

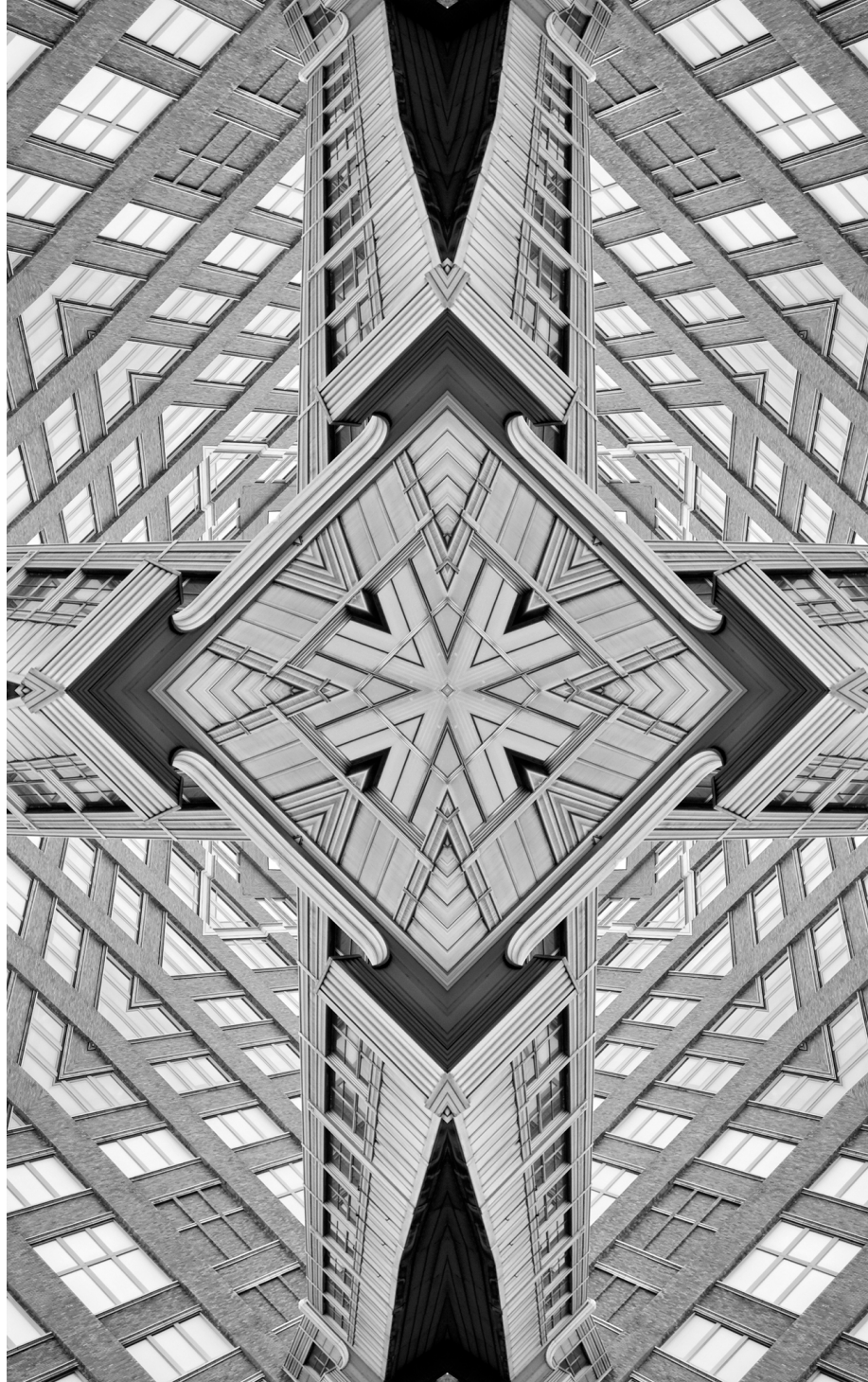
# Issue

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# Brief

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# Bringing India and Thailand Closer via the Trilateral Highway Through Myanmar

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## **Abstract**

This brief underlines the immense potential for increased cross-border trade, tourism, and people-to-people interactions between India and its Southeast Asian neighbours. In particular, it evaluates the importance of India–Thailand relations, emphasising the present state of the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH). Although India and Thailand share a maritime boundary along India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Thailand’s Simlan Islands in the Andaman Sea, they do not share a land border. Thus, connectivity projects between India and Thailand via Myanmar, such as the IMT-TH, are vital to improve land connectivity.

