



**The Changing Narrative:
India's Northeastern Borders
with Bangladesh and Myanmar**

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From the Director's Desk

It gives me great pleasure to announce the launch of the AsCon monograph series from the Asian Confluence. Born in 2012 as an initiative of Divyajeevan Foundation, the Asian Confluence initiates, stimulates and accelerates revival of the shared civilizational values between the peoples of India and our Eastern neighbourhood. The Asian Confluence initiative promotes research, advocacy and training programs that promote people to people contact between the various countries of the region at an academic and cultural level, fostering better understanding on environmental, educational and socio political issues of the region, complementing similar efforts already underway.

In a landmark conference titled the “Shillong Dialogue“ in 2014, held in collaboration with the Indian Council for World Affairs, the Asian Confluence launched a flagship concept , “The Intelligent Third Space” . Complementing the first “first” and “second” spaces of government and large commercial consideration respectively, the “third space” is of people for their own engagement as well as with other sectors. The space is vibrant and intelligent daring stakeholders for innovative and out of the box solutions. The Asian Confluence has aimed to provide an institutional framework to this space promoting an open space for cultural and intellectual exchanges beyond borders, encouraging people to people contact and advocacy for policy frameworks that support the vision.

The role of academia in providing thought leadership to this space is key. Our peoples are bound by a common geography and history and yet separated by borders. The AsCon monographs authored by senior and established academics and policy makers aims to provide thought leadership, and providing stimulus and trigger points for the academic and strategic communities to take forward the discourse.

The Asian Confluence invites scholars and experts to contribute to this ongoing series as a collective and joint mission. We will be looking forward to receiving such proposals in our commitment to enrich the “Third Space” further.



To Dishari
My creative power house

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Abstract

Borders necessarily are a core and constitutive element of international order but with an element of inherent dynamism. International relations literature has thus given way to new approaches to understanding its evolving character, from one that is a purely geographic line to that of zone to a more encompassing interdisciplinary concept. While the basic understanding of borders is that of a barrier, the narrative surrounding borders are increasingly widening to include a functional space moving far beyond the physical territorial marker it provides for the modern nation states.

This is also relevant in the South Asian context especially at the borders, India shares with Bangladesh and Myanmar. At specific points in the borders, cross border activities have been initiated which have been well received by the local residents on both sides. Much of the mobility that this region was used to received a setback with the partition and subsequent developments in the sub-continent. While the formal introduction of cross border activities at the borders have seen a gradual momentum, under the present positive bilateral trajectory that India shares with these two neighbours, it is possible to widen the scope of activities to provide for greater services which are evidently unavailable at these borders areas. The residents on both sides have similar life style and livelihood patterns and remain largely deprived from the benefits of mainland experiences. Cross border activities can be widened to go beyond the mono dimensional approach that has dominated the narrative for many years. The contemporary positive conditions on the ground provide a facilitating atmosphere for developing a mutually beneficial and cooperative experience through common education, health services and cultural activities. Enabling a sustained people to people connect would give way for greater understanding of each other and help address many of the gaps both at the bilateral and at the domestic levels. Briefly, the view of the borders needs a transformation. They can be a force multiplier in India's larger foreign policy goals and in its specific vision for its neighbourhood.

“Man made borders not to limit himself, but to have something to cross.”

-Anonymous

Introduction

Borders necessarily are a core and constitutive element of international order but with an element of inherent dynamism. International relations literature has thus given way to new approaches to understanding its evolving character, from one that is a purely geographic line to that of zone to a more encompassing interdisciplinary concept. While the basic understanding of borders is that of a barrier, the narrative surrounding borders are increasingly widening to include a functional space moving far beyond the physical territorial marker it provides for the modern nation states.

Depending upon the nature of the polity, borders assume varying salience and relevance. Borders are perceived as rigid lines where state is the most important subject, and borders functions as the line for inviolability of its sovereignty and national interest, while others develop broader utility of them as gateway to international markets and greater outreach beyond its own boundaries. Borders while remaining connected with territorial and sovereignty identifications actually include a much broader functional scope as zones of cooperation. As is widely seen the lives and livelihood of the communities on the borders often seem to share an overlapping character and ground experience that is relatively similar if not in sync with the ‘other’ across the borders. Indeed in the South Asian context and specially in India, the border communities have cross border linkages ethnic and often at variance with the mainland.

Borders and nation states have an intrinsic relationship; both mirror the nature and function of each other. Over the years borders while being the cornerstone in the understanding of nation state have also periodically evolved reflecting both the nature of the government and society within the structured context. Given the evolving and complex nature of borders it has been a focus of study for an array of scholars belonging to the discipline of international relations, sociologists, anthropologist and of course historians. The crucial role of borderland communities have been identified as organized polities within the larger institutional architecture of their state of belonging and have underlined the importance of their local culture.¹ Political geographers Anssi Paasi and David Newman contended that borders may be institutions but their very functions may be challenged. Economists generally disagree with all other social scientists, pointing to the limiting and restrictive role that borders play in trade and in flows of goods and people. Leading geographer Agnew argues that borders, ‘are not simply practical phenomena that can be taken as given. They are complex human creations that are perpetually open to question’²He further reiterates;

.... rather than reflecting an unambiguous sovereignty that ends/ begins at a border or that must be overcome as such, border thinking should open up to consider (a) territorial spaces as 'dwelling' rather than national spaces and (b) political responsibility for pursuit of a decent life as extending beyond the borders of any particular state. Borders matter, then, both because they have real effects and because they trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms. They not only limit movements of things, money, and people, but they also limit the exercise of intellect, imagination, and political will. The challenge is to think and then act beyond their present limitations³.

Since the last three decades new approaches are evident in the professional literature examining it through the lens of purely geographic one to more interdisciplinary ones. International relations views states and borders as dynamic and evolving with differing situations and circumstances.

As elsewhere, borders have also assumed a criticality in the Indian subcontinent. The history of the partition and its subsequent trajectory had a sobering effect especially in India and contributed towards shaping the perspective of its borders. Both the troubled memories of communal tension and hastily drawn up borders just before the partition has dominated the Indian narrative on border as well as the inability to overcome that and a number of conflicts at the borders have largely influenced the Indian perspective of its borders. Given the uneven bilateral ties in the neighbourhood India realised the necessity of ensuring border security and inviolability. As is known borders in this region are colonial and postcolonial constructs and institutionalizations of the borders of states are comparatively recent developments. Thus the journey of freedom struggle and consecutive developments influenced the views of the borders.

