

# **SPECIAL** REPORT no. 152

## **The Role of India's Northeast in the Regional Cooperation Architecture**

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# Abstract

**T**here is no dearth of evidence that shows how cross-border connectivity brings manifold benefits to the countries involved. In the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific, greater engagement amongst the countries in these geostrategically and economically significant regions has become more crucial in the recent years. This report analyses

the potential for greater connectivity in the Bay region within a collaborative framework involving India, its eastern neighbours in Southeast Asia, and Japan. The focus is on India's North East Region (NER) as the conduit for such endeavours.

*Cover: Chattogram Port (formerly Chittagong), Bangladesh. Photo from Getty Images/Shihan Shan*

# Introduction

**I**n order to reap the benefits of regional interactions, a certain degree of connectivity needs to be in place. National interests can be varied, encompassing the geopolitical, the geostrategic, and the geo-economic. It is important to see connectivity as a holistic concept that can lead to a transformation in people's lives rather than the mere building of physical infrastructure for immediate strategic and commercial benefits.

At the same time, India needs to assume a more prominent and proactive role in the present geopolitical scenario. This demands engagement at various levels with neighbouring countries, especially those in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Such engagement will enhance regional solidarity at the political, economic, and societal levels. In this context, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which is once again assuming primacy amongst multilateral forums in South Asia and Southeast Asia, is poised to contribute constructively

to strengthening regional solidarity. BIMSTEC can help realise the strategic goal of creating an Indo-Pacific and an Indian Ocean community. India's North East Region (NER) is its physical link with South Asia and Southeast Asia.

This report examines cross-border connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region by situating India's NER at the centre of the endeavour. It analyses the unique socio-political and geographical dynamics of the Northeast and emphasises the potential and challenges of connectivity efforts in the region; it also discusses India's role in the Indo-Pacific region and how its collaboration with key actors like the ASEAN countries and Japan, and its role in BIMSTEC, can bolster security, growth and prosperity in the region.

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# India's Northeast as a Pivot of Regional Connectivity

**T**he NER, which forms the easternmost border of India, comprises eight, largely hilly states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim and Nagaland. The region shares international borders of 5,812 km with the neighbouring countries of China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. The landlocked NER is connected with mainland India by only the narrow 22-km-long Siliguri corridor, also known as the ‘chicken’s neck’, flanked by Nepal and Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup>

The Northeast has a complex socio-ethnic composition, which includes a large number of ethnic tribal groups speaking some 220 languages,<sup>2</sup> each with its distinctive societal, cultural and economic patterns, many of them different from those of mainland India.<sup>3</sup> Partly due to its location

at India’s ‘periphery’, partly to its unique societal legacy, complex demographic composition and lack of adequate infrastructural and economic development, the Northeast has remained isolated from India’s dominant political and developmental paradigm. The challenges of political violence, insurgency, ethnic conflict, and pressures due to undocumented migration, have further added to the difficulties of the region. Its geographical location, surrounded mostly by international borders, makes its security an abiding concern.

“Partly due to its location at India’s ‘periphery’, and also because of its unique societal legacy, the Northeast has remained isolated from the country’s development paradigm.”

To protect the region, its people and their unique culture from onslaughts by ‘outsiders’, British rulers had also demarcated much of it as ‘backward tracts’, ‘excluded areas’, and ‘partially excluded areas’, where tribal people were left to manage their own affairs in varying degrees. Under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, they had also drawn an ‘inner line’ through this region, beyond which visitors – and especially commercial interests – could not venture without a permit.<sup>4</sup>

Independent India followed the same policy, retaining the pre-1947 inner line system. It also strengthened traditional institutions in the formerly excluded and partially excluded areas by creating autonomous councils to safeguard land ownership from outsiders. These measures sought to control population movement in these areas and curb alienation of land to commercial interests.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, to some extent, they have been able to preserve the cultural sanctity of the region.<sup>a</sup> However, they have also impeded economic development and infrastructural growth.