Promoting connectivity is a task often fraught with obstacles. Connectivity often hinges on tangible links, established through transportation systems like roads, railways, air and sea routes, or collaborative efforts such as cross-border energy and resource networks. Additionally, digital ties play a pivotal role. At the same time, connectivity is not a goal in itself, but catalyses enhanced local as well as global political, diplomatic, trade, and socio-cultural engagements.

India's goal of transforming its landlocked Northeast region into a hub of connectivity to other South and Southeast Asian nations is a significant part of its 'Act East' agenda. Connecting India's Northeast with Thailand is particularly vital for four reasons. First, it would enhance regional trade, creating a vital corridor for goods and services between Southeast Asia and India's Northeast, thereby boosting economic growth in both regions. Second, it would promote people-to-people exchanges and cultural ties, strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering a more profound understanding between the communities. Both nations have close ethnic and cultural links with the Tai Ahom and the Tai Khamti communities in the Northeast, and the Northeast Festival, for example, is relevant to the aim of re-establishing people-to-people links and increasing trade, tourism, and business opportunities. Third, it would contribute to regional stability by improving connectivity and cooperation, creating work opportunities to uplift socio-economic conditions in the otherwise underdeveloped region, and reducing potential conflict risks. Finally, this connection can bolster India's strategic influence in Southeast Asia.

India and Thailand cooperate closely through various initiatives to enhance their regional and sub-regional connectivity. These initiatives include participation in the Asian Highway Network, managed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), as well as the 2022 BIMSTEC Transport Master Plan within the BIMSTEC framework.

From a geographical standpoint, India and Thailand lack a direct land border. However, they share a maritime boundary through India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Thailand's Similan Islands in the Andaman Sea.<sup>1</sup> Given the geographical gulf between the two countries, it becomes crucial to establish connectivity initiatives through Myanmar to enable land-based connections. These initiatives aim to enhance trade and tourism, promote development, and strengthen geopolitical relevance. Among these endeavours, the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH) stands out for its potential to

# Introduction

boost cross-border trade, tourism, and people-to-people interactions. However, it is important to note that this project has been in progress for two decades and is still awaiting completion, with a new deadline set for 2027–28.

This brief consists of four sections. The first part delves into the significance of India–Thailand relations and examines the existing connectivity dynamics between the two. It then assesses the progress achieved so far in the IMT-TH, giving particular attention to its procedural and bureaucratic aspects. The third section identifies certain crucial concerns associated with the project. The brief concludes with an analysis of the possible ways by which relations between the countries can be enhanced.

# The Role of Land Connectivity

**T**hailand's strategic location in the heart of Southeast Asia, along the Andaman Sea, underscores its crucial partnership with India and its role as the gateway to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This importance has grown since the region integrated with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Within ASEAN, Thailand ranks as India's fifth-largest trading partner, after Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, bilateral trade between the two countries reached US\$17.70 billion, with India exporting goods valued at US\$7.17 billion to Thailand while importing goods worth US\$10.52 billion.<sup>3</sup> The rapidly expanding Indian market remains highly attractive to Thai investors, offering ample opportunities across various sectors, including infrastructure, agriculture and food processing, automotive and automotive components, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, tourism, retail industries, and renewable energy.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding physical connectivity, air connectivity between India and Thailand has been resilient, with approximately 400 weekly flights operating post-COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> This robust air network reflects the recovery in tourism, trade, and investment ties between the two nations. In 2022, Indian tourists, following Malaysians, ranked as the second-largest group to visit Thailand. From January to July 2022, Thailand welcomed around 0.34 million Indian tourists.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, approximately 0.16 million Thai tourists travelled to India.<sup>7</sup> Airlines from both India and Thailand actively facilitate connectivity between the two countries, including Air India, Vistara Airlines, Thai Airways, Thai Smile Airways, Air Asia, Indigo, Thai Lion Air, Go Air, and SpiceJet, all of which contribute to the robust air link between the two countries. Even Druk Airways, which flies from Thailand to Bhutan, has a stopover at Guwahati.<sup>8</sup>

