



# **Kaladan Project: Vision, Challenges, Prospects**

**Subir Bhaumik**

***Series Editors:***

**Prof. Nani Gopal Mahanta**

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## **Kaladan Project: Vision, Challenges, Prospects**

India's recent connectivity projects in the East, like the US\$484 million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, stem from a compulsion imposed by the sub-continent's post-Partition geography. Pakistan lost its eastern wing in a bloody civil war in 1971 because it was logistically impossible for its army to hold on to an alienated province with millions of Bengalis up in arms and their insurrection fully backed by India.<sup>1</sup> India did not lose its restive 'Seven Sisters' in the Northeast but a spate of violent insurgencies by battling ethnicities (Naga, Mizo, Manipuri, Assamese, Bodos, other tribes) challenged Delhi's control over the remote region.<sup>2</sup> That has compelled post-colonial India to seek alternate trans-national connectivity to the region to get round the limitations imposed by the 21-kms wide 'Siliguri Corridor', the only land link connecting the Indian mainland to the Northeast. A combined armoured-infantry-airborne thrust by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) through the Zompheri (also written as Jampheri) ridge down the Chumbi valley and Jaldhaka cutting off this 'Siliguri Corridor' – this is worst nightmare scenario for India's military planners.<sup>3</sup>

### **Origins of Kaladan project**

Before 1971, the possibility to connect India's mainland to its Northeast through East Pakistan was seen as impossible by Delhi with a hostile Pakistani military regime not only determined to deny that but actually backing Naga, Mizo and Manipuri insurgents in tandem with China to weaken India's hold on the Northeast.<sup>4</sup> When India's legendary editor and geo-strategist B.G. Verghese served as information adviser to late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1966-69, he was the first to push for a multi-modal transport project through Burma (now Myanmar) by using the Arakanese port of Sittwe and the Kaladan river that flows out of India's Mizo Hills to the Arakan (Rakhine) coast into the sea. He said at a 2009 book launch<sup>5</sup> that he had put up a detailed note to Mrs. Indira Gandhi on the eve of her visit to Rangoon (now Yangon) in March 1969 to take up with Burmese military strongman Gen. Ne Win the possibility of connecting to India's Northeast through Myanmar's Arakan province. "That would help us bypass East Pakistan and beef up our supplies , both military and civil, to Northeast," he told this author,

recalling his note to Mrs. Gandhi was the precursor to the Kaladan project as we see it today.<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Indira Gandhi did take this up with Gen. Ne Win along with her request to the Burmese military strongman to use his military to stop Naga and Mizo rebels going to China for guerrilla warfare training and weapons through Myanmar's Sagaing-Kachin corridor, but the emergence of a friendly Bangladesh under its founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman , a great friend of India , explains why India lost interest in a Bay of Bengal-Arakan-Kaladan connect to Northeast through Mizoram, as suggested by Verghese. It is only after the electoral defeat of Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina and her pro-India Awami League that India resurrected the Verghese proposal and started working on it. Bangladesh's BNP government under Prime Minister Khaleda Zia not only blocked the transit agreement suggested by India to use Bangladesh rail, road and ports to connect to Northeast but also refused to allow a Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline project proposed by US energy major UNOCAL through her country. Her government also actually started backing anti-Indian insurgents in Northeast and Islamist insurgents from mainland India.<sup>7</sup>

It was during the March 2008 Delhi visit of Myanmar army Tatmadaw's Senior Vice General Maung Aye that the memorandum of understanding for the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project was signed as a US\$110 million project (later escalated in phases to account for costs and time overruns and currently estimated at US\$484 million). The project was to 'provide easier access to Northeastern region (of India) besides alternate connectivity between India and Myanmar, bypassing Bangladesh.' "The project envisages connectivity between Indian ports on the eastern seaboard and Sittwe Port in Myanmar and then through riverine transport and by road to Mizoram. India will contribute about US\$100 million as well as be liable for any cost overruns while Myanmar will contribute US\$10 million and free land for the project," it was said in a joint press communique after the signing of the MOU , at which this author was present.<sup>8</sup>