For long years this situation remained nearly the same. Despite the passage of time the developments in the neighbourhood has not been conducive towards changing the status quo in the bordering areas significantly. Indeed the western border that India shares with Pakistan has remained confined to limited activity and photo opportunities. Despite the cross cultural links and limited trade the borders on the western side, the relentless security transgression from across the border has essentially ensured the enduring rigid perspective of borders.

This paper focuses primarily on the possibilities of developing a cohesive cross border community to bridge the gap that exists at both physically and psychological levels. It will also premise the above argument on an underlying cooperative framework ensuring a secured environment for greater cross border interaction.

The paper thus begins with briefly tracing some of the theoretical studies on borders and globalisation and developmental patterns have expanded the scope impacting upon providing a more comprehensive understanding of borders and its functions.

The second section briefly reviews India's eastern border and the changing nature of India's engagement with Bangladesh and Myanmar through its land frontiers. The environment on Indian borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar have both undergone changes and has possibly set the tone for a new discourse that encompasses not only improved bilateral neighbourly ties but will also improve local and regional cooperation.

This paper is also an attempt to see if it is possible to go beyond the nationalist construct. In the Indian context, borders essentially outline the physical contours of its international boundaries without taking into consideration the local conditions or possibilities. Much of the formal border activities have been decided from a distance and rarely has factored in local dynamism or behavioural patterns. More so the bordering regions have often been bypassed by the developmental activities of mainland India. The present Indian foreign policy thrust of 'Neighbourhood First' and the refocused 'Act East' policy both significantly impact upon the borders and is giving way to a new discourse of a cross border cooperative framework in both philosophical and physical terms. We have seen that borders became central to the nationalist agenda and given the present momentum the borders are assuming salience in the new construct that the Indian government is attempting to develop.

This paper is limited in its scope and will only attempt to highlight a specific role the border can contribute towards the closing the gap between two friendly neighbours and allow greater interaction at the borders factoring in local environment.

SECTION I

The Expanding Narrative at the Borders

Given the history of the Indian sub-continent, India and its South Asian neighbours viewed its borders as a reflection of its sovereignty. They perceived borders as one dimensional with a core function that was borne out of security considerations. That borders could also, be considered and developed as a spaces for connectivity and mutual development was a much later development. Borders essentially are viewed through the security prism and are a 'territorial' line linked to defence management. They primarily assume role of barriers that needs to be safeguarded through positioning of troops, walls, posts and wires rather than as windows of opportunity and possibility. Ironically, this region was once a source of continuous cross border flows of movement of, people and goods spreading myths and legends, poetry and religion. As has been asserted rightly " that borders and boundaries are central to both imaginations and understandings of South Asia is, perhaps, to understate the case. At the same time borders in South Asia, are spaces that engage a broader sweep of national and nationalist concerns over security, identity, trade, and territory. As such, they are palimpsests that articulate a range of regional narratives."⁴ Unfortunately the 20th century experience in South Asia has not been conducive to perceiving borderlands as "ways of conceptualizing social space and local identity, and the roles these have played in promoting or thwarting the development of modern states."⁵

With the partition of the subcontinent, borders in South Asia took on an identity that was both sensitive and critical and defined the understanding of the new nation states. Similarly in India the borders have been a source of constant focus of attention of academia and policy makers. The passage of seventy years has centred on keeping the borders safe and ensuring its inviolability. This conservative approach from policy makers', security establishment and in general the masses was the dominant narrative. Ironically many of on going discourses seemed removed from the ground situation at the borders. Several points in the border allowed for continuing cross border movement although with very little improvement in the local conditions and for the border population more often than not it has been about prolonged hardship and constant struggle.⁶

Before we attempt to examine the border that India shares with its neighbours and the nature of transformation that is taking place moving the discourse from a security paradigm to a cooperative framework it is useful to briefly see how the narrative of borders through the international lens has been moving.

Nature of Borders

According to one school of thought the state has to manage its borders as a fundamental role of making peace and order in its inner and outer environment. The border essentially defines the limits of state sovereignty.⁷ Although this school also factors in the functional evolution of borders as propounded by authors like Minghi, borders are generally perceived as being under the control of the state and any cross border activities are to be necessarily been controlled by the state.⁸

The Liberal's argument is centred on the universal condition of world politics being globalization. States are, and always have been, embedded in a domestic and transnational society, which creates incentives for economic, social and cultural interaction across borders. State policy may facilitate or block such interactions.⁹ Political scientist Malcolm Anderson argues about the impact of globalisation on the nature and understanding of borders. Increasingly, the sovereign state was losing control, due to motilities it could not contain within its borders.

Borders are quintessentially of evolving nature. They are increasingly being viewed as 'dwelling' spaces rather than national spaces and as territorial space which enables political responsibility for pursuit of a 'decent life' as extending beyond the borders of any particular state. The author further argues¹⁰

We need to change the way in which we think about borders to openly acknowledge their equivocal character. In other words, we need to see a border not as that which is either (a) fixed or (b) as such must be overcome, but as an evolving construction that has both merits and problems that must be constantly reweighed. My main normative commitment is to the idea that the answer to what borders do should always be related to the overriding ethical concern that they serve and not undermine human dignity and what Jonathan Seglow has called 'the right to a decent life'

Borders being complex phenomena cross-border activities which address only the geopolitical dimension of the border tend to fully explain its nature. Evidently, they are multifaceted, multilevel and interdisciplinary institutions and processes transecting spaces in not only administrative and geopolitical but also cultural, economic and social terms. While not making a case for making the border itself redundant it is useful to consider the space as a “thin” border clearly demarcating a political and administrative space, at the same time it allowing for different forms of coexistence to emerge and flourish irrespective of the underlying state border.¹¹ Thus while national borders are central to both the state and its organisation of a political community they are also spaces for socio cultural activities.