Maritime connectivity is also significant, with the port authorities of both nations actively engaged in collaborative efforts to enhance water connectivity, specifically by strengthening direct port-to-port connections.<sup>9</sup> This commitment was underscored by the signing of three significant memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Ranong Port and Indian ports located in Visakhapatnam, Chennai, and Kolkata.<sup>10</sup> The BIMSTEC Ports Conclave formalised these agreements during its convening in November 2019 in Vishakhapatnam, India. Additionally, on 15 August 2019, an MoU was executed between Ranong Port and India's Krishnapatnam Port in Bangkok aimed at strengthening ties.<sup>11</sup>

# The Role of Land Connectivity

Road connectivity is pivotal in global trade and regional development, complementing maritime and air connectivity in several critical ways through enabling accessibility to remote areas, fostering economic growth and social development, facilitating the transportation of goods and people, creating jobs, and stimulating local economies. Moreover, road networks are crucial for last-mile delivery, thus enabling flexibility and cost efficiency, especially for smaller shipments and short distances. Further, unlike maritime or air transport, roads are widely available and adaptable. Road connectivity also enhances disaster resilience and emergency response, allowing for the swift movement of aid during crises. It bridges economic disparities by connecting urban and rural areas, thus fostering inclusivity.

Unlike air or sea routes, land infrastructure is less susceptible to change or removal and serves purposes beyond trade, including geopolitics and people-to-people interactions. Once completed, it often passes through various regions and communities, giving local involvement a critical role in development and maintenance. From a geopolitical perspective, establishing transnational roads carries strategic influence that extends beyond trade and transportation to impact international relations. Nations with infrastructure often gain political leverage and power. This influence can manifest in various ways, including support on global issues, access to natural resources, and alignment on political matters. Recognising these multifaceted dimensions is essential when navigating the landscape of land-connectivity projects.

# Unlocking India's Northeast: The Role of Thailand

India's Northeast comprises eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland—which share a 5,812-kilometre border with five neighbours—Nepal, Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The Northeast states are landlocked, with seven maintaining their sole connection to the rest of India through the Siliguri Corridor in North Bengal, often referred to as the 'Chicken's Neck'—a narrow strip of land 22 kilometres wide, bordered by Nepal to the north and Bangladesh to the south.

The geographical isolation of India's Northeast underscores the need for enhanced connectivity. This isolation has constrained the region's economic growth, trade potential, and cultural exchanges with the rest of India and the wider world. Addressing this challenge requires fostering connectivity with neighbouring countries, including Thailand.

Thailand, which is strategically located in Southeast Asia, is pivotal to improving connectivity for India's Northeast. It can be a crucial trans-shipment hub connecting South, Southeast, and East Asia. To realise this ambition, Thailand is aiming to become a regional logistics hub through focusing on improving its physical infrastructure and trade facilitation. This aligns with the country's infrastructure plan for 2015–2022 and the 2023–2027 Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), which emphasise expanding the country's highway network with neighbouring countries, enhancing its air transport capacity, and developing maritime transport.<sup>12</sup>

In 2016, the Thai government undertook measures to bolster the transportation sector and drive economic growth, including approving a substantial investment increase of US\$25.6 billion for a comprehensive infrastructure action plan in 2017. The plan encompassed 36 transport projects, including new roads, railways, aviation facilities, and ports.<sup>13</sup>

India recognises the importance of the cross-border transportation network facilitated by the IMT-TH in strengthening its relations with the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam). This endeavour seeks to provide a more efficient and cost-effective transportation route. India is also considering extending the road network to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to further expand its potential influence. Additionally, Bangladesh has expressed interest in joining the initiative to enhance trade links and promote tourism. This network can be pivotal to nurturing India's ties with the Mekong region, which holds untapped potential for cooperation and trade opportunities.

# Unlocking India's Northeast: The Role of Thailand

Geographically, besides air and maritime connections, India and Thailand are connected via Myanmar. Thus, once Thailand, Myanmar, and India are connected through a land route, it can emerge as a critical transportation channel for India to engage with the CLMV countries as well as Malaysia, Singapore, and other East Asian nations. Such an expanded network has the potential to promote economic growth and regional integration.