## **Legal Basis**

So the legal basis for the project was the protocol signed by India and Myanmar on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2008 for specifying the parameters of the project, its funding pattern and its objectives. Government, rather parliamentary, ratification was seen as enough at that point of time because Myanmar was still ruled by a military junta and the first parliament elections in 20 years was still two years away. Subsequently, Myanmar's elected government have ratified the protocol. A joint statement issued by India and Myanmar during the 26-29 Feb 2020 Delhi of Myanmar President U Win Myint is the latest reiteration of the two governments, both legitimately elected by its people, to complete and operationalize the Kaladan Multi Modal Transport Project (hereafter called KMMTP). Point 9 of the joint statement said:

Both leaders (Indian president R.N Kovind and Myanmar president U Win Myint) took note of the positive developments related to the Sittwe Port and the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project. They welcomed the appointment, since 1 February 2020, of a Port Operator to operate and maintain the Sittwe Port and Paletwa Inland Water Transport Terminal and associated facilities. Once operational, this port will contribute to the economic development of the region and benefit the local people. Both sides also reaffirmed their commitment to the early completion of the Paletwa-Zorinpui road – the final leg of the Kaladan project. Once completed, the road will connect Sittwe Port to North-East India, generating more traffic for the Port. India appreciated Myanmar's cooperation and efforts in facilitating the movement of project personnel, construction material and equipment for the construction of the road component of Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project across the Mizoram border through Zorinpui southwards towards Paletwa.<sup>9</sup>

## **The project design**

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project is aimed at creating a gateway linking the landlocked North-Eastern region to the sea. Through this project, the mainland will be linked to the Northeastern region through all the three modes of transport, sea, river, & road. The project's framework was laid down in the joint protocol signed by both the countries on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2008. The project has been on a fast track since Look East Policy was rechristened to Act East Policy by India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This long-delayed project began its road construction in April 2018 and is India's single largest developmental activity on a foreign land.

## KALADAN PROJECT: VISION, CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS

The table given below provides details of the route that begins from Kolkata port through Sittwe of Myanmar to Mizoram in India.

| Stretch                                                       | Mode                          | Distance |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------|
| Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar                             | Shipping                      | 539km    |
| Sittwe to Paletwa (River Kaladan in Myanmar)                  | Inland Water Transport        | 158km    |
| Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar border (in Myanmar)                   | Road                          | 110km    |
| From Zorinpui (Mizoram-Myanmar border) to Lawangtlai in India | On Road (National Highway 54) | 100kms   |

Source: MDoNER (official website).<sup>10</sup>



Source: M. Ramesh (2013), *The Hindu Business Line*.<sup>11</sup>

The journey from Haldia port near Kolkata to Lawngtlai in Mizoram through Siliguri Corridor is 1880 km. When the Kaladan project when successfully becomes operational will cut the distance down to 950 km. The goods can be transported to Mizoram through the multi-modal transit way and NH 54 will connect further to Assam and other North-Eastern states. Through this project, India hopes to reduce its dependency on Siliguri

Corridor that lies between Nepal and Bangladesh thereby reducing the cost of transportation and time.

This multi-modal project is multifaceted. Involvement of both waterways and roadways will reduce the distance & the cost of transportation, and expand India's trade with Myanmar and other countries of South-east Asia and maybe even China, whose ports are far away and whose south-western and western provinces are easy to reach through Myanmar.

The biggest potential of the project lies in developing the India's Northeast, where the goods from North-East India can be directly transported through sea instead of taking it through roadways from other ports in India.

As a part of this project, The Indian government has finished rebuilding Myanmar's Sittwe port to make it capable of handling large cargo ships. The port which used to handle 2000-3000 ton vessels is being developed to handle a capacity of 20000-ton vessels. Investing around US\$ 134 million for the project, India is handing over the port to Myanmar after initial support for operations in December 2018 and eventually the inland waterway terminal.

In a written reply to a question in Indian parliament's Rajya Sabha (Upper House), Minister of state for Shipping, Road Transport and Chemical & Fertilizer Mansukh L. Mandaviya informed that the "infrastructure at Sittwe Port in Myanmar, constructed with India's assistance, is ready for operation".<sup>12</sup>

India is seeking to link the KMMTP to its other big road connectivity project through Myanmar, the India-Myanmar-Thailand or the IMT highway. This linking is seen as crucial to providing a multi-modal option to India for trading with Southeast Asian countries like Laos or some northern regions of countries like Myanmar which are located far inland, away from coastal regions that can be accessed by sea. These countries and regions like Laos and Upper (Northern) Myanmar have drifted into the Chinese orbit of influence.

