

## **Glacial Melt and a Himalayan Trilateral Commission**

by Laurence Brahm

*Laurence Brahm* [himalayanconsensus2@gmail.com] is a global activist, lawyer, political-economist, crisis mediator, and founder of the Himalayan Consensus movement ([www.himalayanconsensus.org](http://www.himalayanconsensus.org)).

The Himalayan plateau spreads across Afghanistan, Pakistan, China's Xinjiang and Tibetan regions, Nepal, Bhutan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Throughout much of history, the Himalayas served as a bridge, not a barrier, integrating rather than separating ethnic affiliations. In modern times, however, national boundaries have divided ethnic groups otherwise connected by traditions, religions, and cultural mindsets. Many local populations dispute territories claimed by individual countries.

The Himalayan region should be as important to policymakers in Washington as to those in Beijing and Delhi. Tensions in this area are more likely to boil over than those in North Korea and Taiwan. It isn't too late for a reformulation of foreign policy approaches to the Himalayan region.

### **The Potential for Instability**

Poverty is a very real issue in the Himalayan region. Forty percent of the world's poor live in the Himalayas. In Nepal, 42 percent of the population lives in poverty; in Pakistan 33 percent, India 29 percent, and Bhutan 23 percent. Ethnic minorities in China's western regions represent only 10 percent of China's total population, but account for 40-50 percent of its absolute poor. In many of these countries, the situation of the poor is worsening. Foreign and domestic investment for industrial and economic development in the Himalayan region is hampered by social instability, corruption, lack of transparency, and fears of financial insecurity.

The increasing number of US and allied troops in Afghanistan inserts an unknown variable into the futures of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and China's Xinjiang region. Local populations often view outside military intervention, regardless of intent, with contempt and as further evidence of the failure of the "outside" world to recognize local realities. This view, combined with extreme levels of poverty, hopelessness, and insecurity about the ability to provide for basic needs such as water, fills the ranks of terrorist and marginal groups. The geographic reach of these groups and the associated violence is increasing, spreading throughout the region and unsettling minority populations in individual countries such as China. The historic ties between populations within these countries aggravates the situation, as local people may feel stronger commitment to brothers "across the border" than to those down the street.

An additional consideration in any evaluation of the stability of the Himalayan region is the relationship between China and India, the two largest economies in the region. Each country maintains *de facto* administration over territories claimed by the other. So far, this has produced a relatively stable compromise. However, several factors threaten the long-term viability of this policy. Both countries are focused on moving economic development toward undeveloped border areas. China also fears the instigation of violence and instability among minority populations occupying these border areas is tacitly supported by external forces. Finally, increasing nationalism (caused by domestic pressures in each country) hampers the ability of leaders to negotiate. Think tanks in each country have predicted war by 2012.

The final, newest, and perhaps greatest factor contributing to the high potential for instability in the Himalayan region is climate change. The entire region faces the threat of water scarcity resulting from glacier attrition. The failure of the three major CO2 emitters – China, the US, and India – to reach any substantive agreement on combating environmental changes at Copenhagen in December 2009 has stalled global environmental protection efforts. In the Himalayan region, this is perceived as evidence of the world's inability to recognize and address issues that the region considers imminent and highly destabilizing. It is not difficult to imagine how these challenges could play out in regions lacking "evolved" dispute resolution mechanisms.

### **Getting the Parties to the Table**

There is no single solution to the problems aggravating instability in the Himalayas. The starting point is getting key players to the table and this requires a rallying point. Saving the Himalayan glaciers can provide this common ground.

Scientific debate aside, the reality of glacial melt is obvious to those on the ground. In winter 2010, there was little snow on the Tibetan plateau, leaving major river systems drying and Sahara-type desertification spreading along the once-mighty river banks of the Brahmaputra. Each of Asia's great rivers originates in the Himalayan glaciers. Lower flows from the Himalayas into the Yangtze, Yellow, Mekong, Salween, Irrawady, Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Indus rivers will leave two-thirds of the world's population, living on two continents, without adequate water. Because of the economic, ethnic, and nationalistic pressures described above, without alternative venues, the results of climate change in the Himalayan region would most likely be resolved by violence, leading to cyclical social instability. Tackling climate change and providing solutions can serve as a base for economic development, poverty alleviation, education and medical reform, and recognition and celebration of ethnic and cultural identities – all of which are crucial to ensuring the long-term stability of the Himalayan region.