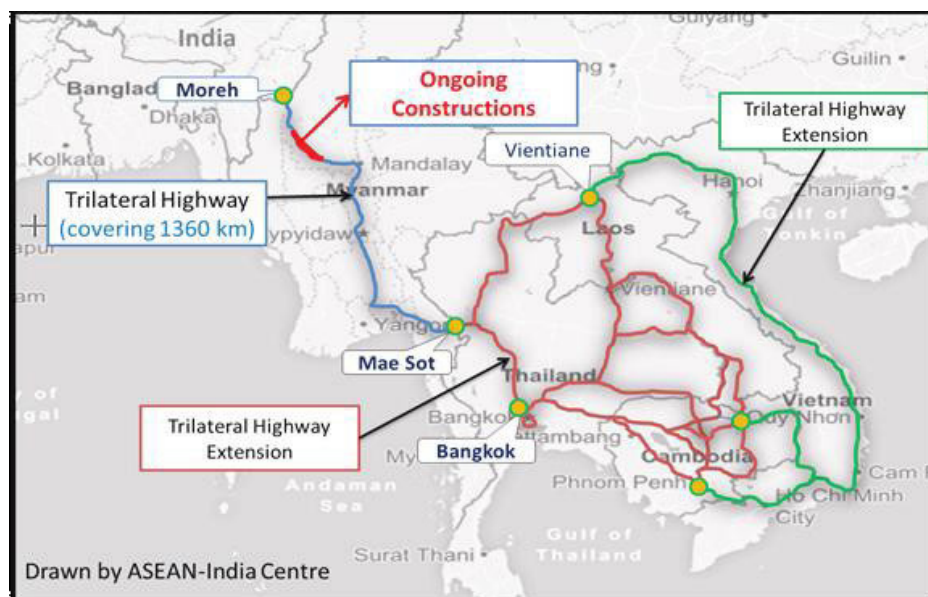
However, specific considerations must be taken into account. Myanmar faces challenges in its connectivity infrastructure, with notable deficiencies in multimodal transport networks. The predominant mode of goods transportation is by road, which results in elevated transport expenses. Myanmar's logistics performance needs to catch up, partly due to the lack of transparency and predictability in border procedures compared to neighbouring countries. Furthermore, stakeholders have raised concerns about the proliferation of official and unofficial toll gates along crucial routes, such as the Yangon to Hpa-An road, which forms part of the East-West Economic Corridor. These tollgates not only add to costs but also cause delays in movement. Enhancing Myanmar's physical connectivity could bolster its economic and physical corridors. However, the deteriorating security situation within the country since the 2021 coup d'état and the ongoing conflicts in the Sagaing and Chin regions have impacted connectivity projects.<sup>14</sup>



# Focus on the India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)

The IMT-TH project, as conceived, commences its journey in Kolkata and proceeds northward to Siliguri. It then veers eastward, spanning the expanse of the Dooars region in North Bengal. Exiting West Bengal via Cooch Behar, it enters Assam through the Srirampur border. Continuing its trajectory eastward, the highway crosses into Nagaland at Dimapur after traversing the length of Assam. Upon entering Nagaland, the highway takes a southerly course, meandering through the landscapes of Nagaland and Manipur, ultimately passing through Imphal before reaching the Myanmar border at Moreh. Subsequently, it embarks on a southwesterly route, crossing Myanmar cities such as Mandalay, Naypyidaw, Bago, and Myawaddy. Finally, it enters Thailand through Mae Sot, then to Suthokai, and reaches Bangkok. The total distance of the trilateral highway is approximately 1,360 kilometres (845 miles) (Map 1).

**Figure 1: Map of the IMT-TH**



Source: RIS Report<sup>15</sup>

Recent statements from crucial stakeholders indicate progress on various segments of the project. Thailand’s Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vijavat Isarabhakdi, reported in June 2023 that most of the work in Thailand has

# Focus on the India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)

been completed.<sup>16</sup> The Indian counterpart also mentioned in July 2023 that approximately 70 percent of the work on the Indian side is finished.<sup>17</sup> Myanmar's Trade Minister, Aung Naing Oo, disclosed that a significant portion of the highway, spanning 1,512 kilometres, has already been constructed, with contractors expected to complete the remaining sections by 2026.<sup>18</sup>