The much-delayed India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) highway is mainly stuck with the construction of 69 bridges, including approach roads on the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section of the IMT highway, and also upgradation of the Kalewa-Yargi section of this highway. The

new deadline for completion of the IMT trilateral highway has been set at 2021. While the Sittwe port with its container terminals are complete, the dredging of the Kaladan river, the completion of the land port at Paletwa and the Paletwa-Zorinpui road is all behind time. Paletwa is the key link in the chain of liberated bases that the Arakan Army has created themselves in the Chin-Rakhine region. For the last two years, the rebels of the Arakan Army have started disrupting work on the KMMTP project and that has further led to delays and some level of uncertainty (see below on the Arakan Army in section “AA Factor”). Added to that is India’s slow speed of execution compared to China and the limited funds it can put into its projects compared to its northern neighbor, which have always hamstrung such projects and this is likely to get worse post-COVID with the Indian economy in a bit of free fall.<sup>13</sup>

### **India’s expanded Vision on Kaladan**

Once the KMMTP is linked to IMT with link roads, not only would it provide India (a) with an alternative access into South-east Asia other than the usual sea route which cannot be used to easily reach deeper hinterlands like Laos, Upper Myanmar, even North Thailand (b) an effective bypass of its own trouble-prone Northeast to achieve such an access because it is still a long time before Northeast’s own road, rail, waterways infrastructure can be developed to handle a large part of the South-east Asia bound trade and before political resolution of the long protracted conflicts like the six decade old Naga imbroglio can be resolved to provide for a peaceful, trouble free land access (c) with an alternative access to Northeast in case a regime change in Bangladesh renders undone the progress in connectivity through that country achieved during the 2010-2020 decade when PM Sheikh Hasina has helmed the nation. India is now in the process of firming an alternative to China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>14</sup> The KMMTP-IMT axis with Japan’s twin Special Economic Zones at Thilawa and Dawei in Myanmar and India-Japan’s joint effort to fund and back the development of Sri Lanka’s Colombo port are seen by many as the first ‘babysteps’ to challenge or at least provide an alternative to China’s BRI.<sup>15</sup> There is also a proposal to build 1,575 km long Sittwe-Aizawl-Silchar-Guwahati-Siliguri-Gaya gas pipeline to transport gas from Sittwe gas field where ONGC and GAIL hold 30 percent stake in oil and gas exploration. On this score, India is not taking chances with Bangladesh

after Khaleda Zia's refusal, even though Delhi's friend Hasina is firmly in power for eleven years now.

### ***Scoring Brownie Points - The Indian development financing model***

Recently Myanmar reduced the budget of Kyauk Phyu port construction by the Chinese state-owned firm as China is known for its debt traps. Not being able to pay back the loan would lead the Myanmar government writing off the port to China like Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. India, on the other hand, has not asked to pay back the project's cost as it benefits a small country like Myanmar also making India-Myanmar ties stronger. This project not only improves North-East India's economy but also possibly helps in reducing the sting of insurgencies in the region because of the employment opportunities for youth. Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Vikram Misri (now he is Indian ambassador to China) told this author in an interview that Delhi's model of project financing is different from China's – "we win hearts , not just create assets, we do projects on local needs , not merely to further our strategic or economic interests , but if the two meet, so much the better and we hand over to local government whatever we make , he said, indirectly alluding to China's takeover of some projects like the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka after Colombo expressed inability to pay up for the debts sustained.<sup>16</sup>

China has been accused of creating a debt trap for countries with weak economy to take over their assets – from ports to mines and more. Myanmar scaled down the Chinese Kyaukphyu deep sea port project after debt sustainability fears gripped the Suu Kyi government when China took over Hambantota. India has played this card in all neighbouring countries when funding projects – finance projects which those countries want but which also helps India and its regions. No wonder, the Chinese have sought some joint projects in Afghanistan with India and Delhi has accepted them, so that while Beijing can figure out Delhi's development financing model, India can shield its Afghan projects from Pakistan-sponsored terror if China is a joint partner. <sup>17</sup>

### **Will opening of Chittagong Port effect Kaladan Project?**

Recently, Bangladesh after a long pending delay has granted India permission to use the Chittagong port. The Chittagong port is geographically closer to India (distance from Chittagong port to Agartala is 222 km) and once the bridge over river Feni that is being constructed opens by 2019 as scheduled, then Agartala (capital city of Tripura) will be the

nearest Indian city to an international port. If connected, this will help Tripura access the port leading to the development of North-Eastern region which the Kaladan project is trying to achieve.

