

Remarks at The Himalayan Consensus Summit, Kathmandu, March 2018
(<http://himalayanconsensussummit.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/hcs-proceeding-report-2018.pdf>)

A hundred years ago, we had colonial empires, borders just beginning to be drawn, and people were used to a revolving door concept of straddling borders. Down the line through the troubled decades of the 20th century, with the division of ideologies and the emergence of newly independent nations, boundaries became defined, sovereignties began to be contested and a new concept of the Himalaya emerged. Compounding these divisions further, the stretch from the Hindu Kush to the mountains of Myanmar clearly shows the effects of climate change, the pressures of population growth, the challenges of sustainable development as well as the threats of terrorism, the security threats from territorial disputes, lack of communication and connectivity, the erosion of cultural identities, and the destruction of heritage. Therefore, the challenge lies in navigating ways to mitigate, if not eliminate, these challenges and build common ground while resolving the differences.

Talking about differences, nothing much has changed in regard to the border disputes between India and China. The Panchsheel agreement of 1954, the first intergovernmental agreement between India and China, essentially dealt with the Himalayan region as it dealt with the trade and intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India. The preamble to that agreement set out the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence, including equality and mutual benefit, cooperation, non- interference, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Many of these principles are what the region needs now as without that awareness, people would not understand the revolutionary concept and need of a Himalayan consensus. As the discussions and deliberations go forward, the biggest challenge lies in seeding and propagating this idea of the Himalayan consensus in the larger public domain. Taking a cue from the Panchsheel agreement, I believe we can put together a Himalayan Charter, a declaration that will enunciate the principles involved in what it means to be truly Himalayan, to really rise above the differences that separate us today. The motto of the Survey of India, the government agency preparing India's official maps, in Sanskrit is 'A Setu Himachalam' - which means from the Indian Ocean, precisely the Adams bridge that separates India from Sri Lanka to the peaks of the Himalayas. That is the idea of India - a Setu Himachalam - the unutterable beauty of the Himalayas in many ways, the crown of the country, really defines what we are. There is such a conglomeration of differences and diversities that comes together to make India, the idea of which is defined so much by the Himalayas. Hence, the concept of Himalayan Consensus should reach across and inspire people to think of the immense potential that exists for cooperation, co-existence and for connectivity, from the mountains to the sea. As for the BRI, a flagship project for the Chinese, I believe India's reservations do not stem from the fact that there is going to be greater connectivity in the region. These reservations are avoidable if we have closer political consultations on the subject and are able to clear the fog that seems to have descended on this aspect of the relationship between India and China. The fact that the ChinaPakistan economic corridor runs through the territory contested between India and Pakistan is a legitimate cause for reservation by India. However, we should be prepared to discuss these reservations in order to see how we can find a viable, workable solution that does not ignore contested sovereignty. South Asia is an integer and the countries Nepal, India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, share a common destiny. The idea of a South Asian commons crowned by the Himalayas should be embedded in the Himalayan Consensus.