Historically, mainland India had close economic and cultural ties with the Southeast Asian nations, with Manipur and Assam as bridges. Commercial relations between Indian and Southeast Asian traders have existed since the third century CE. It has been noted that “Indian ideas, artistic styles, and modes of political organisation” were absorbed into the local culture of Southeast Asia, and this continued through the colonial period.<sup>6</sup> In the post-colonial period, Southeast Asian nations supported India’s five principles of peaceful co-existence at the historic Bandung Conference in Indonesia (1955).

From the 1960s, India’s “engagement with the Southeast Asian countries was gradually replaced by periods of isolation as the clash of ideologies and superpower dynamics kept the geographically contiguous regions on opposite sides of the Cold War divide.”<sup>7</sup> It was only after the end of the Cold War that the changed geopolitical dynamics and the growing imperative of an increasingly globalised economy reinvigorated the dormant interaction between India and Southeast Asia, with India’s NER as the epicentre of such engagement.

a Even so, in some of the protected areas, there has been massive influx of immigrants from across the border in Bangladesh, which has led to serious conflicts over identity and ownership of resources.

The salience of the Northeast in India's regional connectivity vision is not a new idea. India's diplomatic prioritisation of Southeast Asian and East Asian countries has been reflected in its 'Look East' policy since the early 1990s. It was further consolidated as the 'Act East' policy in 2014, which is one of the country's key outreach programmes for enhancing its interaction with the littoral states of the Bay region and the wider Indo-Pacific.<sup>b,8</sup> The foundation and objectives of the earlier policy remain the same, but they have been upgraded and given more impetus and focus. The Act East policy will strengthen India's interaction with its southeastern neighbours in three important domains: commerce, culture, and connectivity.<sup>9</sup>

In this process of re-linking with Southeast Asian countries, especially Myanmar and Thailand, physical and infrastructural connectivity by road, rail, air, and water through India's NER has been of concern for the Modi government. India's northeastern states cannot be easily accessed from the mainland without Bangladesh's cooperation, and therefore, positive relations with the latter are also crucial.

From the beginning of his rule, Modi has also advocated a 'Look East, Link West Policy', seeking to link India to global value chains across the Indo Pacific.<sup>10</sup> In this context, India's Vision 2020 initiative has undertaken three key projects in the Northeast: the Kaladan Multimodal project; building India-Myanmar rail links; and the Trilateral Highway project between India, Thailand, and Myanmar. India also has a 'Neighbourhood First' policy, which includes enhancing regional interaction with eastern neighbours, and for this policy too, the NER is crucial.

However, despite many policy initiatives, optimum utilisation of the northeast as a hub of regional connectivity is yet to be achieved. NER should be perceived not merely as a transit point for human and commercial traffic with the Indo-Pacific, but also as a distinctive space with unique socio-economic priorities and cultural insecurities.<sup>11</sup>

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b India's Act East policy was announced during the India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014

# Strengthening Infrastructure Linkages

**E**stablishing robust physical as well as people-to-people connectivity with countries along the east and southeast of India is essential for a prosperous and stable NER. Physical connectivity within the region should be strengthened in three crucial aspects. First, connectivity within the region, marred by years of underdevelopment, insurgency and marginalisation, needs to be improved. Second, connectivity and interactions between the NER and mainland India need to be further expanded. Third, connectivity of the Northeast with the countries in the neighbourhood must be prioritised so that the inflow of foreign investment increases in a region that has been suffering from low industrial growth and limited employment opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

As a signatory to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, India aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation

(Sustainable Development Goal 9). To do so in the Northeast also requires developing the border areas and facilitating border trade. In recent years, India's trade with Bangladesh and Myanmar has witnessed a steep rise, which shows the potential of such trade.<sup>13</sup>

India has already established road connectivity with Myanmar (from Moreh on the Manipur border to Tamu, lying right across in Myanmar, to Kalewa, 160 km south), as well as trade points, by creating integrated check posts (ICPs) at Moreh-Tamu and at Zowkhathar, on the Mizoram border with Myanmar, and Rhi on the other side.

