

THE TRANS-HIMALAYAN GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The epicenter of Asian Mandala was in the Himalayas, encompassing both the Indian and Chinese geographical space in its encirclement. The distortion began after Western science of cartography started representing reality on a flat surface that demolished the conceptual circle of unity and infinite relations in cosmic sense under the Mandala thought. Cartography takes the linear line and it still guides the current foreign affairs of states and their policy prescriptions. However, in the Asian context, tools of cartography that pierced through borderlands and frontiers tended to split nationalities, societies and ethnicities. The people having lived in the interlaced flow of culture, social and economic interdependency, the cartographic borders become often illogical. Therefore, the application of "linearity of divide" in cultural homogeneity sparked off conflicts in the Asian landscape. The paper argues that the Asian paradigm of political order for Trans-Himalayas ought to be implemented to thwart radicalization of the Himalayas in changing geopolitical landscape. India and China should give up seeking a geometrical linear boundary and instead opt for creating soft cultural frontier along the trans-Himalayan region. A gradual transformation of the long militarized boundary into a humanized frontier zone will serve the interests of India, China and the Himalayan people.

Keywords: Asia, Buddha-Industry, cultural mobilization, Himalayas, *Jihadi*, Kashmir, Ladakh, *linearity of divide*, Padmasambhava, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership(RCEP), soft power, Xinjiang.

INTRODUCTION

The Himalayan belt so far remains geopolitically a dormant sort of zone. However, in its west, Afghanistan remains the epicentre of all the geopolitical eruptions affecting in all directions. Once the US and the NATO thins down their troop's presence there in the aftermath of 2014 draw down, the influence of the Taliban and the sway of extremist power are bound to grow and this time it will engulf the vast Eurasian space north of the Himalayas as well. Possibly, it is not just the geographical spread but also the intensity of conflict would widen. China inevitably cannot escape the rising tide of Islamic extremist resurgence. Revolts in Xinjiang are assuming a new dimesion. The *Jihadi* phenomenon, thus far new to China, is speedily penetrating in Xinjiang despite all the efforts made to prevent it by China's all-weather friend, Pakistan. It is going to be an unstoppable occurrence and it will change China's thinking and behavior that would affect India – China relations (hopefully in positive way) in the longer run.

In Tibet, the contradictions between the ethnic Hans and Tibetan apart, the people on Asia's high plateau will have to fight against their own time for a long time to come. The Tibetans by in large co-existed with the Chinese in the past. Of course, politico- spatial difference periodically erupted from time to time. However, in modern times, the wind of change has transformed China in a way that Tibetans could not. The Lamaism that influences everyday life of a Tibetan remains acutely dogmatic and unlike Buddhism, it is stuck in a metaphysical time. Lamaism with all its mysticism around

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is unlikely to help the Tibetans perform in current geopolitical reality. To be sure, it remains just an interesting relic for the world community.

Another Himalayan fissure is in Kashmir - the main fault-line between the Western spread of Islamic culture and Eastern Indic civilization. It will remain a zone of conflict irrespective of what Pakistan and India does or not. The only victim in this contestation will be the Kashmiris; unfortunately due to layers of history-cover that shaped their identity. For Pakistan, the Kashmir conflict is essential for its survival and for India, the conflict is desirable to consolidate the national unity if not an incentive for nation building and its growth.

Nepal, despite all the upheavals there, especially revolutionary moves made by the Maoists, the people of this part of the Himalayas are coming to terms with the geopolitical reality – a realization that their destinies remains tied to adjusting with the Indian organic system. Fortunately, India's changed outlook under Modi will reset the direction that will offer hopes for stability in Nepal after a decade of civil war.

Another Himalayan hermit kingdom, Bhutan that historically formed a part of the Tibetan organic system had drifted away in the twentieth century to fall under the British and then Indian geopolitical influence. The only internal force responsible for the birth of original *Druk- Gyalkhap* or *Druk-Yul* (Nation of the Thunder Dragon) is the incarnate of the Tibetan origin god-king, the Shabdrung, whose status remains mysteriously buried since 1907 under the contemporary geopolitical exigencies.

