The first ever forum of selected think tanks in South Asia was conducted at Kunming in the Yunnan province from 06 to 07 Jun 2013. This was planned along with the EXPO which is being conducted for many years.

The event was fully supported by the Chinese Government, think tanks in China and the Yunnan province. The first CSATTF was co-sponsored by the Chinese academy of Social Sciences and Yunnan Provincial People’s Government and was organized by the Institute of Asia Pacific and Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, Yunnan Provincial Foreign Culture Exchange Association. The collaborative efforts were provided from China Institute of International Studies, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Shanghai Institute of International Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, China Foundation for Peace and development, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi. The forum with participation of over 120 resource persons provided an opportunity for the participants from South Asian countries to meet in a happening province that has a lot of relevance to connectivity between the Asian neighbours. China capitalized on the opportunity and ensured that it remained an active player in the academic discussions about the role of China in furthering trade and commerce and also regional integration in the Asian century. The forum doubtlessly has allowed China to play a pivotal role in enabling the meeting.

There was a mega performance with wonderful dynamic settings on the eve of the conference which show cased the agility and potential of many performers who put up a song and dance show. The show with many themes enthralled the audience and gave a glimpse of the cultural extravaganza as performed by Chinese artists. The audience was encouraged to participate by providing all of them with colourful torches and clapping devices. Even a scintillating number from Bollywood was sung in an effortless manner to the accompanying music and dance by the team members. The showcasing of the cultural event again was an effort to bring out the professional way in which Chinese
artists were able to put up a great show in some extra ordinary settings for both the domestic and international audience.

The inaugural ceremony was conducted in a new EXPO facility which apparently was built about a month ahead of schedule specifically for the EXPO. The airport itself is imaginatively built and is very different from the run of the mill one sees around the world including India. Various dignitaries from South Asian countries were present and delivered the opening address during the morning ceremony on 06th June 2013. India was conspicuous by its absence on the stage during the inauguration of the EXPO. The reasons for the absence are best known to the Indian Government as there were no indications in the media or in the public domain to suggest a possible explanation. The Premier of China and the PM of India had gone ahead with the meeting in India after the issue of incursion along the LAC was resolved after some behind the scene efforts and it was expected that there would be some representation at the inaugural by a Government representative.

The EXPO would have provided a wonderful opportunity to understand the areas of concern in bilateral and multilateral trade amongst the South Asian countries. This was even more important as India continues to feel that the bilateral trade with China is heavily skewed in China's favour and there is a need to expand the range of trade activity based on ground realities. There were many Indian stalls who alongside their counterparts from other South Asian countries were trying to do business as they were showcasing their products.

Coming to the event itself, the think tank dialogue consisted again of the inaugural addresses by dignitaries after the EXPO in an International Conference Hall at a beautifully maintained picturesque resort (Dianchi Garden Hotel) some distance away from the city. The range of dignitaries for this forum included many former Ambassadors and other representatives including from India. The subsequent parallel sessions were divided in to the following streams.-

1. Regional Economic Cooperation
2. Regional Connectivity
3. People to People Contact

The plenary sessions brought out the stark reality that as far as connectivity is concerned, there are many impediments and these could only be overcome by concerted efforts to bring all the stake holders on the same page and by removing mutual suspicion. Col Hariharan (Retd) from Chennai Center for China Studies and Commodore RS Vasan IN Retd from Center for Asia Studies (also an associate member of the Chennai Center for China Studies participated in the Regional Connectivity sessions and presented their views on the developments in the region. Commodore Vasan highlighted the issues of Power Play in the Indian Ocean by the two Asian powers and identified the areas in which active cooperation and harmony can be achieved as both the countries face similar challenges in the maritime domain.