Compared to the Kaladan project, Chittagong can be easily connected through the road with the help of the bridge. The goods that reach the Sittwe port of Myanmar must be taken through Kaladan River in barges for about 158km to reach Paletwa, a town in Myanmar which then will be taken through road for around 129 km to the Indo-Myanmar border. Hence, India's connectivity with Chittagong Port might lead to lesser shipments to Sittwe port than expected, therefore questions India's heavy investment in Myanmar.

### **The possible future debates**

**Impact on the Environment:** The Indian government under Modi gave a push to the delayed Kaladan project awarding contracts for road construction of the highway from Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar border in 2017, but the road construction is unlikely to meet the second deadline of Sept 2020 and spillover into 2021. There has been no environmental impact assessment, which is a major cause of concern especially in the context of river dredging at the river mouth for the barges.

**Socio-Religious Conflicts:** What remains anonymous is India's ease of flow of goods from the Kolkata port (starting point of the multi-modal transit route) to the Indo-Myanmar border in future. Any disagreement between the countries might create tensions at the port, affecting transportation of goods; or when a problem arises in North-East India or in Myanmar like Rohingya crisis, it would affect both the countries especially for India since it has borne the cost of the project.

**Drug Trade:** The project Kaladan also increases the chances of illegal trade of drugs, weapons and other sources which is a cause of concern for both countries. The Myanmar government is responsible for the safety of cargo from Sittwe port till it reaches the Indo-Myanmar border. Since this route is primarily for the Indian mainland to transport goods to its relatively less developed and less connected North-Eastern region any illegal trade would create backlashes from Myanmar government. Huge seizures of amphetamine and heroin from sea and river ports in Myanmar and Bangladesh, especially in the Cox's Bazar

-Teknaf-Rakhine stretch, have turned the spotlight on the threat of drug trafficking in this region.

Myanmar is strategically important for India as it is the only South-East Asian country that it shares borders with. It is the land bridge for India to other South-East Asian countries. The bilateral security patrolling indicates India's commitment towards the safety of the Sittwe port that influences North-East India's growth and stability. Hence, the operationalization of the Kaladan project will help India move closer in achieving the primary objective of Act East Policy.

Therefore, the suggestion to connect Myanmar's Sittwe port with other South Indian ports will increase the flow of goods to North-East India. Increased accessibility and connectivity between Indian mainland and North-East India is the primary objective of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project. But once the Chittagong port of Bangladesh opens this flow of goods will be shared by both Sittwe port and Chittagong port reducing the sole dependency on Sittwe port of Myanmar. But because the Sittwe port is closer to South-East Asian countries it will remain important.

### **The AA factor, ARSA & the Paletwa conundrum**

The revival of Rakhine and Rohingya insurgency in Arakan-Chin region of western Myanmar in the post-2015 phase has hugely complicated the KMMTP-IMT projects. In 1998, the Indian army double-crossed the leaders of the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA), Arakan Army's predecessor. 7 top leaders and 50-off NUPA rebels landed in Andaman Islands, all the leaders were rounded up and shot in cold blood by the Indian army and 38 NUPA activists were imprisoned. All the weapons they brought to smuggle into Arakans were seized. The whole episode was exposed by this author in Times of India ("The Great Betrayal) and later developed into a full book by India's top human rights lawyer Nandita Haksar (The Rogue Agent). A military intelligence Colonel V J S Grewal, who had been a mole of the Burmese Tatmadaw was allegedly behind the whole episode. He resigned from the Indian army soon after and lives in Myanmar, running a bicycle manufacturing unit set up with slush funds from Burmese military. The killings dealt a body blow to the NUPA and its Rohingya ally, Arakan Rohingya National Organisation

(ARNO) and though the activists in Indian jail finally secured release, the organization was finished.<sup>18</sup>

The Arakan Army, which originated in the northern Kachin state in 2009, recruiting originally from Rakhine labourers working in jade mines, has now emerged as one of Myanmar's most powerful armed rebel group. It had penetrated deep in Arakan (Rakhine) state and the neighbouring China state and fought the Tatmadaw to a standstill, inflicting heavy casualties and even kidnapping soldiers and policemen almost at will. Leading Myanmar-watcher Bertil Lintner has detailed how the Arakan Army has turned the tables on the Tatmadaw by their smart strategic thinking and tactical finesse, mobility and psywar capabilities.<sup>19</sup> By 2017, as the Arakan army was creating its own influence zones in Rakhine and Chin states, a new Rohingya group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) started a new wave of violence, attacking Burmese police and military outposts and ruthlessly slaughtering the men in uniform. Its coordinated attack on 30 police stations and a military camp in northern Rakhine state in July 2017 left to a massive ethnic cleansing drive by the Burmese military that send nearly 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh.