Several empirical studies at the borders point, highlight the struggle of the border residents with ‘conflicting feelings of hostility and humility, independence and interdependence, confrontation and cooperation’ in relation to the security apparatus at the borders.¹² The securitised borders have exemplified “struggles between wanting to reject restraints placed on them by customs guards and wanting to maintain working relations with those same guards in order to extract more profit from their presence are constantly pulling locals in opposite directions.”¹³ Changing circumstances and times subsequently led to the idea of flexible borders. Perceiving borders as corridors of opportunity and one that empowers the people residing there is finding greater response in contemporary experiences. The borders necessarily are an intrinsic part of any cooperative framework that states espouse. Ideas of cooperation, peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit can be reflected through the borders too.

Three kinds of function of borders have been identified. The first function of borders aims to delimit the territorial sovereignty of a state in order to distinguish what is included and what is excluded. Flowing from this it is also a tool of separation constituting the second function through which the border can regulate the degree of control, altering and protection. The third function, constitutes its role as an interface. Different aspects are associated with this quality such as contact, exchange, collaboration or even confrontation. The functions of separation and interface are always potentially present and it is the nature and degree of any international border.¹⁴ Flowing from this social scientist have suggested that the first approach to cross-border region-based integration is to consider the development of economic and social interactions on either side of a border. This focus on exchanges and relationships that link formerly separate social spaces is part of the so-called ‘flow approach’ and is dominant in economic geography and regional science.¹⁵

The above can find a distinct correlation with the changing paradigm of the Indo-Bangladeshi and Indo-Myanmar borders under review. The borders with both formal structures and informal patterns often gave way to contradictory narratives.

SECTION II

The Borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar

In recent years India along with many of her South Asian neighbours has been enjoying sustained and steady economic growth. This however has not coincided with expansion of regional or bilateral trade within South Asia. Undoubtedly, the limited and near stagnant bilateral trade India shares within South Asia has been in sharp contrast to the quantum leap India's trade with China and USA have taken in the past decades. Evidently, the neighbourhood has not been politically or economically attractive for India (except in spurts and starts) and it is only recently that India's neighbourhood policies have been articulated and there appears a concerted effort to reinforce those ideas to improve India's ties within the region. One of the cornerstones of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy articulation has centred around developing a zone of peace and stability with friendly neighbours. The case for forging close, peaceful and cooperative ties with the neighbourhood has been made at various levels.

Brief History

In view of this, India has undertaken several measures in recent years towards strengthening neighbourly ties. These measures range from political to economic and presently are in various stages of conceiving, planning and implementations. One of the visible and immediate efforts has been in ensuring better connectivity. Several studies and reports have identified the lack of regional connectivity as one of the major constraints hindering regional growth and several studies point towards connectivity bringing important benefits.¹⁶

Arguably this was more deeply felt in the Northeast region which remained peripheral to the development pattern that rest of India had embarked upon. The eight northeastern (NE) states - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura - share long borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan while remain inked with mainland India through a narrow 21 km corridor known as chicken's neck. Less than one percent of the external boundaries of the region is contiguous with the rest of India and the remaining ninety-nine percent is international borders.

Indeed the partition of the subcontinent caused the severance of the inland water, road and railway communication through East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and access to the Chittagong port was lost. The Chinese take-over of Tibet and the virtual closure of border with Burma/Myanmar added to the isolation of the region. All these factors had an effect on the traditional routes for trade and services. The partition of India in 1947, which cut off the existing transport and communication facilities, dealt a severe blow to the economic prospects of the region. Northeast is endowed with an abundance of natural resources but the region continues to remain backward. It is endowed with numerous natural resources such as oil reserves, tropical forests, hydro-electricity potentials of the rivers, tea, coal, timber, silk and jute. Some of

these resources have been explored while others remain under-utilised. High rates of population growth, a restricted range of resources, labour immobility, restricted land market, volatile and uncertain political and social environment and largely subsistence economies are the defining characteristics of the region. Sluggish economic growth, poor infrastructure, lack of market accessibility and under utilisation of the natural resources of the region have plagued the economies of the states of the region.

The region continues to remain mainly agricultural and less than forty per cent of the geographical area is under cultivation. The prospects for modern industries are not bright, as there is a lack of local or regional market. It is possible to suggest that one of the important reasons for the economic stagnation of the Northeast is the socio-economic resistance of the people to change and the structural rigidity of a traditional society. The region has also been resistant to economic models of the mainstream that would not factor in the northeast on equal terms. The resentment of and movements against the outsiders have robbed the region of investments, which could have given fillip to economic development.

Various central governments have assisted the Northeastern states with subsidies, grants and special development package, much more in comparison to other states. However, investments in infrastructure and industries were negligible. The backwardness of the region and insurgency are inter-linked, the lack of economic development has fostered discontent and violence, and this in turn has impeded development. There is also a viewpoint that suggest insurgency fosters on easy rent as funds/grant is not a problem here, on the contrary, insurgents would draw a security rent by keeping development low so that the central largesse can continue unabated.

The lack of infrastructure has been responsible for the sluggish growth of industries in the region despite abundance of natural resources and endless planning to modernise the economy. Development and modernisation of the Northeast has been the victim of a vicious circle. Lack of infrastructure has hampered industrialisation and industrialisation has not materialised because of the poor infrastructure.¹⁷

According to some, the economic policy for the region has to be conceived differently taking into account its geo-economic and geopolitical predisposition. Economic policy should not be merely a matter of “quantum variation in monetary allocation”. After an analysis of the state of economies in the region and the constraints hampering their growth, the report argues in favour of free border trade with Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Tibet region of China. The report has suggested a common economic zone including Bangladesh as the “ultimate solution” to the economic woes of the Northeast.¹⁸

It is certainly no secret that the involvement of external powers, especially China, Pakistan Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar had complicated the environment within the Northeast. Internal fissures within various groups fuelled by external powers had held back the region for long.

The Shift

Three distinct shifts in the foreign policy domain finally ushered in a change in India's view of its two immediate neighbours, namely, Bangladesh and Myanmar and which may subsequently change the course of the ground situation on the borders. The first was the initiation of the Look East Policy and secondly the rapprochement with the Bangladesh and Myanmar. The third was the focus to make regionalism and sub regionalism effective in this region.

The initiation of the 'Look East' policy of the Indian government during the early 1990s for the first time introduced the perspective of development and growth for the Northeast. Unfortunately, while the erstwhile 'Look East' policy opened up significant bilateral cooperation with Southeast Asia and the ASEAN regional group, the Northeast region did not gain significantly under this new thrust.

