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CHINA-SOUTH ASIA COOPERATION: CSOs IN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The growing regional dynamics between China and South Asia suggest enormous untapped potentials for regional cooperation in diverse sectors in the coming years. In this cooperation process, not only states but also several non-state actors including civil society organisations (CSOs), private business initiatives and many other fronts are increasingly getting involved. Being independent but complementary organs of the government, CSOs are playing and can further play active role in promoting people-to-people contact and cultural cooperation. These organisations are also facilitating formal cooperation by building bridges, networks and trust among regional countries. The paper broadly aims to explore the potential for stronger CSO level initiatives in the China-South Asia regional cooperation process in areas primarily energy, regional connectivity, trade and commerce, peaceful resolution of disputes and so on. The findings of the paper suggest that CSOs are playing substantive role in the emerging regional governance paradigm. In the case of China-South Asia, CSOs' role is yet to be cultivated in its full potential. In the coming decades, CSOs participation in China-South Asia cooperation will be vital for creating trust, networks and constructive policies nationally and regionally.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, regional cooperation among neighbouring countries and regions has become crucially significant. It is helping to meet the common challenges countries facing today and to improve joint capabilities needed to foster economic growth, security and stability. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a northern neighbour of eight South Asian nations, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. South Asian nations are China's western neighbours. China and South Asian countries share extensive common borders, rivers, mountains, religion, culture and historical ties, and economic transactions inseparably linking South Asia and China together.¹ China is the biggest trading partner for most of the South Asian countries and the country enjoys an observer status of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the sole regional organisation of South Asian countries. China is also linked with South Asia through some other sub-regional cooperation forums notably Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and China (BCIM). These all suggest that there is a growing regional

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¹ Upendra Gautam (ed.), *South Asia and China: Towards Inter-Regional Cooperation*, Kathmandu, Nepal: China Study Center, 2003.

linkage between China and South Asia in both sub-regional and regional levels. In this cooperation process, not only states but also many non-state actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs), private business initiatives and many other organisations are being gradually involved. While this involvement is an indication of the diversification of cooperation channel, at the same time, it necessitates non-state actors' involvement to explore the untapped potentials for collaboration between China and South Asia.

However, the growing importance of CSOs in the areas of governance and exchanges has become an essential aspect of regional cooperation. The process of CSO participation and independent initiatives has already begun. CSOs in the region have started exchanges both in formal and non-formal platforms, though on a limited scale in the case of China and South Asia. They are sharing good practices, coordinating mutual activities, promoting collective voices and platforms and working together in transnational issues.² Hence, the fundamental question is to ask whether CSOs can play a substantive role in building bridges between China and South Asia and in augmenting an effective regional cooperation by fostering cultural exchange and collaboration at people-to-people level. Is this cooperation functioning at the expected height? What are the challenges and shortcomings that CSOs are facing in their effort to foster effective regional cooperation? What measures can be collectively taken to strengthen cooperation and partnership among different CSOs and between CSOs and governments in the region? In this context, the paper seeks to examine three issues: a) opportunities and potential for stronger CSO level initiatives between China and South Asia, partly by assessing the current state of cooperation; b) challenges and shortcomings that CSOs are facing in their endeavours to foster regional exchanges and collaboration; and c) way forward on how to handle the challenges and to strengthen CSOs' role in boosting multi-prong cooperation between China and South Asia.

The paper is based on secondary sources of data and investigates mostly in the form of literature review. To put the analysis in the proper perspective, the paper is divided into five sections. After introduction, a brief analytical perspective is offered in the second section to see the position of CSOs in the regional cooperation process. Then, the emerging potentials for China-South Asia partnership are discussed, followed by a section on the role of CSOs in this regional process. In the fifth section, key challenges and constraints are detailed out and finally the paper ends with a summing of the findings and some policy recommendations.

² Alexander C. Chandra, "Civil Society in Search of an Alternative Regionalism in ASEAN", *Hosei Kenkyu Journal of Law and Politics*, Vol. 75, No. 4, March 2009, pp. 47-69.

2. CSOs in the Regional Cooperation Process

In the conventional outlook, regionalism is symbolised mostly from the nationalist discourse that distinguishes regional cooperation as an intergovernmental domain functioning through the official channels of national governments.³ This purview of regional cooperation process is advocated by intergovernmentalist propositions of regional integration based on the realist perspective. Realists consider regional integration as a form of security community, an entity where the component governments either retain their separate legal identities or form an institutional combination.⁴ It rejects the proposition of regional 'supra-national consensus politics' replacing states' sovereign power politics. Politics is seen as an arena for the expression of national interests which are bound to come into conflict sooner or later.⁵ Intergovernmentalists, extending the realist argument, assume that regional integration owes its inner logic in the unfolding of the diversity of domestic determinants, geo-political situations, and outside aims among its units – states driven by a consistent pursuit of national interests.⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, a key protagonist of intergovernmentalism, presupposes that regional integration is a means for member countries to obtain domestic policy preferences through regional negotiation.⁷ Unlike hardcore realists, he considers that cooperation decision, particularly in the EU case, does not take place in anarchy, but proceeds on the basis of accepted agreements as a new status quo.

