian. From there the route stretches along the Volga River via Moscow to northern Europe. Along with Russia, India and Iran this project was subsequently joined by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. More recently the Turkman President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov expressed interest in the project.

Another alternative would be a north-south axis that then connects to the east-west one, thereby linking Central and West Asia to South and South East Asia. Late in 2005 the US administration introduced a novel idea about regional divisions by placing the Central and South Asian regions within the same division. The principles of the policy were outlined by the US State Department and reflected in the US National Security Strategy published in March 2006. This was a departure from the earlier US policy that regarded Central Asia as a separate region tied to the CIS and was in recognition of a trend in international affairs in the first part of the twenty first century where there is acknowledgement of a transformation of economic and political relations taking place throughout Southwest Asia, the Middle East and Eurasia. The goal was to formulate a concept to encapsulate the totality of these trends and this led to the idea of a 'Greater Central Asia' encompassing an area that included "India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran the countries of the Caucasus and the countries that were previously socialist republics in the Soviet Union and Xinjiang province of China as well as some other lands in this large and pivotal region." This was projected as a benign and equitable intellectual development that reflected the rich history of interaction in commerce and international affairs and deep rooted cultural commonalities and values.

Richard Boucher the then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs noted that "South and Central Asia belong together" by virtue of Afghanistan, which lies at the centre of the region, and can be a bridge that links the two regions rather than a barrier that divides them. In fact this was also linked by a logistic vision, the Central Asian Infrastructure Integration Initiative that was launched in October 2005 and was designed to execute the implementation of the idea of turning Afghanistan into a link between Central and South Asia and integrate them into a single region. As part of the initiative priority has been given to the Almaty-Bishkek-Dushanbe-Kabul-Karachi highway, a transportation and energy corridor that would cross Afghanistan and tie Central and South Asia together. As part of this in early 2006, the US State department was restructured: Central Asia was taken away from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to become part of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs ---- an effort to integrate the region with its 'natural' neighbourhood. In Russia "Central Asia" has been replaced with the term "Central Asian region" which includes the former Soviet Republics but also Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. While a difference between the components of the two perceptions of a larger Central Asian region is evident there is nonetheless a convergence on the need for a larger conceptualization reflecting the inter-connectedness of regions that seem to be at play. It may be argued that this conceptualization is part of a larger global effort at creating regional configurations exemplified in Eurasia by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This requirement has meant that the geopolitical function of what is termed as Eurasia has been reinterpreted keeping in mind requirements of regional cooperation and connectivity. In the 21st century the function of the pivot area has been described as ensuring sustainable land contacts along the parallels (West-East) and the meridians (North-South) thereby contributing to consistent geopolitical and economic integration of large and isolated areas of the Asian continent.

While this re-imaging presents various possibilities the overlapping of states, (no longer contained within clear bipolar divisions) in multilateral 'regional' organizations is another case in point. In fact institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which includes 17 non contiguous

Asian and European states including China and India may become a new 'region' in terms of significance. Some of these institutions have been created to support logistic visions and the AIIB itself is a recent example. This Chinese initiative supports China's logistic vision of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) with the aim to bring South Asian economies closer to China, Central Asia and West Asia. Compared to the post War Marshall Plan, as an initiative OBOR is projected as an instrument to create a continuous land and maritime zone where countries will pursue convergent economic policies, underpinned by physical infrastructure and supported by trade and financial flows, The inclusion of people to people links is a recognition that soft power will play an important role in creating congenial political environment for sustaining the initiative. The OBOR policy document further states that the initiative is designed to uphold 'open world economy and the spirit of open regionalism', an obvious counter to the more exclusive US led mega economic blocks in the making the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP). Deeper economic integration within Asia is embedded in the larger framework of China's attempt to build rail, road and port infrastructures across Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, thereby dramatically shortening cargo transport time between Asia and Europe/the Middle East and Africa. Another important motivation is the development of the relatively underdeveloped southern and western Chinese provinces. OBOR has a transcontinental (Silk Road Economic Belt) and maritime (Maritime Silk Route) component. Much of the transcontinental route passes through areas of traditional Russian influence and regions where Russia is attempting to recreate a common economic zone in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