Ironically, this led to a flurry of studies being undertaken, contributing to the greater understanding of the potential that the region offered. It was only with the coining of the 'Act East' policy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi - led government that the perspective about this region has undergone some changes. The government has not only positioned the Northeast as the gateway to Southeast Asia and beyond but, through multi-pronged efforts of a sustained engagement, developing physical connectivity and encouraging greater investment flows, has given rise to a distinct upbeat thinking about and in the region. To address this, the Narendra Modi Government unveiled a strong developmental plan consisting of building a network of roads and highways, organising investments fairs, encouraging tourism and building high level of educational institutions, but most importantly establishing a connectivity to not only mainland India but also with its immediate neighbours in the East. Presently many of these ideas remain limited to the drawing board. A few infrastructural projects like widening of road four lane highways between Dimapur to Kohima in Nagaland, holding a business fair for ASEAN countries in Imphal have been instances of the limited progress in the policy implementation.

Several reasons can be cited for this; firstly, the security establishment in India had for long dominated the policy perspective for this region and there was no political will to change the course. Several developments in the neighbourhood finally led to recognition of the hollowness of the policy of keeping the region insulated - and infrastructurally deficient - to safeguard it and the rest of the country from deeper incursions by aggressive extra regional player.

India, belatedly understood the criticality of improving its border zones and commissioned a large number of highways and other infrastructure development plans in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur. Construction of the four-lane highway between Dimapur and Kohima - travelling on it earlier constituted a driving nightmare - was a reflection of that political will.

Secondly, the thrust on border and infrastructure development was necessary to implement the sub regionalism that was necessitated in the sub-continent in the wake of ineffective SAARC regionalism. India wishing to increase its influence in the region would be ineffectual without being able to carry its neighbours with it.

Thirdly, in wake of the Indian federal system, the Northeastern state governments have recurrently blamed the Central government for its many woes. With three states governments' in the BJP kitty and looking to consolidate further in the elections shortly scheduled in three other states accusing the Centre for its lack of support may not be an excuse anymore.

The second initiative is towards improving its relation with two of its eastern neighbors, namely Bangladesh and Myanmar. There is a visible thrust through greater engagement and provision of infrastructure support and other fiscal measures. But the engagement needs to go beyond the conventional albeit legitimate argument that argues that the state invariably looks at the region as a geopolitical construct. Hence, the dynamism is not genuinely rooted in the political reality of the northeast; rather, it reflects New Delhi's approach to growth, a jaundiced view that is also a classic postcolonial conundrum.

Beginning with the Operation Golden Bird, conducted along the Indo-Myanmar border in the North-Eastern state of Mizoram during 10–21 May 1995 by Indian troops carrying out operations against insurgents in suspected areas.¹⁹ India has travelled a long distance with Myanmar which also underwent dramatic domestic changes from a tightly controlled military led regime to initiating façade of democratic norms. Indeed India's ties with Myanmar improved substantially after Gen. Maung Aye's visit to New Delhi in 2000, the landmark visit by President U Thein Sein in October 2011 and the return visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Naypyitaw in May 2012, the first such visit in 25 years. These exchanges have fundamentally changed the context.²⁰ Interestingly, while the international community has consistently focused on the governance issues in Yangon, it has tended to disregard other issues of integrating ethnic minority communities into the broader society and economy. Thus argument for providing greater foreign aid for the Border Areas should be seen and pursued as complementary to diplomatic efforts to restore democracy and help unite the long-divided country.²¹

Indo-Myanmar relations have seen a marked improvement in the past years while the present Indo-Bangladeshi bonhomie are reminiscent of the Indira-Mujib friendship era. The breakthrough occurred with coming of Awami League coalition in 2009 and Bangladesh addressing India's security concern robustly. Having set the mood, Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January 2010 resulted in signing of a joint communiqué that encapsulated the political willingness on both sides to engage with each other. The ensuing discussions and agreements between the two sides were unprecedented. The four day visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister to India set forth a comprehensive framework of cooperation and development. Apart from security, the gamut of discussion included trade and investments to connectivity to education as well as culture. Without a doubt, there was mutual emphasis on taking forward bilateral trade and economy. Prime Minister Hasina personally assured Indian businessmen of 'all possible assistance and cooperation' at the same time encouraging Bangladeshis to avail the business opportunities that India offers.²²

In this post ninth Jatiya Sangsad election period, India and Bangladesh began to work in earnest to address each other's problems. Dhaka's political will to address India's security concern was evident from the

outset. India found ways and means to address some of Bangladesh's longstanding demands. Its readiness to dilute the trade barriers, its willingness to consider Bangladesh's fears on Tipaimukh dam and border conflicts, as well as its agreeing to Bangladesh's demand for transit to Nepal and Bhutan, reflected sheer attitudinal shift. The Land Boundary Agreement, measures for free bilateral trade, and extradition treaty all these significant achievements were possible due to the change in the bilateral atmosphere. The initial one billion dollar credit line which was subsequently increased to over US\$ 4.5 billion by 2017 totalling over US\$ 8 billion has linked the two neighbours through various common infrastructural projects that have not only connected the borders through water, road and rails, but also through energy grids.

India and Myanmar bilateral relations have risen from US\$ 12 million in early eighties to US\$ 2.18 billion in 2016-17. Indo-Bangladesh trade has also seen a gradual growth to over US 7 billion in 2017, both the bilateral trade figures fall far below the potentials that was expected. Several studies point towards potential for greater robust economic ties with both these states. Indeed regional transport corridors have been argued to be a primary determinant of greater economic linkages. Improved regional connectivity facilitates the flow of goods and factors across borders which enables countries to benefit from a better relocation of resources. Further as suggested earlier too, transportation networks linking neighboring countries enlarge market size and help national economies to grow.²³

Thirdly, India's thrust towards regional groupings. The changing political landscape in both of India's eastern neighbours has led to positive bilateral relations and also opened up the scope of increasing the connectivity linkages to include sub-regional levels. As is well documented regionalism in contemporary South Asia has been unremarkable. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) became ineffective on account of the continued mistrust between India and Pakistan. Unable to move SAARC forward India began exploring other options of sub regionalism. Presently India is pursuing two regional initiatives in its neighbourhood. The subgrouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) will introduce seamless cross-border trade and transportation through signing of the Motor Vehicle Act but has been held back on account of Bhutan expressing reservation over environmental, commercial and security concerns. This is certainly not the first of the sub-regional attempts in this region. Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC) was one such grouping that also fell through over political differences between India and China. There were few more similar attempts but none achieved any significant gains. BIMSTEC (The Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) was one such dormant organisation but is being infused with a fresh lease of life. BIMSTEC comprises five South Asian states Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and two Southeast Asian immediate neighbours in the region Myanmar and Thailand. Although bereft of any significant progress in its first two decades India is keen to make this organisation functional as it is suitably poised to complement Indian national efforts to tap the potential in its northeast region as well as its bilateral efforts to engage with the adjacent neighbourhood states.