The post lunch session on the final day was dedicated to discussions amongst the think tank representatives. After discussing the draft consensus report, it was agreed by all that it was a worthy initiative and needs to be sustained to provide policy inputs that would aid the
governments to pursue practical options for regional connectivity, prosperity and peace. The consensus document after many deliberations was signed by all the participants. The key highlights of the consensus document are as under:-

1. The role of think tanks in promoting better understanding and providing the right kind of inputs to the policy makers and the stakeholders was acknowledged. This forum is expected to play a crucial role in improving bilateral and multilateral relationship, enhancing mutual trust and understanding as well as fostering cooperation and exchange. The theme of the expo was “Cooperation Exchange and common development”

2. The event is of great significance in strengthening bilateral and regional ties, boosting economic and trade cooperation and increasing social cultural exchange. The forum will also promote cooperation amongst the think tanks in China and South Asian Countries.

3. CSATTF considers that the improvement of connectivity and people to people contact will greatly benefit all stakeholders. A call for continuous cooperation among research institutes and private organisations and civil societies of the region for continuous development of this forum.

4. The forum also indicated that while in the interim, the sights could be set to China and South Asia; gradually it could be expanded to include think tanks from other South East Asian countries.

5. It was also decided to continue the forum on a regular basis to maintain regular communication and interaction.

The evening also had a special presentation by Vishwa Bharathi which was devoted to the efforts of Shantinikethan and Rabindra Nath Tagore in providing different form of education. The presentation was titled From Grass Roots to Higgs Boson to highlight the Tagore’s model of holistic Education. The artists who had come specifically from Kolkatta gave a wonderful performance assisted by commentary and music that provided deep insights into the mind and working of Tagore

Comments and Analysis. It is clear that a lot of thought has been put in to conceptualizing and executing this forum for enhancing regional cooperation. The active participation by all SAARC countries bodes well for the effort. The Government of China and the think tanks need to be complemented for taking this initiative that would provide alternate means of engagement with the intelligentsia of the South Asian think tanks. It is even more relevant as SAARC has many impediments that have come in the way of using SAARC as an effective platform for enhancing the cooperative mechanisms in South Asia. China with an observer status in SAARC is leveraging its position to engage with both the private and state sponsored think tanks which allows it to feel the pulse of the South Asian countries. The informal but high quality inputs obtained would be of immense use for China to draw up plans by which it can gain a lot by initiating measures required in the region for promoting trade and commerce.
From the conference it was also clear that many Chinese scholars continue to work in the Chinese language and do need the interpreters to convey their ideas in English. The South Asian representatives were all fluent in English and were able to communicate their ideas and thoughts eloquently. There was simultaneous translations provided by using a high quality audio phone which ensured that there were no undue delays in the translation.

The run up to the event, the immaculate planning and execution clearly illustrated that a lot of importance was attached to the success of the very first think tank forum. The fact that it was fully supported by the provincial Government was very evident as all the vehicles carrying the participants were escorted by police vehicles to the venue of the EXPO.

There were free and frank discussions on the three chosen topics and many constructive suggestions have been made. The holding of the conference in Kunming in Yunnan province has a lot of significance. This province which has historical linkages to the silk routes has been developing with great potential for providing the connectivity to South Asian countries. The city is growing by leap and bounds and has some great initiative in the infrastructure. However, the fact that many of the historical places were brought down to make way for sky scrapers is something that has not gone well with many of the locals. It may be recalled that way back in 2009, there was this motor rally from Kolkatta to Kunming. However, there is still a lot that needs to be done to ensure that the road and rail connectivity is improved to bring about regional integration with Yunnan at the center of trade activity. The fact that the road and rail connectivity has not taken off was acknowledged and emphasis was laid on the sea connectivity and improvements of ports in the region that could enhance the maritime connectivity.

In conclusion, it can be said that China has indeed taken a lead over its Asian neighbours in getting together the intellectual community and paving the way for enhanced cooperative mechanisms to be put in to operation at the intellectual level. This is another track that hopefully would complement the efforts of the South Asian countries to enhance connectivity, cooperation and engagement in areas other than pure commerce.

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