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Brahma Chellaney, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, India, talked to Uwe Hoering about India's policy towards Myanmar, India-China relations, water conflicts and the US strategy in Asia, during his visit to Germany as Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy.

Uwe Hoering: *With the reforms in Myanmar since 2011 there is a new regional economic and political dynamism in the whole region, especially in the triangle of India, China, and Myanmar in between. Is Myanmar becoming a bridge between its neighbours or a battleground? Since a few years, India is increasingly looking East – and Myanmar plays an important role in this policy.*

Brahma Chellaney: For India, the Look East policy is a strategic imperative, India has to look East, because looking West India sees only trouble - Pakistan, Afghanistan, all the way up to Iraq and Jordan. So looking West is not useful. Looking East is better, because looking East means you engage with the more dynamic economies and with democracies like Indonesia, Japan, Korea, these are important countries for India now. So Myanmar is the bridge between India and ASEAN, the land bridge. Without Myanmar, India cannot constructively engage ASEAN states. So it is very important, indeed it is a good development for India that the bridge has opened up again.

Is this especially true for the Northeastern Indian states, which have been somehow cut of

from economic development and suffered from violent conflicts?

The Northeast of India historically was part of a larger region of which Burma was part because of the ethnicities that live in Northeast of India. Several of them also have members of the same ethnic groups in Myanmar. Take the Nagas, there are Nagas in India, and Nagas in Burma. And then the Chakmas on one side and on the other side - a lot of divided ethnic groups. So the development of India's Northeast actually demands better relations with both Burma and with Bangladesh, this whole area has to be reintegrated, culturally, economically. You have to make the borders less relevant. So it is a big task in the sense that it requires political will on all sides, it requires a major shift in policy.

And the prospects for such a shift in policy have improved with the reforms in Myanmar?

It depends on what happens internally in Myanmar. If Myanmar remains on the path to political transition and continues to reform politically and economically, then it will be good for the entire region. It may not be good for China, but it will be good for every-

body else, for its neighbours, and of course for India. But if there is political instability within Myanmar – let's say, Aung San Suu Kyi does not accept election results (of the elections due in 2015 – U.H.) and there is a new protest movement – things can really go bad, and therefore it is important for Burma to remain stable and on the path of reforms.

What can India offer to Myanmar to support the further transition?

Well, India can offer considerable assistance to Myanmar, one, in infrastructure development, port development, highway development. And India is already active there, building one port, building some highways, also building one railroad. Second, India can offer Myanmar better opportunity for maintaining peace within Myanmar by more effectively patrolling the India-Burma border in collaboration with the Burmese military. Because you know the insurgencies are active on both sides of the frontier. So better policing of the frontier will be good for both, Indian security and Burmese security. But I think the third and the most important thing that India can offer is – Myanmar wants to be integrated with the world, it wants to be seen as a country that is a normal country, and India can very much assist in that process. Burma recognizes that India has been consistent in its policy of engagement with Myanmar for a long time. Some countries have wavered like Singapore and Malaysia and some others have been opportunistic. But India stood its ground even when the Americans were breathing down India's neck. India stuck to its policy to influence Myanmar's political transition through engagement rather than through isolation and sanctions. So the Burmese have more confidence in India than perhaps in any other country in the neighbourhood today. So there is a lot of goodwill for India in Burma which India ought to capitalize on.

There are many initiatives to integrate the region with economic corridors, highways,

railway lines, pipelines, ... One example is the idea to revive the ancient "Southern Silk Road" linking China, Myanmar, India and Bangladesh. Is there a new kind of cooperation emerging between two of the big players in the region, India and China?

Where China is not involved, like let's say building links between India and South East Asia via Myanmar, work is progressing. But if China is involved in an initiative there is more hesitation on India's part and also hesitation on China's part. The Chinese will not get involved in a major project that will significantly benefit India, like any kind of major infrastructure development in Myanmar linking India along the Southern Silk Road. That will probably help India more than it will help Yunnan in China. So the Chinese and the Indians both like to speak the positive language in public and even sign agreements, but implementation leaves much to be desired.

While India is 'Looking East', China has its own economic and geostrategic interests in Myanmar, providing direct access to the Indian Ocean and the oil fields of the Arab States for its Western provinces like Yunnan. Is there a danger, that Myanmar could become a battleground instead of a bridge?