In recent months, both the Arakan Army and the ARSA have coordinated their attacks on Tatmadaw for maximum impact, though there still does not exist any political alliance based on a common vision of a future independent Arakans as was the case with the NUP-ARNO alliance. The ARSA is far too radicalized in Salafist Islamic ideology by their Pakistani mentors <sup>20</sup>to be willing to fight for a 'shared future' with Rakhines . On the other hand, the AA, though more Arakanese nationalist than devout Buddhists, are unwilling to provide Tatmadaw any propaganda mileage by drawing close to the ARSA that leaves it vulnerable to attacks by Buddhist fundamentalist groups often backed by Tatmadaw.

Neither the AA nor the ARSA attacked Indian interests, despite their reservations about Indian army and intelligence services in the aftermath of 'OPS LEECH', a name given to the assault leading to the liquidation of the NUPA leaders by Indian army that was made to look like a crackdown on gunrunners in Indian territorial waters. One Indian journalist close to the military establishment actually blamed defence minister George Fernandes for 'sheltering gunrunners' in a classic case of disinformation mounted by Military Intelligence against its own minister when Fernandes was only backing the cause of Burmese

democracy and federalism.<sup>21</sup> This writer, who has contact with Arakan Army, has been told that 'Operation Leech' is the one single reason why the traditionally pro-Indian Rakhine rebels no longer believe India, specially its army and intelligence. The other key factor for that is India's policy makeover on Myanmar since mid-1990s, especially after BJP came to power, when Delhi stopped dealing with the ethnic insurgent groups on Myanmar's western and India's northeastern borders and started dealing directly with the Myanmar military government and the army.

That culminated in 2018-19 with an Indian military assault on Arakan Army bases in South Mizoram, after persistent requests from Myanmar government and army, Indian troops attacked and demolished several AA bases in south Mizoram in what was described as a special offensive called 'Operation Sunrise'.<sup>22</sup> This was a quid pro quo for a Burmese military offensive against bases of Naga and Assamese rebel groups in Sagaing province of Myanmar. The AA camps destroyed in 'Ops Sunrise' sit on a arms trafficking route used by AA to bring weapons from southeast Asia through Bangladesh coast and the CHT-Mizoram-Chin Hills region.<sup>23</sup> The Myanmar government later, for the first time, handed over 22 ethnic Northeastern rebels to India and they were flown out.<sup>24</sup>

Since then, the AA has attacked contractors and labourers, engineers and suppliers working on KMTTP, causing much uncertainty in Delhi amid fears that India may be getting dragged into a Burmese conflict.<sup>25</sup> Mizoram, which stands to gain most from the KMTTP project, has been pushing Delhi to complete the project. Its rebel-turned-chief minister Zoramthanga, whose MNF separatists (now legitimized as a political party after surrender in 1986) were based in Arakans during insurgency days, has offered to broker an understanding between AA and Delhi, so that the Indian contractors can finish their work on time.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the attacks have come in the Paletwa region, where the KMTTP changes gears from an up-the-river transportation mode to a land mode. Though Paletwa is in Chin state, the absence of a Chin rebel group strong enough to keep the AA out has helped the Arakanese rebels to muscle their way in. Much of the AA attacks on KMTTP has come in the Paletwa region. Some India-backed Chin groups like the Chin National Front has opposed the AA's forays but are not in a position to oppose the much stronger Arakanese rebel army, now believed to be 7000- strong.