Numerous segments of the original IMT-TH alignments have been completed or subjected to upgrades (Table 1). Notable developments include the construction of a vital bypass road that links Myawaddy and Kawkaeik in Thailand as well as the establishment of the second friendship bridge connecting Myawaddy and Mae Sot. Other ongoing activities include enhancing and maintaining roads stretching from Kalewa in India to Monywa in Myanmar. Japan's support has facilitated the construction of a new bridge in Bago, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has played a crucial role in developing an arterial road connecting Bago to Kyaikto in Myanmar.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to address the replacement of 69 bridges along the Tamu–Kyigone–Kalewa road. Progress on this stretch has been hampered since 2015. The project was awarded to Niraj Cement Structurals Limited and Manipur Tribal Development Corporation Limited in 2017.<sup>20</sup> However, due to unsatisfactory performance, the Centre terminated the contract in 2018, after which Niraj Cement challenged the termination order. In August 2020, the Manipur High Court dismissed the contractor's appeal and upheld the termination. Recent reports suggest that work on the first bridge between Moreh in Manipur and Tamu in Myanmar is anticipated to restart shortly.<sup>21</sup> Work on the remaining 68 bridges will begin after technical and cost parameters are revised.

Construction efforts are underway on the challenging Yar Gyi road section, which is a critical component of the Trilateral Highway. This particular stretch presents formidable obstacles owing to steep gradients and sharp curves which complicate the construction process. Presently, only 25 percent of the road has been completed. The Trade Minister of Myanmar indicated in June 2023 that converting a 121.8-kilometre road segment, specifically between Kalewa and Yar Gyi, into a four-lane motorway will require more time than initially anticipated.<sup>22</sup> While the project is slated to be completed within 36 months, delays stemming from unforeseen environmental, political, and security issues will pose obstacles.

# Focus on the India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)

**Table 1: Status of the IMT-TH Project**

Road Section	Status	Year of Completion
Moreh–Tamu–Kalewa	Completed	2017
Yagyi–Chaungma–Monywa	Completed	Not specified
Monywa–Mandalay	Completed	Not specified
Mandalay–Meiktila bypass	Completed	2010
Mektila bypass–Taungoo–Oktwin–Payagyi (Pyay)	Completed	2010
Payagyi–Theinzayat (Thein Za Yat–Thaton)	Completed	2017
Kawkareik–Myawaddy	Completed	2015
Myawaddy–Mae Sot	Completed	2019
Ein Du – Thaton	Completed	2021
Kalewa–Yagyi	Ongoing	Tentative year 2027

Source: Author's own

Another aspect that demands immediate attention is the development and execution of the IMT Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement (IMT-TMVA). Although the Indian government organised the IMT-TH Friendship Car Rally in 2016 to raise awareness among stakeholders regarding the potential benefits of a motor vehicle agreement (MVA) involving India, Myanmar, and Thailand, progress has been notably slow since. The finalised text of the IMT-MVA in 2019 is still to be adopted as a final resolution.<sup>23</sup>

A primary challenge is building additional infrastructure, particularly in Myanmar. The country's limited road networks and poor connectivity impede the smooth movement of vehicles between India, Myanmar, and Thailand. Bureaucratic hurdles present another bottleneck, with the acquisition of permits and clearances proving to be a formidable challenge due to variations in the countries' rules and procedures governing vehicle movement. This complexity makes the process time consuming and cumbersome, particularly posing difficulties for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that may require more resources to navigate such intricate regulatory frameworks.<sup>24</sup>

# Focus on the India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)

Since 2003, a bus service between Imphal and Mandalay has been in the pipeline. In 2020, India and Myanmar finally agreed to launch a service that covers a distance of 579 kilometres. However, the service was delayed due to COVID-19 as well as the political instability in Myanmar.<sup>25</sup> An MVA for the seamless movement of passenger and cargo vehicles between the three countries will be necessary to operationalise such an initiative.

Furthermore, changing governments in participating countries and complex decision-making structures contribute to delays.<sup>26</sup> The prevailing security situation in Myanmar threatens the implementation of the IMT-TH and the IMT-TMVA. The nation has grappled with political instability and conflict in recent years, which has adversely impacted road transport safety. Incidents involving attacks on vehicles and disruptions to transport routes pose a substantial risk to businesses and travellers. These concerns extend to the safety and well-being of drivers and passengers, potentially affecting the feasibility of any agreement.