## **The Himalayan Trilateral – a Practical Dialogue Mechanism**

Adopting a Himalayan Trilateral Commission between the three largest CO2 emitters – China, the US, and India – as key stakeholders in glacial melt and regional water security is a policy objective each country can support. Moreover, these three countries, as the largest CO2 emitters, are pressed to bring a solution – or at least a practical proposal – to the next UN climate change summit to be held in Cancun in December.

While joint scientific and policy work on CO2 emissions and their direct effects upon the Himalayan glaciers may lead the agenda, water security and related ethnic and economic issues are intertwined. As such, the Himalayan Trilateral Commission while having a primary objective of managing water security, would also have the secondary charge of providing a forum for dialogue over and coordinating policy for complex ethnic, religious, and other indigenous issues.

Original membership and funding would be based on CO2 emission criteria. Given the current diplomatic atmosphere, the Himalayan Trilateral Commission may get a better reception if the idea is presented as being initiated by China, with India signing on, and the US lending full support to the region through its participation. Logically, the largest CO2 emitters should be the vanguard in efforts to combat the impacts of glacial melt, but these nations also have incentives to spearhead efforts to avoid instability that would threaten theirs' and the world's security. While initially a trilateral, the Commission's long-term success would depend on the inclusion of other stakeholder nations of the Himalayas. Stability in the region cannot be achieved without recognition and consideration of the suffering that will be felt by all bordering nations when water shortages arise due to glacial melt and the influence this would have on complex ethnic and economic tensions.

Both the primary and secondary objectives of the Himalayan Trilateral Commission cannot be achieved without establishment of a fund (donated to and managed by the three largest CO2 emitters). This fund would provide resources to coordinate policy and establish programs toward three primary goals: (1) the establishment and enforcement of environmental standards; (2) poverty alleviation; and (3) improving education and medical care. Because of the ethnic, cultural, and economic realities of the region, any policy or program must be based on principles that empower individuals and provide them with tools to create sustainable economic success. This type of ground-up policy is more attractive to indigenous groups and provides a stark contrast to the more widespread and popularly rejected alien, top-down approaches.

Additionally, the principles underlying the Himalayan Trilateral Commission are relevant to other parts of the world where climate change is inextricably connected to poverty and social instability. The Mexican government is working on a proposal for a Green Fund employing concepts that parallel those of the Himalayan Trilateral Commission. An acknowledgement by China, the US, and India of a need for such an approach is essential to the success of any attempt to tackle climate change. By coming to Mexico City with a

Himalayan Trilateral, the US, India, and China can demonstrate a sincere intention to address climate change and its impact, and move in a direction that can achieve broad global support.

### **Seeking Cooperation Rather Than Conflict**

The Himalayan Trilateral Commission initiative also offers a platform upon which all parties can find a common goal, and by adopting a fresh approach, avoid fossilized positions that have become intractable. The Himalayan Trilateral Commission approach timed in sequence running up to climate change talks in Mexico City this December, presents a win-win situation that will have global benefits. It offers a badly needed breakthrough in US-China relations, which have deteriorated over recent months. An out-of-the box approach is needed now, particularly when traditional attempts at dialogue have stalemated.

The Himalayan Trilateral Commission will not eliminate terrorism. It can ease fears of local populations, reducing poverty and combating disillusionment, factors that incubate social unrest and fundamentalism. Policymakers in all three capitals must recognize that issues of environment, ethnic identity, sustainable economic development, and security must be dealt with in concert.

*Applications are now being accepted for the 2010-2011 Pacific Forum Vasey Fellow position. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [<http://www.csis.org/program/vasey-fellows>].*