The topic of whether creating a “multi-modal corridor” is feasible or not has been debated time and time again since the late nineties on various different political platforms and within expert circles, which would link Kunming, the capital of China’s south-western Yunnan Province, with one of India’s largest cities, Kolkata, located on the shore of the Bay of Bengal. The proposed Economic Corridor, which would involve creating new infrastructure for transport, energy and telecommunications, would run through the territory of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The plan for the Economic Corridor sees it becoming an integral element facilitating cooperation across a broad range of areas between the four BCIM countries (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar). In December 2013 the organization’s working group met in Beijing for the 9th BCIM Forum.

Comments were made after the Forum was held in acknowledgment of the benefits of both creating the BCIM Economic Corridor and the formation of a close partnership between the member states. Trade between BCIM countries has increased by almost 20 times since the noughties.

However, since then and up until the summer of 2018, there was no mention of BCIM (in popular media outlets). In the summer of 2018, a well-known Asian publication, the Diplomat, published an article with a bold heading: “Can an India-China ‘Reset’ Help BCIM?” The title of this article itself loudly indicates the fundamental reason, which led the project, the “BCIM Economic Corridor” to be half-forgotten for five years, and the possibility of reviving the idea...
Once again.

The fact is that this “reset” of relations between the two Asian giants, which was initiated by the leaders of the two countries during a meeting in Wuhan in the spring 2018, was necessary at a time when the relatively anemic competitive positioning of India and China (in the region and on the greater world stage) took a turn for the worse towards the beginning of fall 2017. The China-India border standoff on the Doklam Plateau, widely known as Doklam standoff has contributed to this situation.

The process itself did not fuel the transition from words to deeds to implement the main BCIM project. China planned the project as one of the many branches of its global political and economic development strategy, which has various different names, but the abbreviation BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is the one which is used most often today.

Another one of these projects is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is already being implemented and runs through the Pakistani part of what was once known as the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which India is claiming full ownership of amid a border dispute. Delhi has turned down Beijing’s repeated calls to join this project due to the fact that the CPEC passes through the “occupied part of Indian Kashmir”.

India has not abandoned the “BCIM Economic Corridor” project, which it has been a signatory of since 2013. But the way China–India relations are playing out has not helped the project to move forward. Therefore, the 2018 “Wuhan reset” was a good time to put the project back on the table.

The abbreviation BCIM was heard once again during a meeting in Beijing, when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina Wazed met with Chinese leader XI Jinping during her visit to China from July 3 to 5, 2019. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister emphasized that she was prepared to begin working on the BCIM Economic Corridor and on other general BRI projects.

It is worth noting that China is one of Bangladesh’s main trade and economic partners. For instance, the government of Bangladesh is providing financial support for the Chinese company China Major Bridge to build a two-tier bridge over the Padma River which is over 6 km long. This bridge may later become a key link, connecting the future BCIM Economic Corridor.

An article published in the Chinese newspaper Global Times comments on the outcome of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister’s visit, highlighting the fact that “[India’s] support [is] crucial” for the BCIM Economic Corridor project. The view this article takes is that this assessment of India’s role is likely to be politically motivated.

The mapped out route for the proposed “Corridor” shows a branch which connects Bangladesh’s largest port, Chittagong, which is also located along the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal. This means that the Indian Ocean could be accessed by traveling down through Myanmar and Bangladesh, and technically the project does not necessarily have to stretch to Kolkata.

But India is located in a region where “tensions” created by the two leading world powers (the US and China) are mounting around it (and in the wider world). It would be no exaggeration to say that there is a sort of “battle for India” being played out between them (as well as for Russia, and for Japan by the looks of it).

Therefore, the article which has been cited from the Global Times strongly emphasizes the fact that the growth in overall influence China has in Bangladesh does not clash with Indian interests, it is even favorable, and getting involved in the “BCIM Economic Corridor” will open up new opportunities for India in the Bangladeshi economy.

However, an article published in India’s leading newspaper, the Times of India, suggests that China itself has lost interest in this project due to the lack of interest India has shown in it up to this point. Another argument which backs up this suspicion was that the BCIM Economic Corridor was left out on the list of 35 projects named at the 2nd BRI forum, which was held in Beijing at the end of April 2019.

In June this year however, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang pointed out that the project remains under the jurisdiction of the four-state “working group”, which held its most recent (13th) forum.

It is also worth noting that in the summer of 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang invited the EU leadership to play a certain role and join the BCIM Economic Corridor. However, the top European countries are still uncertain and unsure about which policy they should take with China in general, particularly in relation to China’s key political and economic development strategy, the BRI.
The BCIM Economic Corridor project appears to be in the same state of uncertainty. The prospects of this project being implemented depend on a large number of factors of local, regional and global significance.

In the meantime, China will continue to strengthen its presence in Myanmar and Bangladesh, which are extremely important partners. This will involve implementing individual projects in their territory. Whether or not these projects will link up to form a unified chain, a “Corridor”, remains unclear.

It may be the case that this is not very important for China today.

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