



Beyond the Coastline: India's Land Connectivity Options around the Bay of Bengal

Event Summary

Wednesday, 10 April, 2024

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted a webinar to launch the paper “[Beyond the Coastline: India's Land Connectivity Options around the Bay of Bengal](#)” co-authored by **Riya Sinha**, Associate Fellow, CSEP and **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, CSEP.
- The discussion focused on the need for developing land connectivity infrastructure in the Bay of Bengal region to complement India's maritime initiatives, facilitate effective implementation of the 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First' policies. With a focus on enhancing connectivity efforts through the North-eastern states to the rest of South and Southeast Asia, the discussion delved into the political economy of the subregion and explored strategies to accelerate the land connectivity efforts.
- The webinar included a panel discussion with **Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane (Retd.)**, the 28th Chief of Army Staff, **Riva Ganguly Das**, former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, **Sohel Kazani**, Founder and Executive Director, Bharat Freight, **Shahidul Haque**, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and **Amitendu Palit**, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead, Institute for South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. Riya Sinha and Constantino Xavier presented their paper and co-moderated the discussion.

Land bridges in the Bay of Bengal region

Sinha and Xavier highlighted how India's regional connectivity strategy has predominantly focused on maritime domains, including new ports and shipping links. While this has helped deepen economic linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia, inland connectivity initiatives have lagged, with persistent delays and obstacles affecting transportation infrastructure and economic integration beyond coastal areas around the Bay of Bengal. India's Northeast Region (NER), which is yet to be effectively linked to the sub-region formed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, continues to lack any significant economic land bridge or corridor with Southeast Asia. Additionally, while the rest of Asia's hinterland economies are now rapidly connecting via rail, there is still no progress on a rail link between South and Southeast Asia.

Highlighting findings from their paper, the presenters suggested that India must prioritise the development

of multimodal transportation infrastructure to bridge the current gap between maritime and land-based initiatives around the Bay of Bengal. This would spur the creation of sub-regional, regional, and inter-regional economic corridors. Discussing the hard transportation and logistics dimension the speakers briefly discussed four sectors: road linkages, rail connectivity, and both land and dry ports to facilitate mobility, including trade in goods. Beyond transportation infrastructure, on the softer side, they highlighted five additional domains: institutional capacity for coordinating connectivity initiatives between central and state levels; instruments to support cross-border stability and security; new international partnerships, especially with regional organisations and multilateral institutions; closer regional collaboration on infrastructure norms and standards; and increased engagement with the private sector.

People and connectivity

The panellists emphasised the importance of centralising 'people' in discussions about borderland connectivity. India's 'Act East' policy visualised the NER as its fulcrum, emphasising development within the region to bridge connectivity gaps. However, this objective remains largely unmet, as development in the NER fails to see significant progress. Historical ties between Bangladesh and India underscore the importance of connectivity, yet recent projects have stalled, raising concerns. The panellists highlighted local perceptions within these regions are a major barrier to the success of connectivity projects. Haque discussed how perception in Bangladesh persists that connectivity primarily benefits business interests, neglecting broader societal welfare. While connectivity has historically been a state-sponsored project, recent years have seen the private sector come into the domain. Discussants flagged that ultimately, connectivity must serve the wellbeing of the people to realise its true potential. Yet, security considerations loom large in the region, questioning whose security is prioritised.

Securitisation of the border

Insurgency in the NER has been a security concern which has often hampered the progress of connectivity initiatives in the region. Emphasising how insurgency is a result of economic deprivation, Naravane deliberated that better development in the region will lead to less insurgency. Thus, resulting in better trade linkages and connectivity within the region and beyond. Das discussed how securitisation along the Eastern border had been a historical reality. The India-Bangladesh border, initially a soft border, became a hard border in 1965 to prevent illegal migration. Discussing how perceptions regarding border connectivity have shifted, Das highlighted that in the 1990s, discussing connectivity and transit in the region was unheard of. However, today, there is growing rail connectivity between the two neighbours for both goods and people. This shift, she emphasised, can be linked to two key events: first, Sheikh Hasina's crackdown on Indian insurgent groups operating from Bangladesh and, second, the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement.

Evolving land connectivity in the region

Palit highlighted the need for the development of multimodal infrastructure for India to meet its goals of connecting with its Eastern neighbours. He highlighted, in line with the paper, that for connectivity agendas to progress, it is crucial for hinterlands to be connected. India has been developing multimodal connectivity through the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project where it operationalised direct links between the Kolkata sea port in India to the Sittwe port in Rakhine state, Myanmar. Kazani discussed how the port development project in Sittwe received support from not only the local government in Myanmar but also all the ethnic tribes in the region. He discussed how despite the political unrest in the state, the sentiment to ensure the development of the port was kept alive. Attributing this to the fact that project provides economic benefits to the state while ensuring long-term investment of Indian assets. He pointed out that project success in the region hinges on private sector capital forming a consortium that ensures transparency while addressing multiple challenges, rather than focusing on a singular issue.

The panellists also discussed the growing concerns surrounding the comparison of infrastructure development between India and China in the region. They showcased that comparison between the two is not the ideal parameter since the Indian model is democratic and delays are often a result of technical disruptions. As in the case of the Agartala-Akhaura railway link construction where soil specifications differed on the Indian and Bangladeshi sides, leading to delays. The Indian model is also cheaper and more consultative, which is preferred by stakeholders involved in development.

Furthermore, on international cooperation, the panellists highlighted the importance of Japanese projects in the region, including the Matabari deep seaport in Bangladesh. Such investments from external player will be instrumental in linking the land and maritime connectivity in India's NER and between South and Southeast Asia.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

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