AA spokesperson Khine Thukha, when asked why they disrupt work on KMMTP while leaving the Chinese Kyaukphyu project alone, has said “China recognizes us, while India does not”. Maybe the AA is looking for payments from Indian companies to fund their armed campaign against Myanmar. Indian officials say it would be difficult for them to do what the Chinese do – arm Myanmar and also sell arms to AA and other rebel groups through fronts, pay cash to rebels on the sly to get projects completed undisturbed.<sup>27</sup>

### **Policy Dilemma for India**

India faces a huge policy dilemma over the Kaladan project, not because it is so important any longer to connect the country’s mainland to the Northeast. Bangladesh’s Sheikh Hasina government since 2009 has concluded a series of agreements allowing India use of Bangladesh territory to access the Northeast by rail, road, river and coast.<sup>28</sup> Tripura has emerged as the new gateway into Northeast India from the mainland via Bangladesh, looking to replace Assam and North Bengal, through which mainland India was so long connected to its Northeast by land. The regular border tensions with China and the threat to the Siliguri Corridor from the Chinese army positions in Doklam-Nathan-Yatung salient, from where they can threaten India’s only land link to seven Northeastern states by a huge roll-down armoured assault on the Chumbi Valley- Jaldhaka axis makes it imperative for India to seek alternatives to connect to Northeast. If Bangladesh remains friendly with a regime like Hasina’s in power,

There are three reasons why the Kaladan project remains important for India, as important as when it was conceived.

- (a) In view of the emerging Chinese threat to the Siliguri corridor and the remote, but not impossible, chance of its being cut off by the Chinese in the event of a full-scale war, India has no choice but to look for an alternate connect to Northeast. Even if there is no military threat to the corridor, transport between the mainland and Northeast through this corridor is much more circuitous and expensive and that brings down the attraction of Northeast as an investment destination and scuttles its potential for economic growth.
- (b) Though Bangladesh, with its geo-physical proximity to both Indian mainland and the Northeast by being perched right in between the two, offers the best option for

the mainland-Northeast connect for India, one cannot rule out the possibility of Hasina or Awami League being replaced by a radical Islamist anti-India regime in distant, if not in near, future. The rise of the BJP-RSS Hindutva forces in India has boosted the radical Islamist constituency in Bangladesh, fuelled further by India's NRC-CAA exercises that threatens tens of thousands of Bengalis with loss of citizenship and a pushback into Bangladesh. Indian Home Minister Amit Shah's hate rhetoric (describing Bangladeshis as 'termites') has not gone down too well with even the most India-friendly Bangladeshi. The Chinese lobby in Awami League and other political parties is growing and feeding on negative sentiments, for which the Hindutva forces are responsible in large measure. If Hasina were to be replaced at any point, a hardline Islamist successor regime may renege on agreements providing transit to India. One is not arguing such a possibility is imminent but it is always desirable to plan for the worst-case scenario. Her leading opponent, Begum Khaleda Zia has openly threatened to 'review all agreements done with India' during the Hasina regime.<sup>29</sup>

- (c) The Kaladan project is now seen as important for India to connect its Northeast to the emergent Japanese-funded Special Economic Zones in Dawei and Thilawa in Myanmar which may provide a geo-economic and strategic alternative to the China-funded and developed Kyaukphyu-Yunnan growth corridor. It is now seen as the logical extension of India's "Act East" or 'Look East' policy by which Delhi can finally get to locate the backward Northeast, long consigned to insurgencies and ethnic conflicts, at the heart of its engagement with the Tiger Economies of South-east Asia and thus set it up for a growth trajectory that it has been denied since Independence.

The stakes are high in Delhi. India's BJP government sees KMMTP-IMT as crucial to the success of India's "Act East Policy" and an effective counter to China's BRI in collusion with Japan's many projects. But unless Delhi can sort out its own Northeastern bushfires through domestic political accommodation and handle the AA – either by backing the Tatmadaw in a successful Sri Lanka type counter-insurgency campaign or by paying it off without upsetting the Tatmadaw—the already delayed connectivity project will suffer more delays. Some like Anthony Davies even see the bloody guerrilla war in Rakhine as "killing

India's Act east dream".<sup>30</sup> That may be too early to say, but Delhi is yet to find a way to hunt with the hound and swim with the crocodile, that may be necessary to get the KMTTP-IMT projects through.