# Key Overarching Concerns

## **Political crisis in Myanmar**

Geographically, India and Thailand are linked through Myanmar, with a significant portion of the IMT-TH project situated within Myanmar's borders. The successful realisation of this project is therefore contingent upon the stability and cooperation of Myanmar. For the IMT-TH corridor to become a reality, Myanmar must stabilise politically, economically, and socially while facilitating the seamless movement of people and goods across its territory.

Until the environment stabilises, the prospects for the completion of the IMT-TH corridor remain uncertain. The realisation of this transportation link depends on Myanmar's ability to serve as a reliable bridge connecting India and Thailand, thereby fostering greater regional integration and economic development.

When connectivity projects are implemented in conflict zones, they are often securitised, making it difficult to fulfill their intended purpose as economic or community corridors. Security concerns become intricately linked with trade and movement, burdening the development process with security considerations. Moreover, even if connectivity projects begin and are completed in these conflict-prone areas, they frequently need to evolve into thriving businesses or community centres. Ongoing conflicts discourage potential investors, and the constant surveillance does not promote the free movement required for economic growth and community development. Within this context, the successful realisation of the IMT-TH corridor hinges on Myanmar's ability to address its stability issues and simultaneously manage the securitisation challenges associated with connectivity projects in conflict-prone regions.

## **Security issues in the Northeast**

While the political security threat posed by the various insurgency groups in the Northeast has waned in recent years, the presence of the Nagas remains daunting.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak-Muivah [NSCN (I-M)] signed the Framework Agreement in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to employ the NSCN (I-M) as a participant in resolving enduring conflicts. However, the agreement inadvertently elevated the NSCN (I-M) as the primary representative of the Nagas, sidelining other rebel groups.

# Key Overarching Concerns

In Manipur, for example, there are seven active insurgent groups that have all been labelled by Indian security forces as VBIGs (Valley-Based Insurgent Groups). These groups include the People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA-MP), the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF), the United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), and the Kanleipak Communist Party (KCP). These outfits are predominantly associated with the Meitei community and maintain close ties with the Naga group known as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang [NSCN (K)], which has no peace alliance with the Indian government.<sup>28</sup> The NSCN (K) has been acting with the Myanmar army and thus have been ambushed by the pro-democracy groups like the People's Democratic Force of the Tamu region near Manipur's border town of Moreh; the Kuki National Army; and the little-known Kabaw Chin National Defence Force for acting alongside the Myanmar army to target Myanmar nationals entering India.<sup>29</sup>

The ongoing crisis in Manipur, centred around the conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki communities, is indeed a matter of concern.<sup>30</sup> While its origins might be rooted in local and regional factors, it is crucial to understand the wider implications of such conflicts. The situation in Manipur extends beyond a localised issue and bears regional significance, particularly in the context of projects like the IMT-TH. Addressing the internal drivers of the crisis becomes pivotal to promoting regional stability and security, and advancing infrastructure initiatives like the IMT-TH.

Though Mizoram now has fewer insurgency issues, the constant arrival of Myanmar nationals in India after the political instability of 2021 has complicated the security dynamics. As a result, the endeavour to connect these regions through a highway becomes difficult, necessitating careful consideration of the complex security dynamics at play.

## **Absence of the local community as stakeholders**

Traditionally, any form of connectivity initiative has been perceived to be the result of efforts by state actors and driven by the political and economic elites of the respective nations, often following a top-down approach. However, given the direct impact of these endeavours on the lives of local communities, it is imperative to adopt a bottom-up strategy in their planning and execution.

# Key Overarching Concerns

This raises an essential question: Who benefits from connectivity initiatives, and what type of corridor is envisioned? Infrastructure development tends to be situated within a framework that prioritises neoliberal and security-focused approaches, often overshadowing the requirements and concerns of local communities. Thus, it is crucial to consider how these initiatives impact border regions in the North Eastern Region (NER), Myanmar, and Thailand and the benefits they will accrue to the local population. Connectivity that is conceived as transit that primarily links only significant cities—such as Kolkata, Guwahati, or Delhi in India—may still need to involve and consider the role of people in border regions to generate the necessary interest and enthusiasm in projects.