On the other hand, a more dominant approach to regional cooperation is the neo-functional paradigm which has been used extensively to understand and explain the European integration process. Neo-functionalism is simultaneously a theory and a strategy of regional integration, building on the work of David Mitrany.⁸ The key focus of neo-functionalists is a process of integration among states, initially engaged in limited functional or economic areas with experience increasing momentum for further rounds of integration in related areas.⁹ Ernst B. Haas, following the neo-functional paradigm, developed the idea of 'spill-over' particularly aimed at explaining the European integration process. According to Ernst Haas, regional integration flows from a process of spillover or ramification in which

³ Navnita Chadha Behera, "Regionalism from Below: the Domain of Civil Society" in Shaheen Afroze (ed.), *Regional Cooperation in South Asia: New Dimensions and Perspectives*, Dhaka: BISS, 2002.

⁴ H. Farrell and A. Heritier, "A Rationalist-Institutionalist Explanation of Endogenous Regional Integration", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 12, 2005, pp. 273-290.

⁵ Neill Nugent, *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999.

⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Integration: A Rejoinder," *Journal of Common Market Studie*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1995, pp. 612-616.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David Mitrany theorises that international cooperation is the best means of softening antagonism in the international environment. Arguing beyond principle of territorialism, he advocated for building a form of authority based on functions and needs, which linked state authorities with needs, scientific knowledge, expertise and technology across the notational boundaries. See David Mitrany, *The Functional Theory of Politics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.

⁹ Ben Rosamond, *Theories of European Integration*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000.

the integration of states in an individual sector is constructed by aiming to achieve the process of integration in other sectors.¹⁰ Both the neo-functionalism and the spill-over arguments for regional cooperation deviate from the realists in a way that they undercut the importance of both the constitutive and the instrumental role of national sovereignty and intergovernmental supremacy in the regional processes. Yet, these functionalist approaches underlie a state-centric model, considering regional cooperation primarily as a product of interaction among sovereign states.

However, two inter-reliant problems pose significant challenge to this state-centric model of regional cooperation: a) it makes regional cooperation hostage to protecting national identity, defending national interests, preserving the sanctity of national borders and safeguarding national security;¹¹ and b) regional ethno-cultural and commercial exchanges, on the other hand, have been always operated beyond the formal governmental channels. Due to these shortcomings, regional cooperation process has failed to utilise the advantages of the growing importance of non-state actors. Transnational networks, cultural exchange and people to people contacts across the border have been widely undermined in both the scholarly analysis of regional cooperation as well as in the collective policy frameworks of cooperating countries.

In this context, a civil society approach to regionalism, a complementary view of regional cooperation at the governmental level, demands special attention in the conceptual formulation of the regional cooperation process. Civil society has become a key component in the emerging governance practices in the present world. Though its participation and role has been mostly appraised from a nationalist context, the increased emphasis on people-to-people contact and multi-stakeholder governance within the regional setting is providing a wider scope for civil society engagement. As an emerging actor in the regional process, civil society is represented by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) such as think tanks, research institutes, non-partisan and non-profit policy advocacy firms, trade bodies, industry associations and so on. Assessing CSOs independently within the regional cooperation process fulfils a useful purpose that is to delineate distinct role that CSOs are playing and can play autonomously within the regional setting. CSOs, unlike the conventional attribution of these bodies as a subordinate of nationalist governments when it comes to regional cooperation, are independent but complementary organs of the government playing active role to promote people-to-people contact and cultural cooperation (track 2)¹², and also to facilitate formal cooperation by building bridges, networks and trust among the

¹⁰ Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Track 2 diplomacy refers to “unofficial dialogue and problem-solving activities aimed at building relationships and encouraging new thinking that can inform the official process. Track 2 activities typically involve influential academic, religious, and NGO leaders and other civil society actors who can interact more freely than high-ranking officials”. See United States Institute of Peace, “Glossary of Terms for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding”, available at <http://glossary.usip.org/resource/tracks-diplomacy>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

regional countries (track 1.5).¹³ Therefore, the CSOs' inclusion within the regional cooperation is a subset of both procedural and institutional representations of people-to-people regional processes. This can be considered as a complementary approach to regionalism, which is 'regionalism from below'.¹⁴

Navnita Chadha Behera sees CSOs participation in the regional cooperation as both intervening at the top and functioning from below.¹⁵ In the first strategy, CSOs can influence the policy making processes of the government and regional bodies at the top level. Termed as Shadow Diplomacy, the participation of government officials in their private capacities, retired bureaucrats, military officers and political leaders in discussions which are non-governmental and unofficial in nature but are close to governmental agendas can be one example of such involvement. They can provide "a second line of communication between different states and seek to bridge the gap between official government positions by serving as testing grounds for new policy initiatives".¹⁶ The justification for their involvement lies in their "easier access to higher echelons of policymaking circles; their better understanding of governments' working styles; and that their suggestions are not likely to be viewed an affront to government policies because of their eminent status and credibility".¹⁷ The second strategy involves a bottom-up approach in which CSOs, aiming to build new constituencies for regional integration, function apart from or beyond governments not only to promote regional economic cooperation but also to create a broader regional community. Though rarely have direct access to the relevant foreign offices, these CSOs can change public attitudes and mobilise public pressure on their respective governments for revitalising regional process.