The legendary R&AW official B.B. Nandi pushed the policy of India's multiple engagement, somewhat akin to China has done, in Myanmar, both with the federal government in power and with the ethnic insurgent groups dominating areas like Kachin, Chin and Arakans, so that India's security needs were fulfilled and the rebels from Northeast were denied use of a trans-border sanctuary.<sup>31</sup> That policy has now been discontinued in favour of a more direct and upfront engagement with the Myanmar government and the Army and the military-to-military relationship between India and Myanmar has continued to grow steadily since the mid-1990s. The quid pro quo of that relationship is based on an understanding that Myanmar will not allow its frontier Sagaing province, the last trans-regional base area of the Northeastern rebel groups, to be used by anti-Indian elements and India will cooperate with Myanmar in curbing, controlling and decimating insurgencies in Chin, Rakhine (Arakan) or Kachin territories. Under no circumstances are rebels on either side expected to get any sanctuary, support or sustenance in neighbouring territory. But the Arakan Army has grown in strength and now declared an all-out final push, urging Rakhine people and other nationalities in Arakan region (meaning Rohingyas and Chins) to back its "all-out assault to remove all vestiges of Burmese colonialism on Arakan soil".<sup>32</sup> The Indian army is no position to cross the border and join the battle against the Arakan Army in support of the Myanmar military. The military intervention in Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula sits heavy on Indian military minds and the Indian army is heavily stretched on its Pakistan and China frontiers with hardly any meaningful reserves available for deployment for a counter-insurgency campaign on foreign soil.<sup>33</sup> But the perceived alternative to that – a covert deal with the Arakan Army – is also difficult because it may upset the Myanmar government and the military and hurt India's long term interests in that country, which is India's link to the rest of the South-east Asia. Some analysts feel India can do what the Chinese do, but many feel that will undermine India's image as a responsible regional player with an important role to play in the Asian stage in the broader context of its growing strategic and economic relationship with Japan, Australia, ASEAN, South Korea and others who entertain grave misgivings about China's rise and assertion.

A detailed interaction on an Indian Whatsapp group ‘Myanmar Scholars’ and also personal interaction with some former Indian Ambassadors who have served in Myanmar pointed to an alternative – a larger Indian role in mediation of the conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, who have so far turned out each other’s ceasefire offers even at the peak of the Coronavirus crisis.

In Mizoram chief minister Zoramthanga, who enjoys the confidence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, India has a potential mediator for such a conflict. Not the least because even the ruling NLD sought his help to secure the release of one of the MPs kidnapped by the Arakan Army.<sup>34</sup> But the Myanmar peace process involves negotiations with multiple groups at the same time and does not follow the Indian model of ‘one group at a time’ approach’.

So only if the Myanmar government, before or after the parliament polls due end of 2020, decided to negotiate separately with the Arakan Army will it be possible for it to consider Indian mediation in the Rakhine crisis. Interaction with some Burmese military officials on a purely ‘no-quote’ basis pointed to possible acceptance of such an approach on part of the Myanmar military leadership, at least a section of which feels it might be useful to tackle one group at a time by focusing on them on a priority basis. Some argue it will be too much of an ask for Delhi to get involved in a tricky diplomatic manoeuvre with potential for a blowback just to facilitate the completion of a connectivity project in a country like Myanmar whose polity is still in institutional and political flux. But weighing the possible long-term gains from the Kaladan project, it may be worth the risk.

### **The Blowback on North-east India**

The Rakhine imbroglio has obvious implications for North-east India specially in the context of growing Sino-Indian hostility following the China’s ‘cartographic aggressions’ along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh sector. If India and China cannot normalize bilateral relations and the hostilities rise, both sides may activate ‘proxies’ to bleed each other and use them in the event of a war. On June 15, 2020, Indian and Chinese troops, while dis-engaging from an 45-day face-off in Ladakh’s Galwan Valley after

a border commander's understanding , suddenly got embroiled in savage hand-to-hand combat that left at least 60 soldiers dead.<sup>35</sup>

The spiral of anger in India was reflected in a call for boycott of Chinese goods and preventing Chinese companies from accessing the vast Indian market. At the time of writing this paper, there was still no sign of a breakthrough at either the military or the diplomatic level.

Two important developments, one in Rakhine and the other in North-east have raised fears that if India aggressively plays the 'Tibetan card' by joining its strategic ally US in backing the cause of Tibetan independence <sup>36</sup>, the Chinese could well resume their 1960-70 level to support to North-east Indian rebel groups and use their close links with the Arakan Army, and other Myanmar rebel groups, to disrupt the Kaladan project and thwart India's 'Act East through North-east' policy in a significant way.