**I**n different parts of the globe, the spectre of conflicts and violence casts a long shadow over development projects for connectivity even as the growing needs of populations have elevated the significance of connectivity. Establishing regional and transnational linkages becomes essential in the face of globalisation and the necessity to address worldwide challenges such as economic downturns, climate shifts, healthcare disparities, displacement of populations, and ecological catastrophes.

### **Developing infrastructure within the NER**

The region needs to embark on timebound projects to address its developmental needs and focus on resolving land acquisition challenges in the Northeast. These issues can be alleviated significantly through comprehensive cadastral surveys that will document land extent, value, and regional ownership.

The Northeast is undergoing a noteworthy transformation marked by economic and industrial progress. The region's macroeconomic outlook is characterised by a positive growth trajectory, underscored by recent developments such as the Donyi Polo Airport in Hongi, located approximately 25 kilometres from Itanagar. The construction of a 600 MW hydropower station at Kameng further contributes to this transformation.<sup>31</sup>

The Donyi Polo airport signifies a fresh start for aviation in the North East. Notably, creating a dedicated ministry for the North Eastern Region has signalled a significant shift in attitude towards regional development. More such initiatives are required.

### **Empowering border communities**

Any connectivity project must prioritise people-centric measures, ensuring that the local communities are integral to the planning and execution. This approach is vital to ensure that connectivity initiatives genuinely serve the needs and aspirations of the regions they traverse. Furthermore, a people-centric approach to connectivity projects extends beyond just economic considerations to encompass social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The involvement of local communities not only ensures that the benefits are equitably distributed but also takes into account the preservation of cultural heritage and the mitigation of any adverse environmental impacts.



The security concerns in the IMT-TH will also be mitigated if locals believe in the project. The insurgency groups primarily operate through the goodwill and support of the local people. Therefore, if the community understands the potential benefits of a project, they will ensure that the road remains unharmed, promoting the necessary free movement required for economic growth and community development.<sup>32</sup>

Incorporating the voices and aspirations of those in border regions, such as the NER, Myanmar, and Thailand, not only strengthens the viability and sustainability of these projects but also fosters a sense of ownership and inclusivity. Ultimately, the success of connectivity initiatives hinges on their ability to empower and uplift the lives of the people who reside along these routes, transforming them into active stakeholders in the development journey.

To significantly enhance the value of the IMT-TH for local communities, it is imperative to establish a range of manufacturing facilities and units in sectors where the local area has a competitive advantage. These initiatives can generate employment opportunities and deliver tangible economic benefits to the region. Viewing the road as a connection to distant places is of limited value to the local population. Therefore, it is crucial to address this gap and take concrete steps to promote economic development and self-sustainability in the community.

### **Special purpose vehicles**

The utilisation of special purpose vehicles (SPVs)—which is a well-established practice in Myanmar and Thailand—will be required for the operationalisation of the project. The SPV formed for the IMT highway should adopt a comprehensive approach to ensure the project's completion. This approach can encompass the engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) route; the public-private-partnership (PPP) route utilising the build, operate, and transfer (BOT) principles; or a hybrid model based on the bankability and value prospects of each project component.

This can be facilitated by an MoU among participating countries to establish a commercial entity like an SPV, preferably located in Nay Pyi Taw (Myanmar), considering that most of the IMT highway traverses Myanmar. The nation's stability would be a prerequisite before any such documents can be incorporated.

Furthermore, a Standing Ministerial Committee comprising relevant ministers from India, Myanmar, and Thailand is essential for proactive project management. Such a committee will help maintain transparency regarding the project's progress between the leadership and the general population.

### **Engagement with all stakeholders**

As a democratic neighbour of Myanmar, India should actively engage with the military regime and other key stakeholders, including the government-in-exile and various ethnic armed groups. This comprehensive approach is essential to ensure the security and progress of connectivity projects, which are currently situated in areas controlled by pro-democracy groups, ethnic armed groups, and the Arakan Army. India should also take a more proactive stance in endorsing the five-point ASEAN consensus—a move that the junta has yet to implement. Collaborating with Laos, the ASEAN chair in 2024, remains essential for India and Thailand to contribute to Myanmar's stability and bolster the oversight and completion of critical infrastructure projects, notably the IMT-TH.