Since the objective of the paper is to delineate the practical aspects of the role played by CSOs, this analytical perspective is kept limited to the identification of possible ways how CSOs can be linked to the regional cooperation processes. There are at least three associations that can be outlined in this connection: a) CSOs as agents of cultural and knowledge exchange: these are track 2 and track 3¹⁸ level roles of CSOs that include institutional collaboration among CSOs across the region, virtual communication, dialogues and network building, exchange of expertise and people, joint workshops and cultural exchange in the forms of exhibition, competition,

¹³ The term track 1.5 denotes "a situation in which official and non-official actors work together to resolve conflicts". See *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Navnita Chadha Behera 2002, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Navnita Chadha Behera, "SAARC and Beyond: Civil Society and Regional Integration in South Asia" in Sultan Hafeez Rahman, Sridhar Khatri and Hans-Peter Brunner (eds.), *Regional Integration and Economic Development in South Asia*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2012.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Track 3 diplomacy refers to "people-to-people diplomacy undertaken by individuals and private groups to encourage interaction and understanding between hostile communities and involving awareness raising and empowerment within these communities. Normally focused at the grassroots level, this type of diplomacy often involves organizing meetings and conferences, generating media exposure, and political and legal advocacy for marginalized people and communities." See United States Institute of Peace, *op. cit.*

education and so on; b) CSOs as mediating and complementary bodies to the formal regional cooperation process: this includes both track 1.5 and track 2 roles such as trust building, network building, dialogue initiatives, participation in the regional and sub-regional forums, mediating and expert services and so on; and c) CSOs as agenda setting groups: this would include the advocacy and policy opinion building role of CSOs in the national sphere, supporting and promoting favourable policies to strengthen regional cooperation. These various types of CSOs role are detailed out in the context of China-South Asia cooperation in section four of the paper.

3. China-South Asia Cooperation: Untapped Potentials

The vast potentials for China-South Asia regional cooperation are mostly under-explored. Academically, there is paucity of scholarly works investigating issues of potential China-South Asia partnership at the regional level. Most of the papers involving China and South Asia either focus on China's South Asia policy from security or strategic perspectives or delineate Indo-China competition over regional leadership. John W. Garver's article on *China and South Asia* investigated Indo-China relations in the wake of Sino-Soviet rapprochement in 1987.¹⁹ It argued that the lack of parallel interests and the continuing fundamental conflicts over territorial issues stymied deeper Indo-Chinese ties. Besides, growing military relations between China and South Asian countries constitute unacceptable threats to Indian security, while China is deeply inclined to strengthen its engagement in South Asia. G.P. Deshpande in his article *The Long Years of China's South Asia Policy*, on the other hand, considered Chinese presence in South Asia not as much a response to national interests, instead as decided by the world order and China's role in and relationship with it.²⁰ Chinese foreign policy in South Asia has almost always tried to eschew confrontation. But the country's enlarging engagement with South Asian countries in military, security and economic spheres indicates that it pursues a long term system management role in the region. Similarly, the article by Jaeho Hwang and Chen Dongxiao on *China's Harmonious Asia Strategy* framed China-South Asia relations within the prism of China's overall Asia policy of building a harmonious Asia.²¹ It argues that China, for that end, has been pursuing a three tier policy: economic cooperation, installing partnerships, and multilateral security. Looking from an Indian side, Anindya Batabyal in his work on *Balancing China in Asia: A Realist Assessment of India's Look East Strategy* stressed that India's competition and rivalry with China has become a significant component in India's Look East strategy.²² Although relations between India and

¹⁹ John W. Garver, "China and South Asia", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 519, January 1992, pp. 67-85.

²⁰ G.P. Deshpande, "The Long Years of China's South Asia Policy", *China Report*, Vol. 46, August 2010, pp. 193-199.

²¹ Jaeho Hwang and Chen Dongxiao, "China's Harmonious Asia Strategy", *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 13, January 2010, pp. 105-124.

²² Anindya Batabyal, "Balancing China in Asia: A Realist Assessment of India's Look East Strategy", *China Report*, Vol. 42, February 2006, pp. 179-197.

China have improved considerably over the years, longstanding mutual suspicion and animosities continue to persist. To increase India's preeminence in the region, the country is trying to improve relations with the military regime in Myanmar, to forge sub-regional cooperation in the form of BIMSTEC and to promote the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation forum.

Both China and South Asia are mutually interdependent in economic and trade aspects and they have common transnational vulnerabilities and interests that provide not only a scope but also compulsions to initiate extensive cooperation between them. While South Asian countries have strong ties with China bilaterally in many sectors, collective cooperation between South Asia and China at the regional level is very low. China usually participates in the SAARC summits as an observer and the country has some track 1.5 level engagements with South Asian countries through BCIM forums. Some of the other sub-regional or multilateral initiatives where South Asian countries have cooperation with China involve: Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) founded in 2002 in which Pakistan, India and Bangladesh are founding members and Sri Lanka joined in 2003; ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) where India, Pakistan, Bangladesh are members; Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) where Afghanistan and Pakistan are members; and East Asian Summit (EAS) in which India is the only member from South Asia since 2005.²³ India and Pakistan have cooperation with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well. However, China-South Asia cooperation is still to be channelised in a proper regional mechanism. As China prefers informal processes of cooperative dialogue as seen in the case of dealing with the East Asian countries and attempts to shape the multilateral environment to meet its own interests,²⁴ the regional cooperation between South Asia and China has tremendous potentials. The paper briefly identifies some crucial areas of cooperation to be fostered at the regional level.

3.1 *Regional Peace and Stability*

From the strategic perspective, China-South Asia cooperation can involve initiatives to maintain peace and stability between South Asian countries and China by working together to resolve bilateral outstanding issues. Among the eight countries of SAARC, the ones directly bordering with China are India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. As for China, the remaining three countries, namely Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are geographically apart, with no territorial disputes. The regional cooperation should encourage to explore a bilateral framework for solving border issues and to search for a fair and reasonable solution acceptable to both sides particularly for India-China and China-Bhutan borders through the principle of

²³ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Interstate Conflicts and Regionalism in South Asia: Prospects and Challenges", *Perceptions*, Spring-Summer, Vol. 13, 2008, pp.1-19.