Well, I don't see a conflict between India and China in Myanmar. China is already better placed than India, much better placed, and will continue to be better placed for the foreseeable future, because a lot of Chinese have immigrated to Myanmar. There is a lot of Chinese presence now in the business sector. And I think that even in terms of joint projects between China and Myanmar, China is way ahead of India. India has a much smaller presence in Myanmar. Well there is competition, yes, but I don't see that this as a potential for conflict, because India-China rivalry is a rivalry for influence in South East Asia, in Myanmar, in the Middle East, even in East Asia for example, and of course certainly in the Indian Ocean region. So that rivalry will persist. But the main danger in the China-

India equation relates to their territorial disputes and the increasing Chinese aggressive behavior along the border in the whole of the Himalayas. The number of Chinese intrusions into India has steadily increased since 2006. Last year for example there was almost one incursion on average per day.

What about the water conflicts in the region – again involving India and China, but also almost all smaller States. You have been warning of 'Water wars'.

Well, a lot of these conflicts in the region in Asia center on dam building in the borderlands just before transnational rivers leave countries' territory. By building dams in borderlands the idea is to capture the water before it leaves your national territory. China has taken the lead on this. For example, it has built six mega dams on the Mekong, it is building dams on the Brahmaputra, and has constructed one dam on the Sutlej. Now it is targeting the tributaries of the Ganges. So quite a number of dams are coming up, plus the Chinese are now building dams on the Salween, a river which flows into Burma and then becomes the Thai-Burmese border. So these dam projects are at the center of a lot of tensions in Asia.

And then there are tensions also over water sharing. China does not have water sharing agreement with any country, it does not even accept the concept of water sharing. India has water sharing treaties with Pakistan and with Bangladesh, and even though these are very sound and successful treaties, they are not free of dispute. So every now and then some dispute arises, but under the treaty between India and Pakistan, if there is a dispute, it can be referred to an international court of arbitration. So there is a mechanism, a safety valve in this treaty, which allows for any dispute or difference to be internationally settled. But that is only possible if you have a treaty and the treaty incorporates this kind of provision. But 53 of 57 river basins in Asia have no water sharing or an institutionalized

mechanism for cooperation. So this is the problem. The only way that you actually can ensure water peace is by building transparency, by agreeing to the sharing of common resources, and by accepting collaboration and institutional mechanisms.

What can be done to convince China to cooperate on water issues?

Well, all the international organizations so far have failed to move China on this issue, so they should provide an answer as to why they failed and what they are doing to persuade China to accept cooperation with its neighbouring countries. China has twelve riparian neighbours, it does not have a single water treaty with any neighbouring country, nor is it currently involved in discussions to finalize a treaty with any neighboring country. They don't like institutional mechanisms on water.

Could India be a leader on water issues in the region bringing the countries together?

It is a good question, because India would be the natural leader for such a coalition. But India rarely gets its act together, because India is reactive, not proactive. I think India should take the lead to spotlight China's disturbing record and to try to internationally embarrass China, because China is behaving as a country that rejects rules and norms on water issues. China was one of only three countries that voted against the UN Water Law in 1997. So India could actually try to spearhead a coalition of countries with common concerns and common interest, but that requires a new kind of foreign policy approach. I will be surprised if India actually adopts such a proactive stance.

Finally, with the return of the Western countries and especially the United States, China is worried that it will be encircled, with Myanmar becoming an ally of the US. Do you see such a strategic plan by the US?

Well, the Americans are trying to enlarge their presence in Asia clearly but they don't have a clear strategy or vision. For example this pivot to Asia of Obama remains more rhetorical than real. There is no real strategic content in it. In fact, when the Americans unveiled the pivot, soon after that they realized that they had gone too far in emphasising the military aspects, putting them on the uncomfortable path of taking on China. So they began then emphasizing the economic aspects of the pivot, which has remained their approach of the last two years now.

But the Transpacific Partnership trade deal has not come through as yet, so there is nothing thus far to show in the pivot. But unless the pivot does not gain strategic substance, Myanmar cannot be an anchor in the American strategy. Obama is planning to visit Myanmar again this year, that will be good, but he has not moved beyond the early steps to do something concrete with Myanmar. The Americans are hoping that after elections next year, Aung San Suu Kyi might become the new president, then they will be able to engage Myanmar more actively. But what if the things don't turn out the way the Americans want, what will they do then? I don't see a long-term strategic approach in Obama's Asia policy. He and his team lack a strategic approach in general, they have no India policy today, they have no Japan policy. The Obama foreign policy or Obama Asia policy is to have good relations with China and all its neighbours, but Americas allies and strategic partners are not happy with that. They want America to take a position. America does not take a position on territorial disputes between China and its neighbours, it is neutral on all those disputes.

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