

INDIAN IR'S SUBREGIONAL MOMENT: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE?

NOVEMBER, 2015

Nimmi Kurian
Centre for Policy Research

ABSTRACT

The subregional turn in Indian diplomacy marks an interesting discursive shift in Indian foreign policy and its engagement of the Asian neighbourhood. Delhi's 'new' reading of borders is an admittedly feel-good narrative of rethinking borders as bridges and speaks a comfortable cosmopolitan language. But behind this celebratory rhetoric, the subregional moment in Indian IR has been a bittersweet one- caught between colliding dualisms that have today resulted in a conflicted and confused narrative. While it speaks of a liberal vision of globalism it has at the same time been curiously resistant to step away from the reductionist logic of borders as barriers. The paper engages with this puzzle and the severe distortions it has produced in India's eastern borderlands. The paper argues for the need to look at subterranean processes that are subverting the idea of borders as territorial dividers and bringing together a new set of actors with an interest and stake in deepening subregional integration. These dynamic processes constitute, what the paper calls, subterranean subregionalism(s), a form of integration that mainstream research and policy has so far chosen to ignore.

A DISCURSIVE BORDER IS CROSSED

The subregional turn in Indian diplomacy marks an interesting discursive shift in Indian foreign policy and its engagement of the Asian neighbourhood. (Kurian 2014a) The expansion in the international activities of subnational governments has been the focus of a growing literature. (Duchacek, 1990, Hocking, B. 1993, Blatter et al., 2008, Crikemans, D. 2008) The idea of subregionalism has gained increasing recognition in discourses of development and offers new insights to mainstream theories of regionalism. While regional trading blocs and arrangements have been a common phenomenon, subregional cooperation represents a novel extension of this larger idea, in that geographically proximate subregions within two or more countries become sites of transborder cooperation. What this does is to bring attention to the borderlands both as a missing level of analysis and as a level of governance. The idea of projecting Northeast India as a gateway to the wider dynamic Asian neighbourhood has found an increasing measure of rhetorical importance under India's Look East policy the rechristened Act East policy. Through a host of sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation), the Mekong Ganga Economic Cooperation (MGC), and the Bangladesh-China-India- Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM EC) India has attempted to signal the growing priority it attaches to integrating its eastern region with the wider Asian neighbourhood.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Admittedly, Delhi's 'new' reading of the borders speaks a comfortable cosmopolitan language and lays claim to a universal vision of globalism. At its core stands a liberal vision of borders as bridges and Northeast India as a gateway to the Asian neighbourhood. But behind this celebratory rhetoric, the subregional moment in Indian IR has been a bittersweet one- caught between colliding dualisms that have today resulted in a highly conflicted and confused narrative. On the one hand, while it speaks of a liberal vision of globalism, it has been curiously resistant to step away from the reductionist logic of borders as barriers.

What explains this paradox? There is clearly a definitional tension at the heart of the discourse that has tended to pull it in different directions. What is problematic with current articulations is that it fails to distinguish between two parallel narratives at work- the more familiar and contemporary notion of subregionalism as a state-led project from a more textured, complex historical understanding of it as a process. These dichotomies have also meant that the subregion tends to get suspended in a sort of 'double vision', caught between geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes. (Sparke 2006). Many of these faultlines have also cast long institutional shadows on India's federal design, straitjacketing the border region within a rigid territorial imagination. Competing statist pulls of assimilation and autonomy explain why India's autonomy model today resembles less the institutional innovation of asymmetric federalism enshrined in the Constitution and

more the top-down, linear thinking of the distant Centre that it has morphed into. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken about the idea of cooperative federalism being mooted by as a 'new partnership between the Centre and the states' (Prime Minister's Office, 2015) If border regions have to be drivers of the emerging subregional imaginary, it will surely take more than just rhetoric to get there.

CHOREOGRAPHED TRADE: AIMING LOW, HITTING LOWER

These dualisms explain the range of contradictions and distortions that one sees at India's eastern borders. The reopening of border *haats* since 2011 has today ended up becoming an exercise in choreographed trade with a pre-selected list of vendors and vendees carrying out trade in a pre-selected list of goods and operating within a pre-demarcated radius of 5 kms on either side of the border. The enormous discretionary powers wielded by agents of state also can accentuate several of these dichotomies at the borders. For instance, at the border *haats* along the India-Bangladesh border, Customs and security officials actively discourage traders from deviations from the official list of approved trading items. The arbitrary cap of permitting only 25 vendors from each side to trade has been a growing source of frustration with traders on both sides. Is it any wonder then that a resumption of border trade has not translated into a revival in trade?

Another sobering example of the gap between rhetoric and reality is the unfortunate status of Moreh, Manipur's border town adjoining Myanmar. It was widely expected that the 165 km-long Moreh-Tamu highway built by India in 2001 to connect Moreh in Manipur to Tamu in Myanmar would serve as a gateway to Southeast Asia. But this potential has remained unrealized due to an abdication of responsibility by the Centre to the border citizen. This is clearly borne out by the fact that National Highway 39 (renamed NH-2), Manipur's critically important lifeline and its principal freight route continues to remain hostage to a cycle of crippling blockades and disruptions deleteriously affecting border trade. Needless to say, the Centre's lack of will to ensure the safety of a critical lifeline has heightened levels of public alienation across the region.