A functional BIMSTEC organisation will not only be the precursor to establishing trade and connectivity and creating cross border value chains with the member states but will also generate an economic momentum that will vitalise the land and sea route connections to mainland India. Bangladesh and Myanmar two of India's eastern neighbours plays a critical role in making BIMSTEC effective. The bilateral cross border connectivity and transport corridors India is developing with both of them will all come together for a regional transportation and connectivity network cobweb that will complement many of the other BIMSTEC common agendas.

Possibilities at the Borders

It is within this context that this paper would like to focus on two aspects of bilateral ties one that falls within the security sector and the other that falls within the people to people (PtP) sector. Both although distinct can actually alter the ground situation to capture not only the imagination of the local population on both sides but also more importantly create the framework for many of the larger cross border initiatives that India has expressed a strong intention to improve. The initiatives include not only the development of cross border infrastructure but also alongside undertake measures for greater facilitation of trade and services and ease of doing business hopefully, in the way ahead.

The large road and railway network that is being planned is also running into issues on account of terrain and security. With reference to the India Myanmar land links, India is extending the 360 km long road between Moreh- Mae Sot to pass through Mandalay and link Northeast India and Thailand in Southeast Asia. The India, Myanmar and Thailand highway will connect with the Kaladan Multi-modal transit project that would link Kolkata port with landlocked Mizoram via Myanmar into economic highways with special economic zones. The main artery of the 2,800-km K (Kolkata)-2-K (Kunming) corridor is nearly ready. A stretch of less than 200 km, from Kalewa to Monywa in Myanmar, needs to be upgraded to an all-weather road apart from a short segment in India's Northeast region that needs upgrading. Apart from the infrastructural issues this route poses political and security problems as it enters insurgency related issues. Possibility of connecting Mizoram with Myanmar's port of Sittwe through the Kaladan River would provide all the landlocked north-eastern States access to the sea. Indeed the Rhi-Tiddim (80.178 km) and Rhi-Falam (151.5 km) roads connecting Mizoram with Myanmar's bordering Chin state and onto Mandalay are other identified potential routes to boost bilateral trade. The double lane hilly road stretch from Aizawl to Zokhawthar is in better condition, although trade through this route is extremely limited. Although the Zokhawthar Land Customs Station has been operationalised, the weighbridge poses a challenge: headloads are the only means for goods to move across. However if the route from Aizawl to Agartala is improved, and the transit trade through Bangladesh is realised, this will become the shortest land route connecting Myanmar and Kolkata. Indeed, the Manipur connectivity with Myanmar through the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road is fully operational. But problems of maintenance continue to plague the route and this, coupled with security issues, have slowed down traffic considerably. The Avakhung

land custom station in Phek district Nagaland has been identified as a border trading point with Myanmar, but as yet there is no progress on this front. It was also decided to improve the 57 km of the old WWII Stilwell road from Lekhapani in Assam to Pangsung Pass on the Indo-Myanmar borders, although the roads on the Myanmar side too would need to be restored to make it operational.

There certainly is a buzz at the moment about the imperative to improve physical connectivity, but NE throws up several challenges to the optimisation of its potential at the present level of development. Clearly, the two large issues that remain unresolved- of terrain and security – will prevent any significant proposal from being fully implemented. The undulating, hard-to-traverse terrain makes it time consuming and difficult to build adequate infrastructure to support international trade. Maintenance is equally daunting in the face of harsh climatic conditions, and is often the cause of movement delay and loss of revenue. Even where infrastructure is in place, trading points are under-utilised due to various domestic compulsions and unrealistic policies. At present the basket of goods that are exported to South East Asia has very little contribution from the Northeast region. The type of goods that are allowed across the border is limited and non-reflective of the demands on the ground. This region will initially be a transit point before it begins to enjoy the spinoffs of trade and transport movement and becomes closely integrated with the entire cross border process.

As has been pointed out in a report ²⁴

...imports by India through the border is predominantly of third country goods (especially from China and Thailand) from Myanmar. This is nothing but a small index of natural supply-demand gap. However, it may be highlighted then checking such trade through land routes may help increase availability of similar products in a legal manner on both sides of the border. Finally, an important observation made during the stakeholders' consultation meeting was the confusion that prevails regarding the transition to normal trade from the previously permitted 62 items for border trade between India and Myanmar. The confusion emanated from the fact that there is an information gap regarding the allowable items of border trade. The traders at Moreh are not yet aware about the switch to normal trade.

While border trade with Myanmar has been converted to normal trade from 2015, it was noted that 10 points spreading across 4 states viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, have been identified for operationalising border haats. Both sides also agreed to explore opening of two new border trade points at Pangkhuwa and Zoninpuri.

The terrain of India's Northeast is a challenge for establishing railway links. So while India has one of the world's largest railway networks, the NE region has limited railway links with other parts of India the gaps in the network have been a cause for slow mobility of people and goods. But this has seen a dramatic change in recent times. In keeping with Indian Railways intentions to connect all state capitals in the Northeast region by March 2020, in an unprecedented and very welcome move five NE states – Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura railway tracks have been converted to

the broad gauge and as many as 29 new trains were introduced in the region in a span of just one year – 2016 to 2017.²⁵ Indeed the 120 km Lumding-Silchar broad gauge will connect the Barak valley in South Assam with Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram for goods movement and for passenger travel. More significantly, the planned 15.06-km line between Agartala and Akhaura in Bangladesh connecting West Bengal with Tripura will also then provide cross border linkages with Tripura and the entire Badarpur-Lumding-Guwahati-Siliguri route and has seen significant progress in the stretch, which will not only be a part of the Trans Asian Railway Network but will substantially shorten the rail distance between Agartala and Kolkata via Bangladesh – from the present 1,590 kms to 499 kms.