²⁴ Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, "Welcome in Asia: China's Multilateral Presence", *Special Assessment Report: Asia's China Debate*, December 2003.

mutual understanding and accommodation.²⁵ Though traditionally both India and China prefers bilateral mechanism to deal with disputes and outstanding issues, the intricate nature of the problems and the growing mutual interdependence require both countries to assess their issues more multilaterally.

Another strategic priority should be to define a proper approach to the relationship between China and the countries in South Asia, which is also a factor in dictating stability and power balance in the region. Since China has a positive attitude towards SAARC, the cooperation should involve strengthening benign interactions between China and South Asia, making careful balance in handling Chinese relationship with India and Pakistan, and promoting SAARC to play a substantive role. SAARC should appreciate and facilitate Chinese willingness to promote China-SAARC cooperation in various areas.

3.2 Energy Cooperation

Both China and South Asian countries are rapidly growing in terms of economic and other social development indicators. This rapid growth is accelerating higher and higher demand for energy in the region. For instance, per capita energy consumption in Bangladesh, India and China increased 40%, 29% and 95% respectively during 2009-2010.²⁶ China is the largest energy consumer and the second largest oil consumer in the world. India also ranks in the first few. Given the circumstances, there is a big prospect for energy trade within the region. Besides, despite the vast potentials of the unexploited energy resources, tangible cooperation at the regional level is almost nonexistent. China and India attempted to address the energy issue by engaging in energy cooperation with the neighbouring countries bilaterally so far and their investments in Bangladesh and Myanmar energy sectors are marked by mutual suspicion and competition rather than cooperation. In the coming days, joint energy exploration and building common pipeline for energy security should be a key priority. To meet the increasing demand, South Asian countries and China can build energy security commonwealth to cooperate and coordinate energy affairs.²⁷

²⁵ Ma Jiali, "China-South Asia Strategic Engagements – 1", *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 153, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, 14 August 2012.

²⁶ Paper presented by Fahmida Khatun, Research Director, Center for Policy Dialogue on "Shaping Energy Cooperation", in the *11th BCIM Forum on Recent Developments in BCIM Countries: New Opportunities and New Challenges for BCIM Cooperation*, organised by CPD on 23-24 February 2013, Dhaka.

²⁷ Paper presented by Liu Xuejun, Associate Professor Yunnan University, on "BCIM Energy Cooperation: Strategic Importance, Real Problems and Possible Solutions", in the *11th BCIM Forum on Recent Developments in BCIM Countries: New Opportunities and New Challenges for BCIM Cooperation*, organised by CPD on 23-24 February 2013, Dhaka.

3.3 *Trade and Economic Cooperation*

South Asia and China together cover a considerable amount of world trade every year. The total export and import volume of China and South Asian countries both regionally and globally is more than 4 trillion.²⁸ BCIM countries alone have 6 per cent of the world trade. But intra-regional trade is very low, being only 4.01 per cent in 2011 for BCIM countries.²⁹ Besides, major share has been attributed to China-India bilateral trade and other countries' share is very low in that volume. This suggests that the intra-regional trade is growing much below its potential. In addition to that, there are many tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade including complexities in border crossing, low road connectivity, difficult procedures, restrictive visa requirements and so on. Transit or traffic is either not allowed or very difficult to avail. There is no formal agreement to guide China-South Asia trade rather countries are divided in different bilateral and sub-regional trading arrangements. There is an enormous possibility to improve intra-regional trade which is around US\$ 132 billion for only BCIM members and most of this potential is underutilised.³⁰ To increase cooperation, China and South Asia should think of a long-term plan to create a regional free trade zone.

3.4 *Regional Connectivity*

Connectivity is one of the key areas to be strengthened in order to boost regional cooperation in trade, investment and other prospective sectors. The process has begun through the Asian Highway network initiatives to link up most of the regional countries. Under the process, an agreement amongst BCIM countries has been signed in 2004, identifying possible routes for road connectivity among them. BCIM also initiated a car rally to revive the historical Southern Silk Route that had connected the region for many centuries yet closed over the last six decades after the Second World War.³¹ Bilaterally, China has developed road connectivity with two countries in South Asia, Pakistan and Nepal. It has also invested in the establishments of deep sea port and in many other mega infrastructural facilities in South Asian countries to foster connectivity regionally. China and South Asia have scope to work collectively to make the Asian highway functional, develop multi-country and multimodal transportation connectivity and encourage mutual investments in the connectivity sectors.

²⁸ CIA World Factbook, 2013.

²⁹ Paper presented by Prabir De, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India on "Cooperation in the Areas of Trade, Investment and Finance: Challenges, Prospects and the Next Agenda", in the 11th BCIM Forum on Recent Developments in BCIM Countries: New Opportunities and New Challenges for BCIM Cooperation, organised by CPD on 23-24 February 2013, Dhaka.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "BCIM Car Rally to Revive Southern Silk Route", *The Hindu Business Line*, 21 February 2013.

