

Prospects Brighten for Kunming Initiative (Cont.)

opportunity. Fear of disturbing the status quo reigns supreme among the bureaucrats generally.

Those who oppose the enhancement of Sino-Indian trade relations point out fearfully that the road will allow Chinese goods to flood the Indian market. A huge amount of Chinese goods come in as it is, and will continue to do so through the unmanned Indo-Nepal borders. Also, a large amount of Indian goods travel in the opposite direction. Yunnan province, where Kunming is situated, imports annually over half a million tonnes of iron ore from India and exports to it about a million tonnes of phosphatic ore. The “fears” would seem to have a definite political bias.

The Kunming Initiative got its name on August 17, 1999, at a conference on regional cooperation and development among China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh held in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in the southwestern region of China when delegates acclaimed a proposal to revive the Stilwell Road, or the Old Burma Road. The Stilwell Road, which stretches from Ledo in Assam to Myanmar across the Phangsu pass and joins Bhamo in Myanmar and then extends to Yunnan province of China. The road covers a distance of 1,043 miles from Ledo to Kunming. The distance from Ledo to Kolkata is about 1,065 miles.

The Home Ministry’s opposition to the proposal flies in the face of unanimous endorsement by India’s seven northeastern states. They have demanded reopening of the road to increase the volume of trade with Southeast Asian countries. Their enthusiasm is well founded. If the Stilwell Road is reconstructed from Ledo in Assam to Mytkina in Myanmar - an admittedly difficult, mountainous 250-mile stretch, this road can then be extended to the Moreh-Tamu (India)-Kalewa (Myanmar) crossing on the Chindwin River. Indian engineers have already built this road recently -it was completed in 2001 - and a bridge over the Chindwin can extend the road as far as Mandalay, which is on the Myanmar railway system. Another Indian northeastern state, Mizoram, which shares as much as 450 miles of border with Bangladesh and Myanmar, could be linked to Akyab (now called Sittwe) in Myanmar, and if Bangladesh

agrees, Agartala in Tripura could be connected to Chittagong. That will open up the entire northeastern region of India, making it the commercial outlet for eastern trade.

Sino-Bangladesh Initiative

In addition to support among the northeastern Indian states, and among some groups and institutions in Delhi, the Kunming Initiative received a big boost last December when Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia met with the governor of Yunnan province, Xu Rongkai, during her official five-day visit to China.

Following an hour-long meeting, the Bangladeshi spokesman told the media that the Yunnan governor had asked Zia to encompass Bangladesh in the Kunming Initiative for an enhanced cooperation to the mutual benefit. The governor said that his province would cooperate with Bangladesh in strengthening interaction in economic, trade and cultural fields under the Kunming Initiative, joined by Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and northeastern India.

Xu, responding to a proposal from the prime minister, agreed to set up the Chittagong-Myanmar-Kunming air route, which, then, would help to build a sub-regional communications network. The proposal for the air link has been taken up seriously and it is expected to get the green light this month when Yunnan officials meet Bangladeshi officials in Dhaka.

Some analysts point out that the Kunming Initiative got bogged down because of India’s concern about the growing economic power of China and also due to the less-than-friendly relations between Dhaka and New Delhi. There is no question that much more is at stake for India in improving its relations with Bangladesh and also in developing a more transparent one-to-one relationship with China.

What is at stake for India?

Delhi has already made significant efforts to open up northeast India to Southeast Asia. Almost two years ago, then-Indian external affairs minister Jaswant Singh, on a visit to Myanmar, made the point that the natural outlet for India’s northeast is through