<sup>c</sup> The Bangladesh government changed the name of Chittagong to Chattogram effective from 10 September 2018. See "Port name changes from Chittagong to Chattogram", Ozean, <https://www.ozean.ch/news/view/new-name-for-Chittagong-port>

Cross-border connectivity between India and Bangladesh has vastly expanded, with railway connectivity across inter-country nodes, a large number of waterway routes utilised by both countries, ICPs on land borders, and Bangladesh allowing its Mongla and Chattogram<sup>c</sup> ports to be used to send Indian goods to the Northeast. The mutual understanding between these two immediate neighbours has led to agreements such as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement, the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement, joint energy projects, and a pipeline for hydrocarbon supply from West Bengal to Bangladesh. Greater digital connectivity, via Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar to India's Northeast, has strengthened bilateral initiatives to foster infrastructural development. Bangladesh also wants to join the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project to improve its own connectivity with South Asia and the ASEAN countries.

The North Eastern Council (NEC) is a nodal agency for economic and social development of the region. The NEC, whose key members include governors and chief ministers of these eight states, is funding improvement of infrastructure in the region. Some recent NEC initiatives include the following:<sup>14</sup>

- **Airport Projects:** Improvement of five airports in the region: Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Imphal, and Umroi—in collaboration with the Airport Authority of India. A new airport at Tezu in Arunachal Pradesh, with NEC funding, is also under construction.<sup>15</sup>
- **Road projects:** Development of 10,500 km of inter-state roads in the Northeast have been completed and handed over to the states for maintenance. Other NEC development initiatives include an express highway project along the Brahmaputra River under the North East Road Sector Development Scheme; development of strategic roads including the Doimukh (Arunachal Pradesh)-Harmuti (Assam) road; the Tura (Meghalaya)-Mankachar (Assam) road and the Wokha (Nagaland)-Golaghat (Assam) road via Merapani; development of 14 projects by the National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL), expansion of the trans-Arunachal highway project; construction of the Arunachal Frontier highway and East West Corridor (proposed). The designated roads and highways development projects under the SARDP-NE have been completed till 2019.



Even the Perspective Plan 2001 prepared at the initiative of NEC has been taken into consideration by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways for the development of road infrastructure in the region.<sup>16</sup>

- **Rail projects:** Construction of the Bogibeel rail/road Bridge across the Brahmaputra in Assam (completed); construction of rail links across 20 major railway projects, including 13 new lines, two gauge conversions and five

doublings encompassing 2,624 km (ongoing); construction of a broad gauge railway line from Bairabito Sairang in Mizoram (ongoing); development of the Northeast Frontier Railway Zone.<sup>17</sup> However, there are many connectivity challenges in the northeast that need to be resolved, before the region can harness its maximum potential in this regard.

“Establishing physical and people-to-people connectivity with countries in the east and southeast of India is essential for a prosperous Northeast.”

# Linkages via Waterways

**B**efore the partition of India in 1947, trade with India's northeastern region was mostly through the territories of what is now Bangladesh. Rail and river transit across the erstwhile East Pakistan continued until March 1965 when, following increased tensions which led to the India-Pakistan war some months later, all transit traffic was suspended. River transit, however, was restored, in a very limited way, in 1972 after the birth of Bangladesh. Realising that improved connectivity can benefit both countries, New Delhi and Dhaka have lately become more proactive in reviving it. For India in particular, transit and trans-shipment through Bangladesh can boost the economy of the Northeast by giving the region access to the Bay of Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Four of the northeastern states—Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram—share borders with Bangladesh. With the exception of the Meghalaya border, which runs entirely along land,

the remaining states share both land and riverine borders with Bangladesh. Tripura and Mizoram have the longest such borders, and could benefit hugely if there were no travel barriers through Bangladesh. The distance from Agartala to Kolkata through the 'chicken's neck' and then via Guwahati and Shillong, for instance, is 1,650 km, while, cutting across Bangladesh, it is just about 350 km.<sup>19</sup>