3.5 Environmental Management

South Asia and China share common environmental features, rivers and mountains and also common environmental vulnerabilities. The major impacts of climate change related hazards that the region is going to face are the reduced agricultural productivity and resultant food insecurity, worsening water quality and availability in regions with water scarcity, increasing occurrences of extreme weather events, climate-induced interstate tensions and conflicts with potential for regional ramifications.³² Common vulnerabilities in the region require both China and South Asia to collaborate in environmental management practices. To address environmental issues, though South Asia has several regional mechanisms within the SAARC platform, China and South Asia have almost no collective platforms to coordinate and assist mutually in environmental management particularly mitigation and adaptation practices. However, China has initiated some programmes bilaterally with many South Asian countries including Bangladesh. China-South Asia cooperation will benefit the regional countries by facilitating early warning systems, technology transfer, infrastructure building and joint collaboration in mitigation and adaptation measures to sustainably reduce the adverse impact of climate change in the region.

3.6 Cultural Cooperation

China and South Asian countries share cultural, religious and ethnographic heritages. It is the people who have been the actual agent of cooperation and exchanges across the region for centuries. Cultural exchanges can underpin a strong foundation for formal cooperation between China and South Asia. In order to create a friendly atmosphere throughout the region, it is vital that China and South Asia engage in more track 2 and track 3 level cooperation. Though in most of the forums and dialogues, people-to-people contacts are emphasised, in practice little consistent actions are taken collectively to facilitate popular and cultural exchanges. The region should seek to develop a regional mechanism responsible to oversee and encourage cultural exchanges on a greater scale.

4. The Role of CSOs in China-South Asia Cooperation

CSOs are increasingly contributing to the regional cooperation process, as seen in the cases of ASEAN and SAARC, through participation, advocacy, demonstrations, projects, monitoring and research, as well as cooperation and networking with other CSOs and government departments. Only the cooperation among states is not sufficient to strengthen regional cooperation, integration and address transnational vulnerabilities that China and South Asian countries, like most other parts of the

³² IPCC, "Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability Exit EPA Disclaimer". *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

world, are facing in the last few decades. CSOs are assisting governmental policy formulation and implementation techniques in economic development, millennium development goals, environmental management, human health, food security and so on. The paper attempts to highlight some important ways through which CSOs can play active role in promoting China-South Asia regional cooperation.

4.1 *The Growing Stake of CSOs*

The role of CSOs in the regional cooperation is gaining currency as a result of two-fold reasons: firstly, the low functionality of regionalism in South Asia due to state-level mistrust and disputes; and secondly, the underlying convenience that CSOs enjoy in conducting cooperation beyond borders. One of the conveniences is that CSOs do not bear political baggage and are not overwhelmed with political competition, border and territorial disputes and other outstanding issues.³³ The second factor is the flexibility within the CSOs' working and institutional procedures that make them more amenable and accommodative in terms of encouraging participation and cross border exchanges.³⁴ The third factor involves CSOs' more positive and dialogue attitude and expertise than the governments that are fundamental to trust and network building between South Asia and China. Besides, CSOs have dynamic management capabilities, scholarly strengths and innovativeness that can help the regional process by bringing alternative ideas and solution to resolve long standing problems. For instance, the BCIM Forum, starting as a civil society platform, has been able to attract commendable attention from the governments of the member countries. It has successfully engaged the four countries in dialogues and regional connectivity and trade issues have got a new momentum with this CSO imitative.

One of the key reasons why China-South Asia cooperation should emphasise track 2 level initiatives involving CSOs in the process is the rise of public-private partnership and multi-stakeholder governance. Due to these developments, government is becoming heavily CSOs and private firms dependent in the new governance paradigm. Governments are relying on CSOs on policy issues, expertise, planning and even the execution of certain policies at the national level, outsourcing many aspects of governance.³⁵ This dependence would soon see governments increasingly depending on the CSOs in pursuing regional cooperation. China-South Asia should proactively facilitate and encourage civil society led initiatives in the region.

In South Asia, CSOs in the past two decades are experiencing an exponential growth influenced by globalisation and growing regional interdependence. There has been a rise in the regional non-official dialogues amongst scholars, journalists and

³³ Asian Development Bank, *Emerging Asian Regionalism: A Partnership for Shared Prosperity*, Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank, 2008.

³⁴ Amitav Acharya, "Engagement or Entrapment? Scholarship and Policymaking on Asian Regionalism", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 13, 2011, pp.12–17.

³⁵ Upendra Gautam (ed.), *op. cit.*

retired government officials. Peoples' SAARC is an important regional initiative. It aims to create a people's union of South Asia, opening up new possibilities of an alternative political, socio-economic and cultural system in the region, and seeks to drive away the discrimination of gender, caste, religion, ethnicity, and identity conflicts by creating a new identity of South Asian citizenship, free movement of people and a new mode of human engagement. Besides, collaborative research projects amongst national research institutes have expanded across the borders and now take a regional pattern. Some notable instances are The Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), the South Asia Network of Economic Research Institutes (SANEI), and the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS).³⁶ Under the SAARC framework, many CSO-style apex bodies have emerged including South Asia Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA) and Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL).³⁷ These bodies are playing more of a track 1.5 role serving as bridge between the governments and the civil society in the SAARC process.