Much of this also draws unflattering attention to the dilapidated and often non-existent infrastructure at its own borders. Take the case of the Petrapole-Benapole border crossing that handles more than 50 per cent of the bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh. The state of border infrastructure is definitely not for the faint-hearted. Further, despite the fact that medical tourists from Bangladesh coming to India for treatment constitute the bulk of

passengers at the border crossings, there is no provision for stretchers or trollies. Power outages are common on the Indian side of the Land Customs Station (LCS), whereas Bangladesh has managed 24/7 power supply at its side of the LCS through solar panels and an innovative energy mix. Clearly, due to these multiple contradictions India's 'new' reading of borders has ended up 'building half bridges'. (Kurian 2014b)

SUBTERRANEAN SUBREGIONALISM(S)

There are interesting examples across India's borderlands that are beginning to break the 'territorial trap' in innovative ways. The paper argues for the need to look at subterranean processes that are subverting the idea of borders as territorial dividers and bringing together a new set of actors with an interest and stake in deepening subregional integration. These dynamic processes constitute, what the paper calls subterranean subregionalism(s), a form of integration that mainstream research and policy has so far chosen to ignore.

Local state actors are beginning to script modest success stories and displaying a measure of stamina and resolve for protracted institutional bargaining with the Centre. Northeast states have begun lobbying the Centre for the resumption of border trade points and demanding access to markets in neighbouring countries. The effects of this lobbying can be seen in India's recent decision to open 70 border *haats* along its border with Bangladesh, with 35 along the border with West Bengal; 22 at the Meghalaya border; five in Tripura and four in Assam. (Chakraborty, 2014)

Direct transborder subnational links have on occasion bypassed the Centre to break logjams and bottlenecks. An interesting case in point is the 726 MW Palatana thermal power plant in Tripura made possible due to the crucial cooperation extended by Bangladesh. Palatana is an interesting instance of robust transborder ties between Tripura's Manik Sarkar and the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh. This agreement with Bangladesh was effectively brokered by Jitendra Chaudhury, Tripura's Industries and Commerce Minister and allowed the passage of heavy equipment for the power plant through the Chittagong-Ashuganj route. Tripura also successfully secured cooperation from Bangladesh to give transit through its territory to transport 10,000 tons of food grains to Tripura. This has resulted in significant breakthrough in savings in time and costs cutting the distance from 1650 kms to 350 kms. The longer route through north Bengal via the Chicken's Neck would have involved switching from broad gauge to narrow gauge after Lumding in southern Assam besides cumbersome unloading and reloading of cargo.

India's border states are also beginning to establish direct links with local authorities of neighbouring countries. Mizoram and Tripura recently hosted District Magistrate-level meetings with their counterparts in Bangladesh to strengthen transborder governance capacity. There are also interesting instances of direct links between the border states of India and Bangladesh in the social sector. Manipur and the neighbouring Sagaing Division in Myanmar cooperated in 2013 to facilitate a private sector-led health sector initiative in Myanmar's Sagaing Division. Cross-border cooperation between local authorities in this instance has proved critical for the project's success with the Chief Ministers of Mandalay and Saigang expediting modalities. These initial successful forays are also encouraging Manipur to initiate plans to develop the state as a healthcare hub for the region including Southeast Asia and offer premium services at costs that are a fraction compared to international rates. Another instance of subnational economic diplomacy is Mizoram's recent negotiation with the neighbouring Chin state in Myanmar to facilitate rice imports. Aizawl has creatively tapped the natural advantage of an unfenced border of 404 kms with Myanmar and a long history of

shared ethnic identities between Myanmar's Chin Hills and Mizoram's Lushai Hills.

FROM PROJECT TO PROCESS

India's subregional diplomacy is clearly producing a modest but valuable space for subnational actors to become active partners in framing and fashioning the terms of India's subregional engagement. These have the potential to recognise the local stakeholder as a critical actor on a range of shared transborder issues such as trade, energy, environment, land use and transport. Retrieving the notion of subregionalism as process can help locate Indian IR within a larger historical template of social, economic and cultural flows that constitute the lived experiences of border communities. It is these 'connected histories' that have to be at the centre of any new rethinking on borderlands. It is time to turn the page back and recall these 'histories of Asian cosmopolitanism' to remind ourselves that the contemporary notion of Northeast India as a landlocked region has little or no historical credence.

REFERENCES:

Blatter, J., M. Kreuzer, M. Rentl and J. Thiele. 2008. "The foreign relations of European regions: Competencies and activities" *West European Politics* 31 (3): pp. 464-490.

Chakraborty, Sujit. 2014. "70 Indian border markets to be open to Bangladeshis", *Business Standard*, 10 October.

Criekemans, D. 2008. 'Are the Boundaries between Diplomacy and Paradiplomacy Watering Down?', Paper presented at the Second Global International Studies Conference/WISC, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 23-26 July.

Duchacek, I. 1990. 'Perforated Sovereignties: Towards a Typology of New Actors in International Relations' in H. Michelmann and P. Soldatos P eds. *Federalism and International Relations*, Oxford University Press.

Hocking, B. 1993. *Foreign Relations and Federal States*, London, Leicester University Press.

Kurian, Nimmi 2014a. *India China Borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre*, Sage.

Kurian, Nimmi 2014b. "Building Half-Bridges: India's Northeast and the 'New' Reading of Borders", *Man and Society: A Journal of North-East Studies*, Vol. 11, pp.42-55.

Prime Minister's Office, 2012 accessed at <http://www.narendramodi.in/co-operative-not-coercive-federalism-for-strong-republic>

Sparke, M. B. 2006. A Neoliberal Nexus: Economy, Security and the Biopolitics of Citizen-ship on the Border. *Political Geography* 25(2): 151.