In order to establish a cross border link with Myanmar, Indian Railways is surveying a possible route from Sairang to Hmawngbuchhuah on Mizoram's southern tip, bordering Myanmar's Rakhine state which will link up with the yet to be completed Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. Geographical and security issues continue to hinder infrastructure development and its sustenance. For the same reasons airport links have also been difficult to build in the region. While there are massive expansion plans for the same including construction of airports and helipads, nine in Arunachal Pradesh, five each in Assam and Manipur, and one each in Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim, limited International flights are now operational from Guwahati but most of the cities apart from few capitals are not connected by air links as yet in the region.²⁶

Cooperative Security

India's Northeast region, although a critical connecting link between South and Southeast Asia, is clearly beleaguered with security issues, economic stagnation, and poor infrastructure. But none of the above will be possible without a modicum of security assurance from all the stake holders. As mentioned earlier many of the Indo- Bangladeshi infrastructure and connectivity projects was possible due to Bangladesh comprehensively addressing the security concerns similarly India opened up its bilateral trajectory with Myanmar once it was assured of its support to address the cross border movements of anti-India elements. With India keen to establish regional networks including that of an energy grid the possibilities of a close sub regional engagement is certainly on the cards. A cooperative framework of trade and services will need a stable structure to support that endeavour which has a comprehensive nature through a common security framework. While its useful to remember that unfortunately, the logic of security and that of development are not isomorphic development at the same time without the assurance of security coverage the development process is often stymied.

In the words of one of India's foremost security analyst, 'India will have to manage its relations with South Asia first, by expanding its comprehensive national power and by offering its neighbouring countries' the benefits of integration and second by countering the growing influence of external powers, particularly, China.'²⁷ This analyst has further explained how 'security and development' need to be given equal emphasis in any regional cooperative framework.²⁸

India and Bangladesh share a long densely populated border. Because of this, cross border crime, illegal border crossing and smuggling activities are quite high. The need of curbing the cross border activities and crime, some incident of firing along the borderline has been recognised by both countries. The leaders of both sides had underscored the need for both countries to cooperate actively on security issues. Thus, in order to maintain peace and tranquillity along the vulnerable patches and areas with view to work in close cooperation and coordination a MoU on Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) was signed on 30 July 2011.²⁹

Both India and Bangladesh have made significant progress in resolving the border issues, including border demarcation, in recent times. Given the history of trust deficit in the region the larger picture needs to be in place before a sustainable cooperative framework can be effective. Indeed India and Bangladesh have taken the first step towards a bilateral framework that has been extended to a sub-regional agenda and political will on both sides have amplified that possibility to a large extent.

In expectation that states especially border states would see the merit in working out a mutually acceptable cooperative security framework and resolve outstanding bilateral security issues it will be possible to develop and build upon the cooperative atmosphere including at the ground level in way that it positively impacts the population abutting the bordering regions of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

SECTION III

Widening the Cross Border Scope

Undoubtedly India suffers severe contradictions at its borders. The highly securitised systems in the borders in reality are inefficient and unable to deliver its purpose. Very limited thought has been given to improve the border management beyond the security paradigm and seventy years have gone by struggling with the prevailing ineptitude and inability to improvise a more imaginative and functional interactive space at the borders. Informal or illegal flows have been the norm rather than the exception at these boundaries. As mentioned earlier the borders between India and Bangladesh post-1971 became a barrier, with the discontinuation of cross-border movements. The official contact points at the borders were rudimentary and inadequate, at best. This adversely affected a large section of the border population whose lives, for a variety of reasons, were closely intertwined with the lands that now belonged to another state. Till few years ago the worst-affected were those who were confined within the small pockets of land known as 'enclaves' inside the neighbour's territory. India and Bangladesh preferred to view the border as a "territorial expression of state sovereignty," determining state control over it. Similarly the Indo-Myanmar borders are no different crisscrossing five northeast states. Consequent to the limiting of the cross border insurgency movement the two neighbours have enjoyed amicable ties for nearly two decades. The borders while enjoying an informal interactive space the security apparatus, continues to seek *raison de'tre* of its continued presence. The Indian official contact points at the borders with both Myanmar and Bangladesh are rudimentary and inadequate, at best. This adversely affected a large section of the border population

which, for a variety of reasons, was closely engaged with a borderland that now belonged to another state. Access to the mainland has been severely restricted owing to the peculiar circumstances. While India and its neighbours may have liked to view the borders as a clearly demarcated space with a clearly defined political boundary, reality was quite the converse. The border complexities were many. The geographical contours of the borders India shares with Bangladesh (4,096.7 kms). or Myanmar(1643 kms) made it difficult to draw and maintain boundary lines in the delineated border sections, and, most importantly, the borders were uneven, overlapping and easily permeable, making them a source of continuous bilateral tension. Ironically, irrespective of the official positions, local cross border transgressions has been an ongoing phenomena.

Globalisation has led to a momentum that has captured the imagination of South Asia too. Today countries in the region and outside are seeking greater interdependence through a connected infrastructure to obtain greater market access and exploitation of the existing natural resource endowments. This has led to re- examination of the borders in India too.

Evidently, in the European context the first approach to cross-border region-based integration is to consider the development of economic and social interactions on either side of a border. This focus on exchanges and relationships that link formerly separate social spaces is part of the so-called ‘flow approach’ and is dominant in economic geography and regional science.³⁰ Although there are several and distinctly dissimilar conditions between South Asia and Europe It is similarly possible to argue there exists a similar intrinsic social and economic interaction in the borders that India share with Bangladesh and Myanmar. The formal structures that were developed never quite fully exploited the ongoing dynamics and on the contrary led to large flow of huge informal and illegal activities. Given India’s new thrust towards engaging more closely with the neighbours it is worthwhile to examine how the ideas also can involve the local population on the bordering region. This would entail

1. Providing beyond the peripheral existence the local population on both sides have been subjected to for so many years and also
2. Allow the local dynamics to develop into a larger spin off for exchange of trade and services which till now have largely left out the bordering region from any meaningful cross border engagement. Inevitably the flows ought to be autonomous reflecting the local resonance and not necessarily remain hostage to the geopolitical necessities of states as has been the case for long.