CSOs in China, though in a very nascent shape, are increasingly getting importance, with government withdrawing from large areas of activity, allowing groups to be active in sectors particularly environment, the care of the elderly and the poor and educational services.³⁸ The space for CSOs is growing and they are becoming more and more diverse even though the political system remains authoritarian. The Tsinghua University's NGO Research Center tracks 500 NGOs active in China.³⁹ The Center classifies these organisations as people societies, academies, sodalities, communities, foundations, charity associations and economic organisations such as professional associations and sector chambers of commerce. Changes such as the rapid rise of private foundations, new forms of philanthropy and the growing use of public advocacy are catalogued extensively in a series of China Development Brief's publications released in 2013.⁴⁰ More importantly, the sheer complexity of the Chinese society as it develops towards middle income status by 2020 will necessitate that civil society groups becomes more diverse, and their work is far more needed.⁴¹

³⁶ Navnita Chadha Behera 2012, *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Kerry Brown, "China's Challenges: Civil Society", *the Diplomat*, available at <http://thediplomat.com/whats-next-china/civil-society/>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

³⁹ Paper presented by Edward T. Jackson, Gregory Chin and Yixin Huang, Carlton University, Canada on "Financing Social-Justice Civil-Society Organisations in China: Strategies, Constraints and Possibilities in Rural Poverty Alleviation", in *the International Conference of the International Society for Third-Sector Research*, organised by Ryerson University on 11-14 July 2004, Toronto.

⁴⁰ Wilson Center, "The Changing Contours of Civil Society in China: The Growth of Grassroots NGOs and Public Advocacy", available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-changing-contours-civil-society-china-the-growth-grassroots-ngos-and-public-advocacy>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

⁴¹ Kerry Brown, *op. cit.*

4.2 Institutional Collaboration

CSOs can greatly promote interaction and cooperation between China and South Asia, with both the regional forum SAARC and individual South Asian countries at bilateral and sub-regional levels, by strengthening institutional collaboration among them across the national border. As 'Framework for Cooperation among African Think Tanks' identified that meaningful cooperation could be achieved if the grouping of cooperating think tanks is determined objectively through a carefully thought-out process, working in the areas including information exchange, capacity building, joint research, sharing experiences, lessons, good practices on policy research, advice and advocacy, the mobilisation of resources etc.⁴² Institutional cooperation between CSOs of China and South Asia can be done in the form of inter-CSOs exchange across borders, multi-CSOs dialogue and forums and also CSOs participation within the regional groupings such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, BCIM and so on.

To illustrate the institutional collaboration role of CSOs in the regional cooperation between China and South Asia, BCIM forum offers a good example. BCIM is a track 2 initiative for regional cooperation started in 1999 which comprises of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. It is an effort primarily by the civil societies of the member countries to influence policy makers, business people and government representatives in boosting regional cooperation. Initially known as Kunming initiatives, BCIM is an example of how CSOs can enhance people-to-people contact and also contribute significantly in trade, connectivity and energy cooperation.⁴³ It provides the platform for regular dialogue among the member countries CSOs, citizen groups and also government bodies. BCIM has grounded a fairly good foundation for formal cooperation and the governments of the member countries are taking interest to participate and act together with CSOs. The forum has potential to facilitate private-sector driven projects, one of the purposes of BCIM establishment, which is yet to be materialised. There is a lot of scope for working in this sector regionally.

Besides BCIM, CSOs are actively participating in SAARC Summits, in the BIMSTEC and other regional and sub-regional groupings. Their increased participation is assisting the regional bodies to set more inclusive agenda, by giving people centric and development oriented insights and policy suggestions and by building popular networks across the region. There have also been social movements initiated by civil society to forge greater people-to-people contacts in South Asia. This has enabled non-governmental voices to be heard at the regional level. One such initiative is the South Asia Partnership International (SAP-I) with its member organisations in Bangladesh, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.⁴⁴ For more than 20 years they have been promoting regionalism through civil society initiatives. This network

⁴² "Frameworks for Cooperation among African Think Tanks", *African Conference of Think Tanks: Policies for a Better Future*, Cairo, Egypt, 8-9 November 2010.

⁴³ "BCIM Stress Identifying of Priority Projects", *The Financial Express*, 25 February 2013.

⁴⁴ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, *op. cit.*

has been organising the People's Summit since 2001, which is to promote the people's agenda, to offset the inadequacy of the formal structure of SAARC to cultivate interactions with the civil society.

4.3 *Network Building and Knowledge Exchange*

Think tanks and organisations alike can build social and cultural networks via regular dialogues and exchanges. These think tanks have been embedded in networks at three interrelated levels: firstly, they operate in policy networks within their national constituencies; secondly, they have formed their own networks; and thirdly, they operate within regional and international policy networks. The network building role of CSOs is quite visible in the Southeast Asia. Think tanks in that region tend to be more closely involved in regional networking; some of their network arrangements have come to be regarded as significant precursors to governmental involvement in regional inter-governmental associations such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Specifically, think tanks have been vital in structuring non-governmental dialogues and research programs. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) have been important research networks of think tanks operating throughout East Asia and beyond.⁴⁵ Furthermore, they collaborate with other like-minded organisations. Broader research communities of think tanks, university centres and business actors have been involved in non-governmental efforts to promote economic cooperation through regional bodies such as the Pacific Trade and Development Conference (PAFTAD) and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC).⁴⁶ China and South Asian countries can pursue this type of network building activities and exchanges in their regional collaboration.

Under the SAARC process, the civil society networks provide an umbrella platform for many NGOs, activist groups, social movements and peoples' organisations to come together and mobilise popular support for issues of common concern and public good.⁴⁷ They have opened a multitude of communication channels across a wide spectrum of issues ranging from women's rights, child labor, immigration, human trafficking and human rights violations. The South Asia Women's Forum, South Asia Network and South Asia Network on Food, Ecology and Culture are playing an active role in raising awareness on various social predicaments, as well as encouraging assimilation in the region.

⁴⁵ Elenita C. Dano, "Building People Oriented Alternative Regionalism Models in South East Asia: An Exploratory Study", *AFA and Asia Dhara*, 2007, available at http://asiadhrra.org/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2008/03/alternative_regionalism.pdf, accessed on 16 July 2013.

