

India's Engagement with Southeast Asia: Role of Physical Connectivity

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Abstract

Connectivity is an absolute necessity for regional cooperation. Development of connectivity between any two regions-physical, institutional, cyber, and people-to-people facilitates faster and greater interaction, thereby minimizing transaction costs, and enabling cohesiveness and convergence. India's connections with Southeast Asia dates back to historical times. Southeast Asia has become one of the prime regions of the world with steadily expanding production networks and as such providing an opportunity for India to integrate itself with the region's manufacturing networks. India's upgraded ties with Southeast Asia can be corroborated by its shift in policy from 'Look East' to 'Act East', trade figure touching \$142 billion in 2018, signing of multilateral and bilateral FTA in trade and services among others. The relationship could be taken to another level if physical connectivity between India and Southeast is enhanced. Realising the importance of connectivity, India is undertaking projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project with countries of Southeast Asia. Certain projects like the Mekong India Economic Corridor are also being planned. However, building a strong connectivity relationship between India and Southeast Asia requires strong policy initiatives and greater political will. This paper seeks to throw light on the ongoing physical connectivity initiatives between India and Southeast Asia, their present status, probe challenges related to them, and assess their potential benefits. It also argues that improved connectivity between India and Southeast Asia can inspire greater dynamism in regional production networks, would boost trade, and promote greater foreign direct investment.

Keywords

Connectivity, Southeast Asia, Act East, Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and Kaladan.

1. Introduction

Connectivity, since antiquity, has been one of the prime drivers of relationships between any geographical regions. However, in the dynamics of modern international relations, its importance has assumed greater significance. Expansion of the production network to multiple locations owing to the necessity of reducing production costs has made connectivity all more important. Developing connectivity infrastructures between two regions such as transport lines, digital connectivity among others leads to a significant reduction in transaction costs as well as helps in achieving greater regional integration, attracting greater foreign direct investment. Connectivity promotes interaction and integration in almost all spheres-economic, political, and cultural. The Asian Development Bank Interim Report suggests that connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia opens the market for goods and services thereby promoting economies of scale and greater competition. Regional competitiveness also receives a boost since the regionally competitive industries generate more efficient production structures.

With all the above-listed benefits attached to improved connectivity, India has its own reasons to improve the status of connectivity with Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, as a region, has attracted huge significance in the last three decades, with the interests of almost all major powers of the world converging in this region. India's own exchange with Southeast Asia has grown multiple times. Promoting trade in goods and services, and people-to-people, contact with ASEAN is one of the principal pillars of India's 'Look East Policy'. ASEAN has emerged as an important trade partner of India and trade figures have risen steadily since 2000, and stood at around \$142 billion in 2018. India-ASEAN trade comprises 10 percent of India's total external trade, and India is one of ASEAN's top ten trade partner countries. India is also responsible for supplying an important part of Asia's primary resources. India's FTA with ASEAN in goods and services is central to its economic engagement with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Its trade with ASEAN is expected to increase by double, the aim being \$300 billion by 2025. Hence, this growth in engagement will see an increasing demand for national as well as international infrastructure for production,

consumption, and international trade purposes. Better connectivity between India and Southeast Asia can infuse greater dynamism in regional production networks, would increase trade, and promote greater foreign direct investment. Moreover, proper linkage of India's Northeast region with Southeast Asia is likely to help in the region's better integration with the mainstream economy.

2. Connectivity Projects between India and Southeast Asia

Considering the words and space constraint, only important connectivity projects between India and Southeast have been taken up.

3. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project

The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project is an important limb of India's Act East Policy and its outreach towards Southeast Asia. The project aims to enhance connectivity between the ports in India with the Sittwe port in Myanmar. From Sittwe, it will then connect to India's Northeast region through road and inland waterways. Thus, the project would provide an alternative route to connect mainland India to the Northeast parts of the country via Myanmar, making transportation of goods easier. The project is named after the river Kaladan. The Kaladan River originates in the state of Mizoram and is referred to as Chhimtui. It flows in a southerly direction through the Rakhine and Chin state in Myanmar before draining into the sea. The river is navigable but turns shallow beyond Paletwa. However, once the project materializes, it will be easier to transport goods using the Kaladan River. The background study for the waterways component comprising Port and Inland Waterways Transport (IWT) was done by M/S RITES Limited in 2003, and for the road component in 2005. The company suggested a waterway route from Sittwe Port to Kaletwa (Myanmar), a distance of 225 kilometres along the Kaladan River, and thereafter connecting Kaletwa to the Indo-Myanmar border through road, which would cover a distance of 62 kilometres. Based on this suggestion, the Ministry of External Affairs, India, entered into a 'Framework Agreement' with the Myanmar government in April 2008 for undertaking the multi-modal project. The Indian government, the financier of the project, had approved a project cost of rupees 535.91 crores, which has recently been revised to rupees 2904.04 crores. Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has been in-charge of the Port and Inland Water Transport (IWT)

component of the project appointed as the Project Development Consultant (PDC) for the implementation.

Table 1: The Transit Route Planned between Kolkata and Mizoram Comprises of the following Segments

Stretch	Mode	Distance
Kolkata to Sittwe Port (Myanmar)	Shipping	539 km
Sittwe to Paletwa Inland	Water Transport	158 km
Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar	Border Road	110 km
Border to NH 54 (Lwangtlai, India)	Road	100 km

Source: Mdoner, Goi

The principal components of the project include the following:

- **Port and IWT Components**
 1. Construction of an integrated port and inland water transport terminal at Sittwe including dredging.
 2. Construction of an IWT-Highway trans-shipment terminal at Paletwa.
 3. Construction of 6 IWT barges (300tn Capacity) for transportation of cargo between Sittwe and Paletwa.
- **Highway Component**
 1. Construction of a highway from Paletwa river terminal to Zorinpui in Chin state of Myanmar on the Indo-Myanmar border for 110 kilometres.

Further, to distribute the benefits of the project throughout the Northeast region, Zorinpui would be connected to Lwangtlai in Mizoram, 100 kilometres away from the Indo-Myanmar border from where NH 54 goes through. It would, then be connected to major Northeast cities and state capitals.

The project was awarded to Essar Projects (India), which started the project work in December 2010. The responsibility for providing land and security rests with Myanmar whereas the Indian government will bear the cost of the construction of a project. Upon completion, the project would be delivered to the Government of Myanmar, and would be operated by it as per the provisions contained in the Protocol on Facilitation of Transit Transport and Protocol on Maintenance and Administration.

The initial deadline for the Kaladan Project to be completed was June 2015. However, because of various reasons, the project has got delayed. The work on the project began in December 2010. After a string of several delays, India finally started the work on the construction of the 109 km stretch of road that links Paletwa River Terminal to Zorinpui on the Indo-Myanmar border in April 2018. The project was awarded to C & C Constructions in June 2017 at an investment of INR 16000 crores, with a timeframe of 36 months. However, the project took off late since it received clearances from Myanmar's government only in January 2018. On the Myanmar side, the Indian government has wrapped up the construction of the Sittwe Port, the river terminal at Paletwa, and the dredging of the Kaladan River. India handed over the control of Sittwe port to Myanmar in April 2017. On the Indian side, the extension of the Aizawl-Saiha National Highway to the Indo-Myanmar border at Zorinpui is near complete. India also handed over six cargo vessels worth \$81.29 million on 26 June 2017. The construction work for the vessels began in 2013 and was launched in 2016. Each vessel has a cargo capacity of 300 tonnes. These vessels will be used for the transportation of goods from Sittwe to Paletwa.