With respect to these NE borders two levels of activity can also be noticed (1) horizontal relations between similar governments or government organizations, which have traditionally been described as governance issues, and (2) vertical relations, which have been understood as intergovernmental relations.³¹ While the popular approach has been seeking for ethnic overlap cultural similarities as factors for cross border engagements, it is curious to note one of the successful attempts at cross border cooperation in Europe are exceptional on two counts.

Border Communities

First, as borders did not evolve organically but came into being by decree, they are not those almost-natural frontiers of social communication, surrounding populations assimilated into one culture, that Karl Deutsch describes in his model of nation-building. Instead, they incorporate various nations, peoples, and groups at different stages of national mobilization, while leaving out others with similar claims to a European identity. The second peculiarity of the common European border is that it cuts not between two identities, as is usual with borders, but between a wealthy “in-group” and an ill-fated “out-group.”³²

Borrowing from studies identifying different approaches to understanding the changing concept one that finds resonance in the Indian border regions in the concept of the borderscape that ‘highlight the constitutive role that borders in modernity have played in the production of political subjectivity, thereby showing the potential of the borderscape as a space for liberating political imagination from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organisation of new forms of the political and the social become possible’.³³ Arguably the border narratives and genealogies of the European and South Asian cases are entirely different and does not stand to any cogent construction of the same the philosophical concept is possible to be adapted and improvised for cause of greater common good.³⁴ The two specific borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar are poised to include much more than what was initially envisaged as local dynamics can bring in spill over activities much beyond what was initially planned. India’s initiation of border infrastructure development with both Myanmar and Bangladesh assumes greater relevance in the backdrop of the agreements that India and Bangladesh signed in January 2010 to increase regional connectivity as well India’s trade agreements with Myanmar of 2005.

One of the first successful attempts of engaging at the borders have been the opening of the border haats³⁵ at the Indo-Bangladeshi borders;

At present the localised border ‘haats’ (markets) on the Indo-Bangladeshi borders (two at Tripura and two at Meghalaya are presently in operation) have gathered momentum providing direct contact between buyers and sellers. The limited opening up of the border is essentially for the local communities living along the border. The vendors selling their products in border haats are local residents who live within a five-km radius. It has been estimated that bilateral trade worth of US\$ 20mn may take place annually between India and Bangladesh through these haats. These haats would facilitate the marketing of some of locally produced items among the people living in inaccessible areas of both the countries. In fact border haat is not a new concept, rather reintroduced in 2011 after 40 years of its last function in the region.³⁶ This is indeed considered by local communities as returning of their old good days, as their lack of access to market is considered the main reason for their impoverishment in the post Bangladesh period.

These haats, once informal arrangements have now been given formal structure and have generated a specific economic activity and inadvertently has opened up avenues for social interaction. Although this space is yet to be fully explored, the cultural and social connect is undeniable. The periodicity of these

haats have led to developing sustained economic opportunities around the borders as well as providing avenues to understanding the common cultural and social ethos. The possibility of developing the haats into much larger space for interaction is undeniable. The people to people connect in this space can be given greater salience through a more creative interpretation of existing mechanisms.

Indeed it is not uncommon to have fields and unused land available at borders which are not fully utilised. Border haats usually held in the open space have some limited infrastructure available usually meant for the security agencies. To begin with Border Community Zones built with shared resources for common good needs grater explorations. Ranging from cultural interaction during fixed hours it can include medical facility as that more often than not is not easily available in these far away from the mainland areas. A limited physical space can provide the delivery mechanism for many of the needs of the local populace that a peripheral region has been unable to provide for.

By and large youth from heartland and urban spaces have access to quality education, children from rural economy and border zones are unable to access the same. Indeed to provide people living on the border zones a better life and greater stakes in creation of wealth and resources they need to be provided with greater access to opportunities. Border areas in most states in the region are at the same level of development. Poor infrastructural facilities given limited available resources impede the opportunities available. But these are the very areas which can be tapped for creation of common physical spaces for nurturing of cultural and natural heritage. Conceiving border community zones for an outreach to population at the borders can address the huge gaps that remain between the urban and non-urban population in India and Bangladesh and Myanmar.

A shared border community experiences can transform the nature of lives on each side. The social and economic environment on both sides of borders are often similar, the livelihood patterns, the available educational opportunities even cultural practices. Thus creating an interactive space for building a common knowledge system through interaction and exchange with the local population on each side cannot only provide basic amenities most required but also de-securitize the border zones to a large extent. The sharing of best practices from local experience would be an inevitable gain from informal interactions. The space would be readily available for issues of climate change and its prevention and mitigation, agricultural methods, simple vocational training and issues that are common and beneficial to all. Trans-border community living has to be incubated for creating connected minds and hearts. An entrepreneurial culture can thus be encouraged through concerted efforts by both state and civil society organisations. While India is contemplating enhancing cross border trade through creating cross border value chains in agro products and floriculture these local community spaces can be the springboard for such activities.

Further to social and economic activities getting traction the possibility of developing a common school curriculum for children may be explored. Differences in languages would have to be bridged through a deeper understanding of the mutual needs on both sides. There would be issues over language that would require further detailing. The security concerns need to be addressed through issuance of biometric

identity cards and a full mapping of the population, the development of border zones that become an interactive space rather than a dividing line will enable creation of an integrated economy and stable friendly neighbourhood. While it has to be conceded that biometry and interactive space are difficult bedfellows it is hopeful that the positive spinoff would enable the stakeholders of government and local population to view the process through an alternative perspective.

Distance education has been well established within India. The Indian apparatus that exists can be expanded to include greater geographical and subject bandwidth for imparting quality education far and wide. Transmission of distance education can be in a variety of languages as demanded by the cross border population. Given Indian technological advancement distance education can reach out to different audiences with different needs.

India shares border with Myanmar at Manipur, Mizoram, Nagland and Arunahal Pradesh. Some have formal structures in place, such as the market at Moreh-Tamu, which has limited exchange of local produce. The Northeast and Myanmar are yet to have a full-scale exchange of goods and services through the land border.³⁷

Arguably, while border trade holds huge potential, including facilitating buyer and seller interaction, the flooding of Chinese and Thai goods through this route need to be addressed. Similarly, the other border crossing at Rih- Zhoukathar remains under-utilised. The infrastructure is minimal and hardly conducive to providing impetus to trading. A concerted effort is required to provide the population with goods that are in demand replacing the limited items that is traded at present. Sheer lamenting over the problem cannot address the problem. Encouraging local investments for local produce and indigenous production is worth examination. This apart, the issue of people mobility and movement needs re-examination. Nagaland enjoys open borders with Myanmar the village Longwa with Konyak population overlaps on both sides and continue to enjoy a free flow of social and cultural interaction. Also for Tuensang district of eastern Nagaland, the Khamniungan people have their brethren across the borders and for long have maintained direct contacts without any direct intervention from the member states. The issue of people movement have also not received much attention given the conducive local conditions.