⁴⁶ Ma Jiali, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Navnita Chadha Behera, 2012, *op. cit.*

4.4 Policy Opinion Builders

Think tanks or policy research institutes among other CSOs have long acted as policy entrepreneurs within both domestic and international policy domains of the industrial world. Through their advocacy of certain preferred policy positions, think tanks have played a cardinal part in policy thinking in national development and regional cooperation. Their role in the developing world, although a more recent development, is no less important. Like their counterparts in the industrial countries, developing country think tanks seek to set agendas, define problems and establish the language of policy through policy entrepreneurship. Additionally, these organisations potentially can contribute to governance by supplying information and expertise, and by encouraging exchange between official and other private actors.⁴⁸ There is a growing number of CSOs in South Asian countries and also China. These CSOs can work nationally to promote agenda and policies conducive to regional cooperation. The collective mobilisation of CSOs can create long-term synergy among grassroots activists, governments and regional bodies.

4.5 Serving as Bridge: Confidence and Trust Building

CSOs, participating in the track 2 process, are seeking to make more effective regional process by developing a wider social base and serving as bridge of trust and confidence. CSOs can foster cultural cooperation and exchanges, promote mutual understanding and respect, facilitate exchange of ideas and programmes bilaterally and multilaterally. The incentives to participate in a regional track 2 process include the possibility of securing greater contacts and building closer rapport with governments. In the case of China and South Asia, the initiatives such as the ASEAN People's Assembly create space that regional civil society organisations can utilise. In addition, CSOs can help, by working with track 2 and track 3 frameworks, governments and cultural and social institutions to improve their capacity and policy prescriptions. Sensitive issues in relation to political matters are also de-sensitised by the Civil Society, as exemplified by the progress made by the South Asian Centre for Policy Studies and the India-Bangladesh Dialogues.

5. Key Challenges and Constraints

Though the advancement of regional and inter-regional communication and exchanges through multimodal communication and socio-cultural networks have given an immense opportunity for CSOs to play a big role in the regional cooperation and integration process, diverse challenges and constraints obstructing their effective role also persist considerably. The challenges range from the lack of logistical capacity

⁴⁸ Diane Stone and Helen E. S. Nesarurai, "Networks, Second Track Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation: The Experience of Southeast Asian Think Tanks", Paper presented in *the Inaugural Conference on Bridging Knowledge and Policy*, organised by the Global Development Network, Bonn, Germany, on 5-8 December 1999.

to political and bureaucratic impediments. This article tries to briefly sketch some of the key challenges and constraints that CSOs are facing in China-South Asia regional setting.

Firstly, the difficulties associated with logistical shortcomings: many local CSOs in the region lack capacity to organise dialogue and act as public advocates with governments and regional and international bodies. CSOs are facing a constant problem of financial uncertainty; they are donor dependent and hence do not have financial sustainability. This concern usually keeps CSOs busy with maintaining good terms with donors instead of improving relations among CSOs themselves. Besides, many CSOs are not interested in establishing structural mechanisms that could increase coordination among CSOs because of the lack of logistical incentives and administrative outreach. For regional cooperation, donors have no established mechanism to provide funding support for CSO initiatives. For instance, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) currently has no ongoing direct funding mechanism to support CSO activities.⁴⁹ Majority of the ADB funding for the CSO is provided in the context of government-approved and executed loan or technical assistance projects. Therefore, the provision of ADB's lending and non-lending products and services to CSOs is undertaken upon request or approval of ADB's developing member countries.⁵⁰ In such cases, CSOs serve as project implementers or otherwise are contracted to undertake specific component activities or to provide project-related services. Many regional CSOs has been long advocating for developing a mechanism exclusively for CSO-donors coordination in the areas of funding and operationalisation of regional cooperation activities.

The second pool of challenges comes from governmental and bureaucratic constraints. CSOs engaged in cross-boundary ventures enjoy poor governmental support and trust in their endeavours for regional cooperation. Governments have done very little to facilitate CSOs participation in the regional and mega-regional bodies such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), and the Pacific Trade and Development Conference (PAFTAD). Since the channel of regional exchange among the countries is confined to governmental level, and track 2 and track 3 levels of diplomacy dedicated to the promotion of regional economic and political cooperation have not grown to a satisfactory level. Due to governments' unwillingness to allow CSOs to step into sensitive regional issues, the participation of CSOs is very limited except some areas such as environmental management, human rights and so on. International Environmental Governance (IEG) Forum is such an initiative where members of Asia-

⁴⁹ Grant Curtis, "The Asian Development Bank's Cooperation with NGOs and Civil Society", paper prepared for The International Society for Third-Sector Research Sixth International Conference *Contesting Citizenship and Civil Society in a Divided World*, Toronto, Canada, July 2004, available at http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.istr.org/resource/resmgr/working_papers_toronto/curtis.grant.pdf, accessed on 21 October 2013.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Pacific civil society organisations meet to promote CSOs' participation in the regional environmental governance.⁵¹ Moreover, CSO-government relations are affected by the lack of established institutional mechanisms for interaction between governmental and the non-governmental sectors.