Bangladesh's initiative to develop a new container terminal at Chattogram Port, and another at Pangaon, aims to enhance bilateral maritime trade with India through short sea shipping arrangements. Earlier, goods traded between them had to be shipped via the ports of Colombo, Singapore, or Klang.

Also, Indian goods to the northeast can now be delivered through Chattogram port. Cargo from Kolkata can use multimodal transport to reach Chattogram or Mongla, or India's Northeast. Bangladesh has allowed the use of the following routes: Chattogram/Mongla to Agartala (Tripura), Chattogram/Mongla to Dawki (Meghalaya), and Chattogram/Mongla to Sutarkandi (Assam) and Chattogram/Mongla to Srimantpur (Tripura). The riverine ports of Farraka and Bandel on the Indian side have been, like Pangaon in Bangladesh, designated 'ports of calls' under the Coastal Shipping Agreement (2015).<sup>20</sup>

The India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade,<sup>21</sup> signed in 1972, was a pioneering initiative. The designated inland water routes under this protocol, which was expanded in 2020 from eight to 10 and new locations are also added to the existing routes: -Daudkhandi stretch of Gumti river (93 Km) as India-Bangladesh Protocol Route No. 9 & 10 in the Protocol will improve the connectivity of Tripura and adjoining states with the hinterland of both the countries. It is

expected that the operationalization of Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi Routes and their extension up to Aricha (270 km) will help the augmentation of infrastructure in Bangladesh as it would reduce the transportation cost of stone chips/aggregate to northern part of Bangladesh through this route. It will also decongest the Land Custom Stations on both sides. In Routes (1) & (2) [Kolkata-Shilghat-Kolkata] as well as in Routes (3) & (4) [Kolkata-Karimganj-Kolkata], Kolaghat in India has been added. Routes (3) & (4) [Kolkata-Karimganj-Kolkata] and Routes (7) & (8) [Karimganj-Shilghat-Karimganj] have been extended up to Badarpur in India. In these routes, Ghorasal in Bangladesh has also been added. At present, there are six Ports of Call each in India and Bangladesh under the Protocol. Five more Ports of Call have been added: Rajshahi, Sultanganj, Chilmari, Daudkandi and Bahadurabad in Bangladesh and Dhulian, Maia, Kolaghat, Sonamura and Jogigophs in India, along with two more extended Ports of Call such as Ghorashal, Muktarpur in Bangladesh and Tribeni, Badarpur in India.<sup>4,22</sup>

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d Under this protocol, six ports of call in each country have been nominated for facilitating inter-country trade. Floating terminals to facilitate cargo movement have been provided and maintained at 10 locations: Dhubri, Jogighopa, Tezpur, Silghat, Vishwanathghat, Neamati, Bogibeel, Dibrugarh, Panbari, and Oriumghat. Land for setting up terminals at Hatsingimari, Dhubri, Silghat, Vishwanathghat, Neamati, Dibrugarh and Oriumghat has been acquired.

National Waterway (NW) 16 (River Barak) figures prominently on these routes and has become vital in connecting India's northeast with Kolkata. Barak River is the second largest river in the NER. Originating from south of Kohima in Nagaland near Nagaland–Manipur border, it traverses Nagaland, Manipur and Assam, and splits at Bhanga into two streams called Surma and Kushiya. These two streams rejoin at Markuli in Bangladesh and thereafter the river is called Meghna. The Barak–Meghna river system has a total length of 900 km: 524 km is in India, 31 km on the India–Bangladesh border, and the rest in Bangladesh. The navigable portion of Barak River in India is the 121-km stretch between Lakhimpur and Bhanga which has been declared as NW-16 in 2016. Implementation of various projects for development of infrastructure on NW-16 has already started.<sup>23</sup>

However, the shared protocol routes are largely seasonal ones, and alternative links are also needed. To further develop inland waterways connectivity, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) will improve facilities at Bhanga (19 km upstream of Karimganj), and at Badarpur (also in the Barak Valley).