### **Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections**

Beyond physical connectivity, there is a need to build linkages. The Northeast India Festival, celebrated in 2019 and 2022, is a powerful tool for enhancing cultural diplomacy between the NER and Thailand. This festival showcases the vibrant cultural diversity of the NER and highlights the cultural affinities and historical ties between the Tai cultures of Thailand and the indigenous communities of the NER. The festival creates a sense of shared identity and cultural interconnectedness by promoting cultural exchange and fostering a deeper understanding of the other's traditions, languages, music, dance, art, and cuisine. This cultural diplomacy helps build stronger people-to-people connections and goodwill, laying the foundation for enhanced connectivity and cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

From a tourism perspective, the NER has commonalities with Thailand, such as festivals like Sangken in Arunachal Pradesh and Bohag Bihu in Assam, which are similar to Thailand's Songkran festival. Leveraging these cultural ties, the festival aims to boost Tai tourism circuits, promoting historical sites, attracting tourists, and stimulating local economies and employment opportunities.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the NER's natural beauty and cultural heritage appeal to Thai tourists, while Thailand's diverse tourism offerings attract travellers from the

region. This presents a mutually beneficial scenario and supports Thailand's goal of increasing tourism revenue, aligning with improved connectivity introduced in recent years. The popularity of Northeast Indian cuisine during the festival has created a demand among Thai people, offering opportunities for meat supply and establishing food chains catering to Thai audiences. To maximise these opportunities, it is essential to organise more workshops or festivals in this context. Holding intermitted festivals may serve a limited purpose if their outcomes are not consistently followed up and revisited over time.

### **Sharing of knowledge and technical know-how**


In July 2023, the Royal Thai Embassy in New Delhi in collaboration with Asian Confluence, a think tank based in Meghalaya, organised the impactful 'Exchange Program for Emerging and Young Entrepreneurs from Northeast India' initiative. The programme convened budding entrepreneurs and public-sector representatives from Northeast India and Thailand. The primary objective was to cultivate a fertile business environment that encourages the exchange of innovative ideas and fosters robust networking. This engagement promised to yield substantial business collaborations and drive increased investment flows between the two nations.<sup>35</sup>

During the programme, the delegation was allowed to explore tourism-management practices at prominent destinations, categorised into three main themes. These immersive experiences included visits to historical and other important sites such as the Grand Palace, Wat Phra Chetuphon (Wat Pho), and the Royal Thai Navy base in Sattahip, which exemplify successful public sector-led tourism management. The delegation also explored thriving tourist attractions shaped by private-sector innovation, like the Royal Garden Plaza, Ripley's Believe It or Not in Pattaya, and the Pattaya Floating Market, highlighting Thailand's prowess in catering to diverse customer segments. These insights underscored the synergy between the economy and sustainable development through tourism.

Furthermore, the joint exploration of diverse sectors, including raw-material sourcing and export-driven endeavours, is being encouraged. To ensure the sustained growth of the Northeastern states, infrastructure development and connectivity projects must be expedited to fully unlock the region's economic potential and offer alternative market and transit routes for the sub-regional economies of the Bay of Bengal.

The IMT-TH aims to catalyse regional connectivity and development. While progress has been made, numerous challenges, including political instability in Myanmar and security concerns in the Northeast, must be addressed for the project's successful completion. Moreover, it is essential to prioritise the involvement of local communities, foster cultural ties, and promote knowledge sharing to unlock the full potential of this connectivity initiative. Ultimately, the IMT-TH has the potential to reshape regional dynamics, enhance economic growth, and strengthen diplomatic relations among India, Myanmar, Thailand, and beyond. However, careful consideration and concerted efforts are required to overcome the existing obstacles.

The prospect of Myanmar achieving stability within the next few years remains bleak. Even if a stable government emerges, sustaining peace in the India–Myanmar border region may be difficult. The success of ambitious corridor and highway projects will continue to be closely tied to Myanmar's stability.

Myanmar has had a long and painful history of conflicts; with effective leadership and a clear vision, the country has the potential to evolve into a stable and economically prosperous society. Given its abundant natural resources and strategic geographical location between its weighty neighbours, India and China, Myanmar can achieve a transformation. The emergence of capable leadership is crucial, but the outcome hinges on the evolving political landscape within the country. 

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