It is therefore significant that there is a proposed amalgamation of China's Silk Road Economic Belt and the EEU and setting up of a dialogue mechanism which is likely to create a synergy that would cover connectivity, trade, energy and raw material production in the region. There are in addition two significant energy projects linking the two states, "The power of Siberia" pipeline and the Altai gas pipeline. During the Putin-Xi summit that took place in Moscow on May 8, 2015, the leaders of Russia and China signed a joint declaration "on co-operation in coordinating the development of the Eurasian Economic Union with the Silk Road Economic Belt. The declared goal was to build a common economic space in Eurasia, including a free Trade Agreement between the EEU and China. While the positive implications of the connection is clear there remains the issue of implementing the merger of an institutionalized body like the EEU with what is essentially still an idea in the making. There is also the fact that since their interests overlap in Central Asia, multilateral formats would have to be developed for discussions. Also mechanisms would have to be developed to implement joint projects on EEU states, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. The institutional framework developed for the EEU free movement of funds, goods, services, and labour) would mean that implementation of these rules in the territories of the non EEU states that are within the purview of the SREB will be problematic. However, despite problems this is a synergy that India would have to take note of as it moves towards a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union. Though the SREB has been generally well received implementation could be problematic. India in particular is concerned about the maritime element of the route that moves through the Indian Ocean though it also presents possibilities of cooperation in corridors like Iran. While the strategic implications of OBOR has been viewed with concern it remains a fact that OBOR is underpinned by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the proposed Shanghai Cooperation Financing Institution and all of these include or will shortly include India.

The Indian alternative has been to focus on the eastern and western reaches of the Indian Ocean and the sub continental landmass south of Eurasia but linked to it. The 'Connect Central Asia' initiative has to be viewed within this context where both the traditional continental trade routes and the maritime multi modal routes would come into play. There also remains the alternative to

connect Indian initiatives with other existing (like Turkey-Iran-Pakistan railway) or proposed routes (branches of the Silk Road Economic Belt). A multi modal link to Central Asia through the Iranian port of Chahbahar could then link through existing and newer links to Russia and Europe. These include both transport corridors like the INSTC and pipeline projects like TAPI. The potential for both if linked to the South East Asian states would be manifold. Similarly the BCIM corridor could link to a broader Asian network. The development of a network of Indian Ocean ports to serve as regional shipping hubs for littoral states with connecting highways and rail routes would mean leveraging India's location in one of the most strategic stretches of ocean space. The launching of a Spice Route, Cotton Route and the Mausam Project, all of which are attempts to tie together countries around the Indian Ocean assumes significant in this context. At the macro level the aim of Project Mausam is to re-connect and re-establish communication between countries of the Indian Ocean world which would lead to enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns while at the micro level the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu. The aim is not just to examine connections that linked parts of the Indian Ocean littoral but also the connections of these coastal centers to their hinterlands. The 'Spice Project' aims to explore the multi faceted Indo-Pacific Ocean World collating archeological and historical research to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean- extending from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian sub continent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago. The broader aim is to connect these with a 'Information Silk Route' where telecom connectivity between the countries would be made possible. All of these strategies need to be visualized as integrated aspects of both domestic and foreign policy.

In this background the final presentation will focus on the following aspects

1. Will logistics determine the future definition of 'areas' / 'regions' and 'regional' interaction?
2. Do current trends indicate that states like China and India are moving towards a Mackinderian position in terms of logistics, combining continental and maritime dimensions through multi modal corridors?
3. Will logistics and infrastructure development (rather than security arrangements) become the new marker of carving out realms of influence? If so how far has the Indian initiative in the north east succeeded?
4. Where logistic visions and ideas overlap (a branch of the OBOR is the BCIM corridor which connects Yunnan to Myanmar, Bangladesh and eastern India) will the logic of logistics override political compulsions?
5. How will global developments (the Iranian nuclear deal and the opening of Iran, the synergy between Russia and China, Russia's renewed interests in the Middle East and its failing economy, the fall of the rouble on Central Asian economies, the continuing problems of transition in Afghanistan and India's problematic relations with its neighbours) affect the outcome of the logistic vision.