One of the important reasons for the project to come up is to provide the landlocked states of Northeast India an easy pass to the Bay of Bengal. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, the project "aims to provide connectivity between India and Myanmar from ports on India's eastern sea board to Myanmar's Sittwe port and further to Northeast India through Myanmar using sea, river and road transport modes to facilitate movement of goods". The project, when completed, will provide an alternative route to the already overburdened and overstretched Siliguri corridor in West Bengal, popularly known as the Chicken's Neck. Moreover, the continuous refusal of Bangladesh to grant transport and transit rights through its territory to the Northeast states, including denying access to the Chittagong port which is located within a distance of 200 kilometres from Agartala, is also considered an important reason to implement the project. The project helps India to bypass Bangladesh for its transportation of goods from Kolkata to the Northeast.

According to reports, the diversion of cargo going to Northeast India to Sittwe will benefit the region, especially the states of Mizoram, the

Manipur, and Nagaland. The Northeast will be closer than ever to the mainland India once the road, waterway, and port project is completed. At present, the distance between Lwangtlai in Mizoram to the Haldia port in Kolkata through the Siliguri corridor is around 1880 kilometres. However, once the project is completed, NH 502A will connect Lwangtlai in Mizoram to the Indo-Myanmar, which will further travel towards Paletwa through a highway, and finally connect Paletwa to Sittwe using the waterway. Thus, goods can be moved from and to the mainland of India, Mizoram, and the Northeast reducing the distance from 1880 kilometres to roughly 930 kilometres. Thus, the reduced distance will help in cutting costs as well as time.

The Zorinpui Land Customs Station in Mizoram will come up will enhance the border trade with Myanmar. Important commodities that are exported from Mizoram to Myanmar are bamboo, spices like chillies, sesame, banana, cotton yarn, ginger, squash, passion fruit, and all kinds of citrus fruits. Major items that Mizoram brings from Myanmar are cattle, pigs, processed food like fish, beef and pork, cow, chicken, readymade garments, electronic goods, textile articles and textile fabrics, etc. Thus, the economic benefits of the project to the landlocked state would be substantial.

The port project will lead to improving bilateral relations and increased economic activity between India and Myanmar. The ships carrying goods from Indian ports to Sittwe for delivering it to the Northeast can also carry goods to be exported to Myanmar. From Sittwe, goods can travel to Rangoon and from there to entire Southeast Asia. Thus, the port has the potential to link Myanmar to all major Indian ports. Moreover, the port at Sittwe also provides India certain strategic influence to India, as it will help India to counter the growing influence of China on Myanmar.

However, the project is not free from challenges. On the Myanmar side, several civil rights and environmental organizations voice the concerns of the lack of transparency by the Indian government. They raise the issues of lack of consultation with the local communities and unavailability of information about the project. Non-involvement in the gains of the project as well as wages for the labour are also pointed out. The environmentalists opposing the project also highlight the damaging impact of the project on the environment.

The project faces certain geographical challenges as well. The inaccessible and difficult terrain creates logistical problems in terms of transportation of construction materials, machineries, and labour. Firms undertaking the project face similar problems in completing the highway from Lwangtlai to the Indo-Myanmar border.

4. India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is an enterprising project covering a length of around 1360 km that will connect India with the Southeast Asian region. The eventual extension of the highway to Vietnam would increase the highway's length to approximately 3200 km. The highway links the town of Moreh in the state of Manipur in India, to Mae Sot in Thailand via Tamu, Mandalay, and Myawaddy in Myanmar. The project is a part of India's larger 'Act East' policy which aims to connect the nation with the ASEAN region. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway was first proposed in a trilateral ministerial meeting on transport linkages in April 2002 held at Yangon. The highway was initially scheduled to be operational by 2015. However, due to delays arising from various reasons, it is likely to be operational by 2023. The route of the highway will be:

Moreh (India) – Tamu (Myanmar) – Kalewa (Myanmar) – Yagyi (Myanmar) – Monywa (Myanmar) – Mandalay (Myanmar) – Meiktila (Myanmar) – Nay Pyi Taw (Myanmar) – Payagyi (Myanmar) – Theinzayat (Myanmar) – Thaton (Myanmar) – Hpa'an (Myanmar) – Kawkaik (Myanmar) – Myawaddy (Myanmar) – Mae Sot (Thailand). At the 2003 Foreign Ministers' meeting of the three countries held in New Delhi, the following decisions were taken with respect to the works related to the trilateral highway:

- The highway would be built in three phases. The first phase was to include 78 km of new roads, upgradation of around 400 km of roads, the construction of all-weather approach lanes, and rehabilitation/reconstruction of weak or distressed bridges.
- India was given the responsibility of 78 km of new roads, also dubbed as the missing link, 58 km of upgradation in Phase-I. Thailand was given the responsibility of upgradation of 136 km and 62 km sectors

of Phase-I and another 100 km as part of Phase-II. It was also decided that Myanmar would take up intermediary approach roads, reconstruction/rehabilitation of weak bridges, pending the approval of the Burmese government.

- A Senior Officials group was to be established to review the implementation and progress of the projects.

The three-sided Joint Task Force again met in New Delhi in September 2012. The meeting agreed that all efforts would be made to establish the highway by 2016. At the 2012 India-ASEAN commemorative summit, the leaders of the ASEAN countries and India agreed to extend the trilateral highway to Cambodia and Vietnam. India and Myanmar also signed two MoUs pertaining to connectivity projects during the visit of the Myanmar President Htin Kyaw to New Delhi in August 2016.

In July 2017, the Indian government approved the expansion and widening of the section of NH-39 between Imphal in Manipur, to Moreh in Myanmar for 1630 crores. The National Highway Authority of India is appointed as the Technical Executing Agency and Project Management Consultant for the project. The work for the nearly 120 kilometres Kalewa-Yargi section for upgradation to two lanes was awarded to a joint venture of Punj Lloyd-Varaha in September 2017 at an estimated cost of 1177 crores to be completed in 36 months. India's Border Road Organisation (BRO) has already upgraded the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road (TKK) in Myanmar, also called the India-Myanmar Friendship road.

The Trilateral highway is expected to give a boost to the border trade between India and Myanmar and help in implementing the free trade area with Southeast Asia. According to Bana and Yhome, the project will help build direct people-to-people connectivity between India and the Mekong Sub-region as well promotes India's reach in a region where China's foothold has increased.

However, the project faces certain challenges. Lack of coordination among the agencies responsible for the project, financial constraints, inadequate monitoring, and security problems related to insurgent activities have led to repeated delays and cost escalation of the project. Even though the project faces other problems like land acquisition and tree felling, the Indian government intends to complete the project by the new deadline of 2023.

5. Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement

India, Myanmar, and Thailand are also in talks for signing a motor vehicle agreement to promote land connectivity between the three nations. The proposed motor vehicles agreement was first discussed in the meeting of the Transport Secretaries of India, Myanmar, and Thailand on Cross-border Transport Facilitation on 18 April 2015. A follow-up meeting took place in June 2015 where a framework was proposed to facilitate cross-border transport in the region. The motor vehicle agreement aims to connect the two regions of South-Asia and South East Asia via a unique agreement to facilitate the easier cross-border flow of people, passenger vehicles, and cargo vehicles in a seamless manner, which will boost trade between the three countries. The agreement seeks to promote a regulatory regime, which would harmonise the cross-border procedure and standards by allowing mutual recognition of documents. According to the Indian government, the initiative will “further cement cultural and economic ties among the three nations and highlight the potential benefits of connectivity and integration in the region and keeping India’s focus on its close neighbourhood”.

However, Myanmar has sought time to sign the agreement. It seeks to review the possible fallouts of connectivity arrangements it has signed with other countries as well as those that are in the region before proceeding with the agreement.

