

Opportunity and Challenges of Trans Himalaya Regional Cooperation
Under BRI

Lt Gen Vivek K Shah (Retd)
Chairman, Nepal Institute for Strategic Studies

Honorable Chair of the Programme,

Dr Du Han, President of Leshan Normal University,

Prof Dr Dai Yonghong , Executive Director, Center for Trans-Himalaya Studies ,

Prof Dr Liu Junrong , Director of Center for Trans - Himalaya Tourism and Culture center,

Scholars and Intellectuals,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Afternoon !

On behalf of the **Nepal Institute for Strategic Studies**, it is an honor for me to participate in this conference and to talk about the very relevant topic **“Opportunities and Challenges of Trans Himalaya Regional Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.”**

Before, I go further **let me first thank and congratulate LSNU**, Center for Trans Himalaya Studies of LSNU, and Center for Myanmar Studies of Sichuan University for organizing this very important conference on a very pertinent subject and for the kind invitation extended to us to share our thoughts. I extend my deep compliments and greetings to the people of Leshan and all members of Sichuan and Leshan Normal University in

particular for the great hospitality and providing us a great learning experience. I extend my sincere thanks to the Executive Director, Center for Trans-Himalaya Studies, Prof Dr Dai Yong Hong and President of LSNU, Mr Hu Dan and of course Prof Dr Liu Junrong , Director of Center for Trans - Himalaya Tourism and Culture center.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in ancient times, the **Silk route was the heart of the trade between Asia and Europe, a network of routes linking the cultures** of China, India, Persia, Greeks, Rome and Arabia, great civilizations of ancient times. It was named so, because Silk from China was one of the major commodities being traded, through the network. Compass, Paper, gun powder first invented in China was shared with the world through the silk route. We know how important these items have been for the development of humankind.

Apart from goods and merchandise religion, languages, music, art, life style and above all culture also flowed through these routes that played a significant role in development of the major civilizations of the world shaping our present day life. In short the **most significant contribution of Silk Route was definitely bringing cultures and peoples in contact with each other**, and facilitating trade and exchanges of cultures between them, thereby changing the course of history and ideas!! On the other hand, the entire Trans Himalayan range, however, existed as a physical barrier for the expansion of the trade activities in that region. Still the great travelers across central Asia and China like **Marco Polo from Portugal in 12th Century, Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang) in 6th and 7th Centuries** spent many years to learn about Hinduism and Buddhism philosophies. Many ancient artifacts, temples and pagodas in China are the testimony of these ancient exchanges.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we see the world going through unprecedented level of globalization. **National boundaries are being morphed into bridges from barriers.** Societies are getting closer to each other. Interdependence is being more pronounced. Countries are moving towards closer economic engagements. In this context, the idea of Trans Himalaya regional cooperation is extremely relevant and important to us, and with the uninterrupted efforts of stake holders a substantial upgrading of the concept has been realized, especially driven by China which is the engine of economic growth of the world. **Geographically, Nepal belongs to the central part of the great Himalayas and development of this region is vital** for us and for that, I personally thank the organizing institutions for such a commendable effort to bring all of us here to discuss the pressing issue.

Opportunity and Challenges

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Trans Himalayan region lags behind other comparable regions in terms of economic growth due to various reasons. There are **challenges of geography, poverty and illiteracy that exacerbate it. Natural disasters, climate change, massive under employment, and other security threats such as shortages of water, food, health and energy** are common in the sub Himalayan region. Trans Himalaya region despite its huge resources has not been successful in overcoming this challenge with the exception of China and India to some extent. Since 2013, with the declaration of BRI by President Xi Jin Ping of China, the people of these underdeveloped regions are hopeful to relish the anticipated outcome of the initiative bringing rapid improvement

in the quality of their lives. China's journey to becoming economic power with over 700 million people pulled out of poverty in mere 38 years can be both an inspiration and an learning experience for our region. That is why we believe the BRI is going to be a significant historical milestone of 21st Century for us.

Vastness

The Trans-Himalaya region covers a vast area **rich in natural resource with a great population of human capital**. These opportunities should be realized efficiently and effectively. For this, I believe that the Trans-Himalaya regional cooperation has been multi-dimensional in approach built on the BRI foundation.

As many south Asian countries are willing to participate in the process, we can begin to **initiate different programs, for example cultural exchanges, tourism development, academic and business exchanges, Think tank exchanges with interactive sessions** to discourse better policy objectives at P to P level and many more. At the same time mutual trust, confidence building measures for mutual prosperity should be our choice rather than clinging to the historic animosity left over by the colonial past.

Integration of SAARC in Trans Himalaya Cooperation

There are many regional instruments in the South Asian region and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is one of them. The countries of **SAARC have diverse strength desirous to upgrade their cultural exchange and connectivity** in many areas. All member countries of SAARC have close relations with China, and some share common borders

and others are in the vicinity. Therefore with the BRI operationalized, the countries in the SAARC region will be more integrated to for their common economic agenda under the Trans Himalayan cooperation module.

The immediate impact of BRI will be felt in the SAARC countries if its regional cooperation mechanism is further integrated with the Trans Himalayan economic cooperation enhancing linkages of a diverse range of potential opportunities.

Creating an Economic Community

Firstly by strengthening cultural bond and economic cooperation with the help of **people to people communication other opportunities** will soon evolve and form an economic community based on the many commonality we share.