At the last India-Bangladesh summit meeting held virtually on 17 December 2020, both countries further reviewed bilateral connectivity measures and welcomed recent initiatives, such as the signing of the second addendum to the Protocol in May (which added the Sonamura-Daudkhandi route and extended some of the others) and the trial shipment of Indian goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chattogram. The prime ministers of both countries agreed to rapidly operationalise the trans-shipment of Indian goods through the Chattogram and Mongla ports. India reiterated its request to Bangladesh to create at least one land-based port in Bangladesh which could trade with its neighbouring states in India, while keeping the list of export-barred items ('negative list') to a minimum, and starting with Agartala on the Indian side and Akhaura in Bangladesh. Bangladesh proposed that Bangladeshi trucks be allowed to use the Feni Bridge connecting Tripura and Bangladesh, to transport goods from Chattogram to the northeast.<sup>24</sup>

Given the delays in operationalising the Kaladan Multi-Modal Trade and Transit Project between India and Myanmar, Ashuganj port in Bangladesh may be used by India as an alternative to Myanmar's Sittwe to revitalise trade routes to the Northeast. No doubt at present, the Ashuganj

riverine port cannot be used in a major way as its multi-modal connectivity is poor. But India could help in speeding up its development to make cargo transportation to Tripura and the other northeastern states easier.

“The India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, signed in 1972, was a pioneering initiative.”

# Exploring Connectivity in the Indo-Pacific

**T**he very construct of the “Indo-Pacific” is contested by different stakeholders in the region. It is largely perceived as an “interconnected space across the two continents of Asia and Africa and between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean”. The region, one of the world’s most crucial trading sea routes, is “a continuum across the two oceans joined together by its main trading channel, the straits of Malacca.”<sup>25</sup>

There is need for transnational interaction and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific for both strategic and functional reasons. First, the growing economic, military and diplomatic footprint of China in the region has turned it into a space of strategic balancing of power for the other regional as well as extra-regional players who need to build a coherent response to the Chinese onslaught. Second, other stakeholders like the US, Japan, South Korea, India, the member states of ASEAN, and other littoral states in the region, also want to harness the immense economic potential of the Indo-Pacific through greater interaction, connectivity, and commercial linkages.

India is crucial to the geopolitics of the region and it needs to assume a more prominent and proactive role. It has affirmed the need for a rules-based order in the region that is free, open and inclusive, and ensures the right to freedom of navigation for all actors based on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all other nations; peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue; and adherence to international rules and laws. This constructive and inclusive vision has led important players like the US and Japan pushing for a greater leadership role for India in the region. This resonates with India’s own diplomatic push for closer interaction with the region, manifest in its policies like ‘Neighbourhood First’ and ‘Act East’. Such a vision of closer regional interaction requires engagement at several levels with neighbouring countries.

BIMSTEC, as a multilateral institution, can contribute constructively to the enhancement of physical, economic and people-to-people links with Southeast Asia. India can play a central role in strengthening BIMSTEC as a more meaningful regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific. The Bay of Bengal is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and its auxiliary—the Andaman Sea—is India’s geostrategic gateway into the wider waters. Conceptualising the Indo-Pacific as a natural geographical region that hosts “a vast array of global opportunities and challenges”, India has launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI) to focus on seven pillars: maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; scientific, technological and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity through maritime transport. Given Japan’s wide experience in bringing about connectivity in the region,<sup>26</sup> its support for the connectivity pillar of the IPOI is crucial.<sup>27</sup>