However, the spirit that continues to drive the main engine of Bhutanese relationship with India is their deep devotion to *gyagar* (the holy white country- India) – fidelity embedded into Bhutanese ethos by the wisdom of the 8th century Indian leader and philosopher Padmasambhava, also known as Guru, who hailed from Uddiyana, the modern-day Swat Valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Of course, such piousness today remains one sided but importantly the Bhutanese have diligently displayed so far their obligations towards India. Irrespective of contemporary political convenience the Kingdom remained steadfastly and unshakably the most reliable ally – stood by India along. The only parallel example is another far away *Vajrayana* nation, Mongolia that posits similar strategic obligatory faith in India. Tibet could have been another case but for India's inability to protect its independence. The Dalai Lama refuses to buckle under China's sway and continues to stay in India. Apparently, the bona fide rulers – the Jebtsundamba of Mongolia, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, and the Shabdrung of Bhutan lived in India. However, when China's influence is growing all over the world, how possibly could the tiny Himalayan state of Bhutan escape from its gaze? The impact is already palpable on the ground – creating a string of political electrons, threatening Bhutan's traditional bond with its "sacred" brother India. Perhaps the Modi's government understood Bhutan's case and its sensitivity. Under the previous government, the relationship had to go through major strains.

THE HIMALAYAS: ZONE OF INDIA-CHINA CONFLUENCE

The last three thousand years of our history suggests that the vast range of the Himalayas played more of bridge role than a wall. It fostered congruence of civilizations, culture, spirituality and commerce. It was responsible for shaping Asian identity what it is today. In fact, if we follow the mythology, the epicenter of Asian *Mandala* (circle of sacred and friendly space or a political order) was in the Himalayas, encompassing both the Indian and Chinese geographical space in its encirclement. If we begin to think this way in our own policy, many of the conflicts are going to fade away.

The destruction of *Mandala* that symbolized the Asian paradigm of order had started in the eleventh century when the Islamic invaders systemically smashed the institutions and centers that attracted the Chinese to India. The detachment since then began to affect India-China cultural contiguity with enormous implications. The forces from the West however continued to disrupt the Asian oriental equilibrium. After the Islamic rule, the inroads by Western powers into Asia to play the Great Game had their impact on the Sino-Indian harmony creating a host of problems especially for India. Ironically, the Himalayas today connect the string of political crisis on the both sides of the mountain range.

The distortion began after Western science of cartography started representing reality on a flat surface that demolished the conceptual circle of unity and infinite relations in cosmic sense under the *Mandala* thought. Cartography takes the linear line and it still guides the current foreign affairs of states and their policy prescriptions. However, in the Asian context, tools of cartography that pierced through borderlands and frontiers tended to split nationalities, societies and ethnicities. The people having lived in the interlaced flow of culture, social and economic interdependency, the cartographic borders become often illogical. Therefore, the application of "*linearity of dividē*" in cultural homogeneity sparked off conflicts in the Asian landscape. The crevice runs across the greater Himalayan region (running from Afghanistan, Kashmir to

Arunachal Pradesh). That is why delineating a boundary line through the complex Himalayan range in a cartographic sense remained problematic.

DEALING WITH TIBETAN GEOPOLITICS

Notwithstanding occasional festering tensions erupting across China's Tibetan and Uighur populated regions, politics in trans-Himalayan region remain undermined. The issues remain stalemated and dormant even though all aspire to preserve contiguous culture, identity, and religion. Yet, the level of trans-Himalayan radicalism is low. Nonetheless, the issues or instability factors do affect both sides of the Himalayas. Tibet can be a keystone but its leader, the Dalai Lama who professes Lamaism accepts neither radicalization nor reconciliation that keeps both India and China gussing. The Dalai Lama still visualizes his world in the *Mandala* concept, for he does not seek either separation or independence in a linear political fashion. He has also even dropped the demand for "greater autonomy" and instead he seeks preservation of living under the Chinese *Mandala* or constitution that guarantees space for Tibetan culture and religion to exist as it did for centuries.

A path forward is desperately required but it would be hard to push for dynamism in a short time. However, the onus is upon China to rethink the trans-Himalayan paradigm. China has the resources, both intellectual and material, to revive the past concepts to implement in the modern context. China is already reproducing traditional concepts like the "Silk Route" to restore the ancient linkages. However, on the Himalayan front the time is running out fast. The restoration of paradigm is possible only during the current Dalai Lama's lifetime. To be sure, neither China nor India should desire radicalization of the Himalayas – not an impossible thing though as the situation elsewhere is unfolding. The stakes are high as problem transcends borders and both India and China will have to suffer.

ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

There are of course the economic and developmental imperatives for the Indian Himalayan belt. The entire stretch of the Himalayas remains a backward zone; perhaps 40 percent of the world's poor live in the region, of course not in calorie intake measures but in terms of its marginalization, economically and socially. The Himalayan natural strength is gigantic. The enormous biodiversity, farming, lumbering, horticulture and hydro-energy potentials bestow the region. Its glaciers remain the source of all the Asian rivers. Yet most people living in these mountains lack drinking water. There have been no worthwhile scientific, technological commercial interventions in the region. Industries are nearly non-existent. No significant plan exists to draw on the enormous solar and wind power potentials. The Himalayan tourism potentials are great but the revenue tourism generates along with other value-added monetary savings flow back outside the region. No clear planning whatsoever exists for retaining the financial capital required to boost the economy further. The barriers for the Himalayas are not nature but manmade. The frozen and militarized border along 3,600 kilometers denies the region access to external markets. This has been going on for too long and cannot be sustainable in the longer term.

WAY FORWARD

Nevertheless, the trans-Himalayan regions will have to assume dynamic importance at every level in the 21st Century. The region, once a crossroad of Asia, entails enormous significance for cultural and economic resurgence of Asia. It holds the key to sustenance of Asian culture, philosophy, tourism, environment (climate change), political and regional security.

At a time when the balance of power is shifting towards Asia, the Himalayan societies will have to factor themselves in the foreign policy perspectives of their respective nations, for it has geo-strategic value for all the concerned states. It remains a keystone and a source of regional stability. With potential increased tensions between India and Pakistan, it may also be time for an out-of-box settlement of the Kashmir issue. If not, such prolonged crises, whose ends are not in sight, also leave the other regions in a state of uncertainty, especially about their direction of developments.

ECONOMIC BRIDGE: REVIVING THE SILK ROUTE

At a time when the economies of the Asian countries are rising, the trans-Himalayan region could play an important bridge role in expanding India's economic and commercial interests across East and Central Asia. In the changed atmosphere, the region needs to focus on restoring the lost trade linkages while reconnecting itself to the Silk Route and beyond. Such viewpoints could be the kernel not only for broader atmospheric change but will also prove beneficial to all stakeholders. In fact, time has come to take benefit from China's economic achievements. China can offer better technology and experiences that other trans-Himalayan regions require.

The two major countries, India and China, should explore the possibility of converting the existing problems into opportunities. It is time that initiatives for cross-border activities are launched say by proposing a Regional Comprehensive

Economic Partnership (RCEP) scheme between India and China. The RCEP will help to create a regional market covering both sides of the Himalayas. In fact, both sides of the Himalayas historically formed a web of religious, political and commercial inter-relationships. Moreover, the interdependency was a geographically determined and more importantly, such a trans-border cultural environment enjoyed endorsement by both India and China prior to 1962 border conflict.

Even now, the issues could be resolved not so much by politico-military but through a well-calibrated cultural and economic means. A non-military approach might also work to end the current entanglement between the two countries. The RCEP may have huge advantage for India as increased cross-border connections will provide India enormous access to markets in Xinjiang and Tibet – both having huge demand for Indian consumer products.

A fresh approach is also required to seek benefits from cooperation with China. A cooperative approach should eventually pave the way for greater understanding and softening of the current standoff, thereby creating a positive atmosphere for the resolution of boundary issue. For India, a fresh thinking is required; any further delay could risk serious ramifications against China's increasing quest for strategic minerals and water resources.

THE HIMALAYAN SOFT POWER

One of the important and powerful dynamics that has taken shape in the trans-Himalayan region is the resurgence of Buddhism as a factor of cultural mobilization and economic growth. This is happening when the Buddha nature and its wisdom is ushering a speedy comeback on the world stage to meet the challenges of 21st century. A strong revivalism of Buddhism in the trans-Himalayan region is of great importance for restoring the lost traditional linkages between Asian societies. This will become a new factor in enhancing mutual interests, especially exploring new opportunities for cultural, economic and human development across the mountain ranges.

Moreover, Buddhism is making a speedy comeback albeit as a Brand symbol of rising India. Analysts have noted that Buddha-Industry could transform the lives of millions, providing lucrative career options to a large youth component of his land. India's corporate believes that the country is sitting atop millennia-old tourist mines. A recent study report suggested that Shakyamuni could potentially generate \$1 billion revenue for the country.