The South Asian Region is big market with human and natural resources. Many countries border with China and others are in close proximity. Despite these opportunities, due to resource crunch and lack of desired capital, connectivity and technology the region continues to be under developed with unacceptable poverty rate. SAARC countries should learn from the experiences of China for poverty alleviation and economic development. All countries in the region should grasp the opportunities provided by Belt and Road Initiative by means of **infrastructure development, connectivity, technology transfer and of course the means to finance** the required investments. By conceptualizing the investment climate conducive to innovation, rapid establishment of prerequisite physical infrastructure like highways, airports , railways, power grids and energy pipelines mixed with

economic community can transform the entire Trans Himalayan region. For that the role of BRI will again be crucial.

BRI and Trans Himalayan Regional Cooperation

I feel that 2018 is going to be a milestone year. Since the first BRI summit in May 2017 , we can sense the excitement of many countries in expectation of benefits of BRI. **Nepal having signed the agreement last year** and now after the new constitution the new government in Kathmandu is ready for implementing the BRI and looking forward for to new opportunities. I strongly believe that, Trans Himalaya Regional cooperation should complement initiatives in the region and the activities under it should sustain momentum with gradual supplement of BRI project-driven initiatives. **Other regional organizations such as BIMSTEC, BCIM, BBIN in addition to SAARC can benefit by integrating their development strategies with BRI** so that available resources and technology can be used more efficiently and augment the development process. Such integrated approach of development will have greater significance for the holistic development of the region and I think China must act as a major driving force in this process. As the BRI progresses more approaches to Trans Himalaya Regional cooperation should unfold for the prosperity of the entire region.

Cultural Exchange and People to People Communication

I am delighted that the conference theme revolves round highlighting the **importance of People to people communication** in the Trans Himalaya Region. Nepal has made it clear that it wishes to act as a Himalayan land bridge between two great regions China and South Asia. These two regions with the geographic proximity to over half of world population have the

greatest potential for economic development. Nepal can be one more corridor of BRI to be connected to countries of South Asia with Chinese railways and road ways network which can greatly contribute to the economic expansion of many south Asian nations. Nepal has many viable border points along its 1400 Km border with China and many more with India. Nepal is only 27 KM away from Bangladesh. The development of North South corridors of Nepal and to link these with the South Asian sub continent and other previously stated regional blocks such as **BIMSTEC, BCIM, and BBIN** and so on offer a historic opportunity for mutual growth and mutual prosperity.

The Himalayas that extends from Afghanistan to Myanmar possess a barrier in trade relation, especially between China and South Asian nations challenging greater economic cooperation and initiatives. I recall many conferences in the subject matter conducted in the past. During a **seminar conducted by Nepal Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS) last year** and interaction programme this year, many experts and intellectuals thought that great Himalayan barrier which were thought to be impregnable in the past are now viable due to advancement in science and technology. With the prospects of BRI in the Trans Himalayan region, Nepal's geo strategic location offers a platform for regional cooperation and improves connectivity of the entire region.

Maximization of Cooperation

I think increased activities on the ground are needed on our part to maximize Trans Himalaya Regional Cooperation under BRI which is a major focus of this conference today. In doing so, it is important to look at it from **two**

perspectives: first, to improve understanding of the strategic significance of trans Himalaya regional cooperation; its integration process with BRI , what has already happened and what needs to happen; and secondly, addressing the challenges, concerns and explore opportunities toward its implementation and functioning so that direct net benefit to all stakeholders can be demonstrated which will help mitigate some of the risks and apprehensions voiced by some countries.

Security Dimension

Ladies and Gentlemen, security is utmost priority in the region. For any successful development effort a **peaceful and stable environment** is a must. When we talk about security we have to consider two aspects; one, National Security and Sovereignty should be guaranteed between and among the nations involved. Secondly, **physical security of all development projects**. Sustainable development can take place only in an environment of sustainable peace. Unfortunately, the region's colonial past has left much negativity around us. So we have to choose dialogue and diplomacy for peaceful coexistence. There can be no military solutions for long term peace and prosperity of a region.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am happy to note that many countries are beginning to explore the opportunities provided by the BRI, in the framework of Trans Himalaya Regional Cooperation and vice versa. Hence, I believe the respective **governments will begin integration of both** in their development strategy. We are awaiting to practically implement it in land bridge concept, create a multi layered relationship not only Government to government, but

also at B to B (Business to Business) and P to P exchanges which will bolster in connecting trans Himalayan region creating massive economic opportunity and reducing poverty. I am sure; these will **bring positive changes** in our people's life which we can experience in our own life times. For this, the countries involved have to build an **atmosphere of trust and confidence rather than suspicion and apprehension** left over by history to make trans-Himalaya Regional Cooperation a reality.

Before I conclude, let me reiterate as many previous speakers have highlighted, there are many opportunities in Trans Himalayan regional Cooperation and we must not lose sight of its potential areas where we can make the historic progress. Under BRI it can have a full fledged **mobilization of finance, work force, and diverse trade activities** and so on.

I am confident this conference will bring out many practical ideas and help the policy planners and members of broader intelligentsia to find various ways and means for peace and prosperity. As far as Nepal is concerned, we will continue to work and help making Trans Himalaya Regional Cooperation a success. Finally, let me again **congratulate Leshan Normal University, the Center for Trans Himalaya Studies of LSNU and Centre for Myanmar Studies of Sichuan University, Center for Trans Himalaya Tourism and Culture Center of LSNU** for planning and organizing this conference that will surely contribute to enhancing our cooperation in the region.

I look forward to the presentations and successful deliberations.
Thankyou.

20 April, 2018