India, along with Japan, the Southeast Asian countries and other littoral states, have espoused the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Forums like the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiated by India reinforce its vision of integrated and equitable maritime connectivity. India interacts with its Indo-Pacific partners both bilaterally and multilaterally, in a variety of spheres “including maritime security, the blue economy, connectivity, disaster management, and capacity building.”<sup>28</sup> In a future that will see immense competition for energy and other resources, the Bay of Bengal, with its wealth of hydrocarbons and sea routes vital for trade, has become an arena of both maritime cooperation, and competition amongst its stakeholders. As India ventures to ‘Act East’ and prioritises its neighbourhood to play a more prominent role in the Indo-Pacific, the Bay emerges as a cardinal sub-region for its strategic manoeuvres. The Bay is geographically rightly positioned to be India’s link to the wider waters of the Indo-Pacific as the country aspires to extend its area of influence beyond the Malacca Strait.

“The Bay of Bengal, with its wealth of hydrocarbons and sea routes vital for trade, is an arena for both maritime cooperation, and competition.”

Japan has taken a leading role in assisting India and other countries in infrastructural connectivity projects under the IPOI.<sup>29</sup> It is important to deliberate on the ways in which India can collaborate with the littoral and non-littoral stakeholders beyond Malacca in the Bay of Bengal region on maritime connectivity. India's maritime initiatives need greater synchronisation

with those of other regional agencies to better integrate collaborative growth in the Bay. Most importantly, members of BIMSTEC need to collaborate among themselves and with other stakeholders to build greater regional connectivity and enable collaborative growth to ensure stability and prosperity in the Bay. How efficiently India's Northeast serves as a hinterland for strengthening connectivity in the Bay and the wider Indo-Pacific region is a matter of great concern.<sup>30</sup>



# Conclusion

India and its key regional partners, especially Japan, have taken a holistic approach to connectivity with Southeast Asia. It perceives the Northeast as a significant space in itself and not a mere transit point for regional connectivity. Various connectivity projects have begun in the Northeast, pursuing the vision of greater regional connectivity.

There are serious challenges, however: inadequate funds, lack of effective cooperation among the different states, lack of planning and insufficient participation of different countries in specific roles, limited data sharing among the regional stakeholders, and the involvement of the military due to security issues in the border regions. These have to be collectively addressed by all the stakeholders.<sup>31</sup>

Physical connectivity projects in the Northeast have often been beleaguered by delays. There is urgent need for timely completion of the projects.

There must be detailed stocktaking of the present state of infrastructural initiatives in the Northeast, the challenges such projects face, and how these can be overcome. Development of human resources and capacity building in India's NER should go simultaneously with development of resilient infrastructure.

Japan's role as a reliable partner in the region is crucial. The scope for collaborative efforts among BIMSTEC member countries as well as other stakeholders in accelerating connectivity in the Bay region also needs to be explored. The Northeast has close cross-border ethnic and religious ties with India's eastern neighbours and Southeast Asia. Apart from physical connectivity, facilitating the flow of people across borders, closer people-to-people contact would foster greater opportunities for regional interaction.<sup>32</sup> ORF

## Acknowledgements

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### Inaugural Session

- Nilanjan Ghosh, Director, ORF, Kolkata (Chair)
- Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Senior Fellow, ORF Kolkata
- Nakamura Yutaka, Consul- General, Consulate General of Japan in Kolkata.
- Riva Ganguly Das, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.
- Tariq Karim, Ambassador (Retd.), Political Analyst & Independent Consultant
- Subrata Saha, (Let. Gen. Retd.) PVSM, UYSM, VSM Director — School of Military Affairs, Strategy and Logistics, Rashtriya Raksha University; Member, National Security Advisory Board