Buddhism is speedily regaining its momentum in China as well. According to the Dalai Lama, China already has 400-500 million practitioners of Buddhism and will grow manifold in the coming years as China opens up.¹ More and more Buddhist temples are coming up in China with enormous support from the common people. It is here that the trans-Himalayan region play link role for the spiritual destinies of millions in Asia. One hopes that the Governments of India under the BJP displays more finesse and tangible actions in pursuing this important goal. In fact, lot more is required to conceptualize the relevance of Buddhism as a cultural complex in the contemporary times. More than its market import, Buddhism needs a cultural tagging - a source of knowledge-based soft-power lever.

Potentially, Buddhism has sufficient intellectual strength to affect the geopolitical trend in Asia besides the preservation of global peace. In fact, China is already trying to play a foremost role over Buddhism, at least on the Asian scene. Not only would it like to control the trend and nature of discourses on Buddhism but also use it as a vehicle of influence and instrument of pragmatism in major parts of Asia. For India, Buddhism was its ancient geopolitical tool and it could still use this wisdom to meet the challenges of the new millennium. The challenge before India is to retain its cultural leadership and play a meaningful role in shaping the course of this great phenomenon in the 21st century. Of course, both India and China require a synergy for a nuanced and adept policy pursuit in Asia.

Interestingly, Islam - another important religious faith finds embedded in the trans-Himalayan cultural complex. In fact, a range of historical and ethical association between Buddhist and Islamic principles continue to exist in the region as opposed to Western ethics. It is essential that some of the existing flawed Western interpretations of Asian history be revisited if a broader cohesion is to be brought about for a long-term peace and stability in Asia.

SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL TOURISM

A fresh policy approach is required to promote a brand of sustainable cultural tourism. China plans to invest \$10 billion over the next five years to build several high profile infrastructure projects (roads, airports and hydropower stations) to develop the Kailash-Mansarovar region. It aims to develop the entire Mense-Gunsa and Rudog-Senge Tsangpo (Indus) corridor so that the Kailash-Mansarovar area - considered as a holy land for Buddhists, Hindus and Jainism becomes

1. The Dalai Lama said during the Kalachakra ceremony held in Leh in July 2014.

easily accessible. It appears that the goal is to attract China's own affluent tourists as well as international tourist traffic including Indian pilgrims to Western Tibet.

On the Indian side, Ladakh has come into sharp domestic and international tourist focus. The entire Indus corridor (Lamayuru-Nimu-Bazgo-Leh-Hemis-Nyoma) has become an attractive cultural tourism complex. Now that India too is developing infrastructure including circular roads and airports in Ladakh, the two countries could explore the possibility of jointly developing tourism industries so that they serve as engines of economic growth for Ladakh. In fact, as the flow of traffic from the West is gradually drying up, the vast Indian and Chinese domestic tourists could become huge prospects for the trans-Himalayan regions.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Importantly, political stability, sustainable economic development, and environmental protection are interconnected issues for the trans-Himalayan region. Coordinated environmental policies are essential to mitigate the non-traditional security challenges such as climate change and natural disasters. Gradual glacial attrition from global warming means water scarcity in the Himalayas. The flow of Himalayan water is already becoming a critical issue. The possible diversion of the Brahmaputra River by China has raised eyebrows in India. However, the solution may not lay in politics but in culture. Just as the Mt. Kailash is the home of Lord Shiva, the Shuomatan Point or U-Bend of Brahmaputra is the home of *Vajra Yogini* – a sacred deity, worshipped by millions in both India and China. Therefore, the protection of environmental biodiversity and culture should become a keystone of policy planning. It should become an important step toward laying the platform for long-term stability and harmonious co-existence of diverse regions.

CONCLUSION

In the context of security, India and China finds locked in a boundary dispute across the Himalayan range. Efforts have been to draw a linear boundary across the Himalayas. They fail because the spatial reality here transcends political boundaries that both powers wish to delineate. Even the British strategic masters failed to draw a linear boundary and instead periodically laid emphasis on having buffer concept by dividing regions into inner and out zones. Even McMahon had to use a broad brush for drawing a line along the Himalayas that remains disputed even after one century. It is therefore imperative that India and China should give up seeking a geometrical linear boundary and instead opt for creating soft cultural frontier along the trans-Himalayan region. A gradual transformation of the long militarized boundary into a humanized frontier zone will serve the interests of India, China and the Himalayan people.