Mobility and Movement

Borders are also through which peoples' movement occurs. Migration continues to be an issue of concern for India. This region also has a thriving informal labour movement given the porosity of the borders. Indeed in any discussion on borders and communities in the region the very different developments in Assam and elsewhere in NE raises a number of uncomfortable questions over sharing of life-worlds, community and flows. Regionalism in this region to significantly make any difference will need to factor in the history of the peoples movements and its impact on each member states. While governments are reluctant to admit and resolve the issue of informal labour mobility given the associated issues of human security state intervention alongside civil society support can address this issue. Search for equitable

solutions which will benefit both the demand and supply side will move the states towards the creation of a non-securitized atmosphere. As has been pointed out ‘Existing national governance structures do not have well-defined spaces that delineate the relationship between government responsibilities and the rights and obligations of public citizenship.’ The life and welfare of people is an integral element of any migration and population movement and cognition of that will remain the core to the welfare of the populace. While all the three states under review have some mechanism in place for movement of professionals, limited institutional arrangement exists for likes of blue collared workers. Regional cooperation to be effective needs to establish common standards to protect the rights of migrant population. This has been possible in developed and matured nation state systems, where the identification of cross-border region is based upon a functional approach to spatial integration, particularly the flows of cross-border workers. Similarly the US-Mexico border is understood as a specific product of globalisation, where cross-border labour flows and ‘twin plants’ industrialisation generate social, economic and environmental interdependencies which are part and parcel of the integration process. Unilateral mechanism applied by India have not been fully effective in dealing with this outstanding problem. Although economic factors have been cited as overriding cause of migratory trends political and security issues often cloud the issue and this problem needs both bilateral and a regional solution.

Conclusion

As pointed out by several studies, the extended South Asia region is yet to reach its full potentials in terms of its intra-regional trade and commerce. Deeper engagement has been held back due to low level of infrastructural development connecting the economies. India and its neighbours have shown a greater desire to work closely together bilaterally and at regional levels. This essentially also involves a changing perspective of each other.

For neighbours to converge and find common grounds to work together necessitates, mutual understanding of each other’s strengths and weakness. To seek mutual benefits for India and its neighbours Bangladesh and Myanmar in both bilateral and cross border engagement necessitates a commitment to rule of law and democratic governance.

There has been a breakthrough of sorts in recent times with India shedding its erstwhile inhibitions about offering complete transit between the landlocked states in the neighbourhood. Ranging from opening up transit through their land and water routes the possibilities of this area as a regional hub for trade and energy is now a reality. The regional attitudinal change is visible but only with complete implementations of the several policy decisions taken by the political leaders will the environment move towards a cooperative framework. The inclusion of the entire population including those at the borders in the spinoff of the benefits of new initiatives and developmental policies will enable a conducive environment for developing a modern welfare nation state. The quintessential nature of borders in the region will need to evolve with the changing political and economic trajectory. The benefits of interdependence will be touch all levels, domestic, bilateral and regional.

The regional neighbourhood has several outstanding issues which often tend to ambush any bilateral or regional initiatives. The Rohingya fleeing the borders from the Rakhine province into Bangladesh is a case in point. These instances invariably lead to hardening of individual positions. The geo politics of the region is complex and the shadows of the past has loomed large and for long. It is time to break out of the stereotypes and embrace the new world that all the political leaders seem committed to ushering in.

While several infrastructure projects are various stages of implementation many others are also being examined to increase the land, water and air connectivity in this region and subregion. Evidently, for India this region has assumed unprecedented prominence for both domestic and foreign policy factors as never seen before. The interests generated now centres around lending this region with a positive story in the journey of making of a 'New India'. And in that new imagination rests also the idea of changing the narrative at the borders too. The environment is conducive to not only increasing the state to state linkages but also people to people connect. The population living on the borders have enjoyed a transboundary association connect but that which never professedly supported by India nor its neighbours Bangladesh or Myanmar beyond a very rigid framework.

Increasingly there is a common refrain amongst the leaders of the region of moving towards the realisation of mutually beneficial journeys and destinies. Hopefully, the time is ripe for the drawing board plans to be finally translated into reality and changing substantially the scope and ethos of this regional neighbourhood. It is possible put in place a comprehensive cooperative paradigm to break the stereotype impasse at the border allowing for maximising the untapped dynamism available at the borders and its people. There appears a moment for not only greater bilateral convergence but also an enabling environment for regional overtures through greater understanding of the region and the common good. We hope the moment will not be lost.

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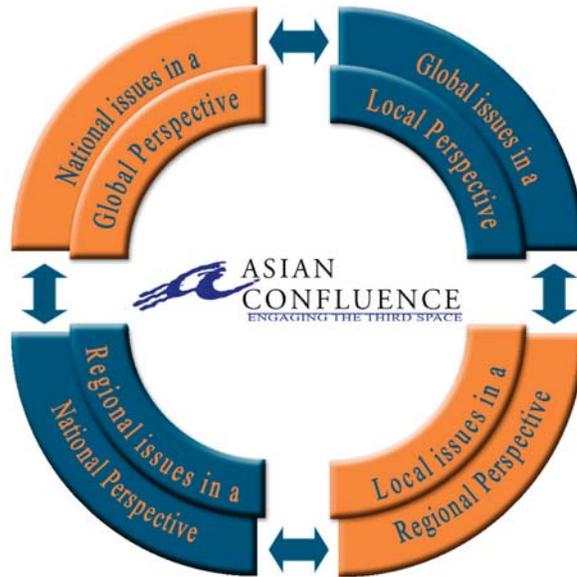
BRIEF PROFILE



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Dr Sreeradha Datta is Distinguished Fellow, Asian Confluence. Former director of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata she has also been a Fellow with Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. A student of international politics from Jadavpur University, Kolkata she earned her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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