### Valedictory session

- Matsumoto Katsuo, Head of JICA in India

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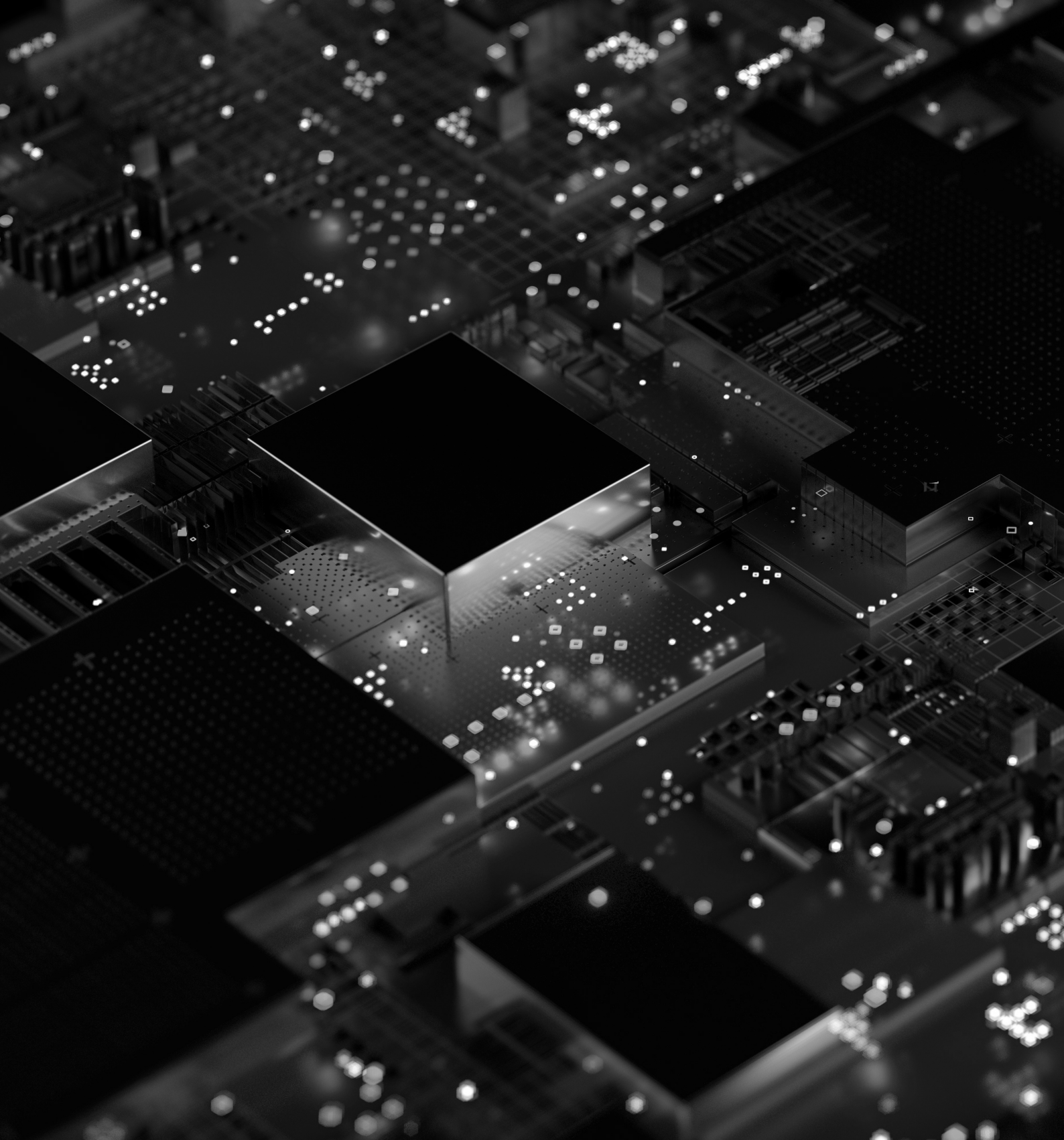
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