In the case of South Asian regional cooperation, the SAARC Secretariat does not provide support-structure for systematic inputs from civil society stakeholders, including NGOs, think tanks and the private sector.⁵² For example, 'The Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution', which was signed in 2002 in response to the widespread demands of NGOs and civil society, CSOs were not assigned any effective role for its implementation.⁵³ Besides, in the SAPTA-SAFITA negotiation phases, CSOs were both underrepresented and their potential role was undervalued by the member states. "The challenge for a new South Asia to emerge lies in transforming this contestation amongst the state, market and civil society into a partnership, so that they can work together for the common good of all its citizens".⁵⁴ Besides, in the case of China, CSOs enjoy very little freedom to pursue independent policy objectives and course of actions. Though this trend is changing with the growing number and diversity of CSOs in China, the government is still very cautious and watchful on the growth and mandate of civil society initiatives.⁵⁵ Many of the CSOs need government approval in each stage of their engagement outside the national border. Despite the current restrictions on their activities have already been challenged several times at the National People's Congress, China's parliament,⁵⁶ little has been reformed to ease up the restrictions.

Another factor that hinders effective cooperation is that CSO communities display significant differences country by country, reflecting country-specific factors that make it difficult to develop any regional common structural arrangement to foster CSO level cooperation. CSOs are diverse in aspects of purpose, mandate, philosophy and orientation, role in development and the size and the scope of operations. They also lack practical experience in terms of cross-cultural exchanges. Most of the CSOs in Asia Pacific region are working in a local basis and have very little scope for international or regional networking and practices. In the CSO sphere, an additional divergence occurs with the activists' disdain for the veterans of track 2 dialogues claiming that retired bureaucrats have totally divorced from social realities on the ground: they never critically engage in the constructive policy opinion building against the vested government interests.⁵⁷

⁵¹Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future, "International Environmental Governance: A Briefing Paper", available at <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/publications/reports/IEG-SFpaper.pdf>, accessed on 21 October 2013.

⁵² Navnita Chadha Behera, 2012, *op. cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Yin-Hong Shi, "The Issue of Civil Society in China And its Complexity" in Yoichiro Sato (ed.), *Growth and Governance in Asia*, Hawaii: the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), 2004.

⁵⁶ Kerry Brown, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Navnita Chadha Behera, 2012, *op. cit.*

Finally, outstanding bilateral disputes or nationalist feeling in many cases dictate the psyche of the civil society when it comes to the issue of regional and bilateral cooperation. Until now, the engagement of civil society in the regional cooperation process has been minimal. The track 2 processes, which are sometimes cited as examples of the participation of civil society in regional institution building, are in reality dominated by government-sponsored and supported think-tanks. Moreover, a key principle of track 2, the participation of government officials in their private capacity has rarely been upheld in practice; seldom have these officials been able to stand above national concerns.⁵⁸ Furthermore, due to divergent nationalist perceptions and low government facilitation, CSO initiatives are bound to be limited and short-term strategies which yet to produce any dramatic breakthroughs on contentious regional issues. The channels of communication between track 1 and track 2 continue to be informal and ad hoc, limiting any prospect for cumulative effect or systematic influence on governmental thinking and interactions in terms of regional cooperation. For instance, the idea of creating a non-legislative, deliberative body of South Asian parliament revived by the South Asia Policy Analysis Network died because no concrete follow-up measures have been undertaken to effectively push forward the idea.⁵⁹ Influenced by the partisan political tendencies in South Asia, CSOs also change their positions and demand based on what regimes are in power.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Though there are enormous opportunities for collaboration between China and South Asia, the region still lacks positive climate to have effective regional cooperation. This lack of adequate positive climate in favour of regional cooperation could be addressed by independent and reputable CSOs in the region as the work done by these bodies highlights the benefits of regional cooperation and thus influences public opinion and the thinking of political leaders. A more long-lasting and perhaps more effective way out might be first to create and institutionalise new mechanisms for interactions between the government and the influential sections of the civil society within each country.⁶⁰ There appears to be a need for some greater attention to be given to strengthening the capability of CSO institutes, think tanks and experts, and to promoting effective networking among them. Enhancing analytical and research capabilities and establishing strong and effective network among these organisations are important track 2 contributions towards strengthening regional cooperation complementing track 1 or G2G efforts.

⁵⁸ Amitav Acharya, "Democratisation and the Prospects for Participatory Regionalism in Southeast Asia", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No 2, 2003, pp. 375–390.

⁵⁹ Navnita Chadha Behera, 2012, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

The following measures could go a long way in achieving these goals: (i) CSOs should create sector-based regional associations of like-minded CSOs to facilitate and coordinate exchanges and cooperation among CSOs of China and South Asia. They can seek governmental support in this regard. (ii) CSOs of this region should work jointly for utilising technical and technological facilities of modern day world to improve networking and communication among themselves to facilitate sharing of information, ideas and advocacies and increase coordination of implementation and management. (iii) The coordination and exchange of data and expertise should be increased among the CSOs of China and South Asia. (iv) More importantly, CSOs should build collective platforms and advocacy networks like the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) in order to exchange expertise and good lessons, advance mutual support system and promotional attitude building, and help coordination of the mandate at both horizontal and vertical levels. (v) They should also increase cooperation with other public interest groups particularly donors and multinational corporations to channelise funding and facilitate coordinated effort to foster effective regional cooperation. (vi) CSOs should work collectively to reduce their dependency on the governmental initiatives at the regional level and increase independent course of action while working as complementary force to strengthen regional ties. (vii) They, at the same time, should increase the level of cooperation with the governments and work in partnership with government agencies so that they can gain government trust and cooperation in terms of trans-boundary cooperation with other CSOs in the region. (viii) CSOs of this region should emphasise on participatory method and follow a combined policy to work in a particular sector or area, or adopt a particular framework or problem solving mechanism that will be a much more effective approach rather than working through different mechanisms.