6. Imphal-Mandalay Bus Service

Another project that has been pending is the bus service connecting Imphal in Manipur to Mandalay in Myanmar. The Manipur Assembly passed a resolution in August 2003 for the introduction of bus service between the two cities to facilitate the easier movement of Manipuris. Finally, the Chief Minister of Manipur flagged off the experimental bus service on 9 December 2015. The approximate length between Imphal and Mandalay is around 580 km. Once the Motor Vehicle Agreement is signed and operationalised, buses can travel up to Bangkok in Myanmar. Some of the issues that need to be resolved include operators, fare structures, visa/travel documents, as well as designated points of halting throughout the journey. The bus service is considered an enabler in promoting tourism and cultural relationship between Myanmar and Manipur. Manipur has various tourist sites such as Govindaji Temple,

Kangla Fort, Loktak Lake, etc., which attract people from another side of the border. The famous Sangai Festival also promotes tourism of the state, which attracts people from Myanmar in large numbers.

7. Rih Tiddim Road

The Rih-Tiddim road seeks to build connectivity between Myanmar and the Indian state of Mizoram to give a push to border trade and commerce. India has been upgrading the road, which connects the town of Rih in Myanmar, to the Zokhawthar Land Customs Station (LCS) in Mizoram, via Tiddim, which leads to the Champhai town in Mizoram, just 28 km away from Zokhawthar LCS. IRCON International Limited has been selected as the project developer.

8. Tentative Projects

Apart from the above-listed projects, which are in progress, other important projects are also in the pipeline. One of them is the Mekong-India Economic Corridor. The ERIA Institute of Jakarta has done a study on the proposed project, which connects India's east coast with the four Mekong countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The project aims to connect the Dawei port of Myanmar with Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam via Bangkok and Phnom Penh, which is further, linked to the Chennai port of India, thus forming a trade, industrial and investment corridor and adding to the GDP of the region.

9. Conclusion

The above-mentioned projects hold immense benefits for India in terms of enhancing its relationship with South East Asian countries in all spheres, especially furthering trade and investment. Moreover, the socio-economic development of the Northeast region could also be pushed further once connectivity with Southeast Asia materialises and investment follows up. These projects will also advance India's Act East policy in the larger Indo-Pacific template. For these to happen, the projects must be expedited and completed on a war footing.

One of the important requirements for the projects to see the light of the day is finances for the creation of infrastructure. According to ADB, Asia needs around \$26 trillion for financing infrastructure needs for 2016-2030. Apart from public finances, the report suggests to make use of the private sector money to solve infrastructure problems. De argues that

Public-Private partnership could be a viable alternative. Long-term finances from global lending organisations like the World Bank, AIIB, BRICS Bank can help mitigate financing problems.

India, Myanmar, and Thailand must expedite the process of creation of the Highway considering the possible gains they could reap from the project. Political will needs to put behind these projects for their successful implementation. India and ASEAN also must engage at various levels for the early conclusion of connectivity projects. Moreover, India must meet its target of connecting the Northeast with the mainland India through the railways. This will not only help bring the Northeast close to the mainstream but also promote a faster and cheaper mode of transporting goods. Road networks also need to be improved and integrated into Northeast India.

The border trade between India and Myanmar should be made smooth with the publication and expansion of items that could be traded between the two sides. Businesses should be made aware of the changes in the list. Moreover, proper infrastructure should be constructed along the border providing civil facilities for traders and customers. Illegal trading points and extortions by insurgents should be checked. India and ASEAN must explore the possibility of a paperless trade mechanism for seamless trade connectivity, starting first with India and Myanmar, and then expanding it to other member countries. The connectivity projects possess immense positives for the development of Northeast India which itself should be a reason to expedite the processes and complete the projects by the newly projected deadline of 2023. What is also required is the improvement in connectivity among the Northeast states, both rail and road, to bring private investments and foster socio-economic development.

Indian ports also need to be modernised to expand the trade with Southeast Asia. The Kaladan Multimodal project could be used to trade with countries beyond Myanmar. However, the inefficiency of Indian ports in terms of turnaround time for cargo due to various other reasons is an inhibiting factor. What is required is an overhaul of the Indian port systems to respond to the needs of expanding trade volumes with the East.

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