The first development is the evident use of the Bangladesh coast and the Chittagong Hill Tracts-Mizoram jungle corridor by the Arakan Army to bring in substantial consignment of weapons into the Rakhine-Chin embattled region.<sup>37</sup> There are indications that the Bangladesh military and the Hasina government, upset with Myanmar's refusal to take back the one million plus Rohingya Muslim refugees, has either decided to look the other way or actively helped the Arakan Army carry the weapons into their embattled homeland to settle scores . That the Arakan Army has close links with China and that China is now well entrenched in Bangladesh by emerging as its main source of development finance would add to India's worries.<sup>38</sup>

The use of the Bangladesh coast for bringing in weapons into India's embattled North-east is not new. In 1995, the Indian Army intercepted a large mixed rebel column of Naga, Manipuri and Assamese guerrillas bringing in weapons through CHT-Mizoram corridor after landing it on the Monakhali-Wyakaung beaches in Bangladesh.<sup>39</sup> But the use of this route had stopped after Sheikh Hasina government cracked down hard on the North-east Indian rebel groups using sanctuaries in Bangladesh since assuming power in Jan 2009.<sup>40</sup> Now that there is evidence that the route is active again, it is clear that the Northeastern

rebels will again have access to this route for arms induction, as the Arakan Army has. Hasina's government may not help Northeastern rebel as yet, not the least because these rebel groups had close ties with her domestic opponents like the BNP and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami, but the Northeastern groups could settle for a covert tie-up with the Arakan Army, which could make a decent profit to finance its own weapons import by selling part of the trafficked consignments to Northeastern rebels. If this happens, it will largely negate India's successful entreaties with Myanmar's military, which has cracked down on Northeastern rebel bases in Sagaing and handed over 22 of these rebels to India.<sup>41</sup>

China's control over Myanmar's Northern Alliance (a clutch of six separatist rebel groups led by the United Wa State Army and the Kachin Independence Army) is well known. Now that the Arakan Army has joined the Northern Alliance groups in a large rebel coalition and have started coordinating anti-Tatmadaw (Burmese military) operations with tacit Chinese backing,<sup>42</sup> Beijing can use the northern Shan-Kachin-Sagaing land route as well as the Monakhali-CHT-Mizoram route to push in huge weapons consignments into Northeast India to boost multiple local insurgencies.

The second recent development is related to the stalemate in India's Naga peace process. In August 2015, hopes of a final settlement to the six-decade old Naga imbroglio soared after the Modi government signed a 'Framework agreement' with the leading Naga insurgent faction, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)'s Issac-Muivah or IM faction. Delhi later roped in several other Naga rebel factions into the process by designating them as 'Naga National Political Groups' (NNPG) who were expected to endorse a final settlement after their suggested amendments to the negotiated draft (between Indian government and the NSCN-IM) were incorporated in the final draft. But in late 2019, the peace process hit a huge roadblock when Delhi refused to accept NSCN-IM's core demands of a separate flag for Nagaland and concede any trappings of 'shared sovereignty' in a final settlement.<sup>43</sup>

Following failure of both sides to achieve a breakthrough, a top NSCN-IM commander threatened to seek Chinese support for resumption of insurgency in Nagaland and neighbouring states with Naga populations which this faction had sought to merge into a

‘Greater Naga state’ called Nagalim.<sup>44</sup> Now Indian intelligence has reported that NSCN commander Phungtin Shimran, who had threatened to seek Chinese help, has actually reached China with 300 rebel fighters.<sup>45</sup> The Naga rebels were the first in South Asia to secure Beijing’s support in supply of arms and in receiving training in guerrilla warfare and several batches of them reached China to be trained and armed between 1966-78 before Beijing stopped its ‘export of revolution’ with the end of Mao and rise of Deng Xiao Ping’s regime. If India joins the US in backing the cause of Tibetan independence – and the Modi government is now under some pressure from BJP-RSS hardliners as well as the US to do so – and also jab Beijing on prickly issues like Taiwan (two BJP MPs joined the ‘virtual’ swearing-in ceremony of Taiwan’s new government this year) and Hongkong (where protests are now dying out), there is a strong chance that China will start backing its old proxies like the NSCN and other rebel groups in Northeast India, with whom its intelligence has continued to maintain ‘exploratory links’.<sup>46</sup> That would have received a fresh impetus after the clashes on the border emerging from China’s fresh claims on areas like Galwan Valley and India’s growing role in the four-nation military grouping QUAD (US, India, Japan & Australia).

If the Chinese were to resort to a policy of ‘thousand cuts’ to bleed India, Beijing would start aiding multiple Northeastern rebel groups. But just not to place all its one basket and merely bank of armed separatists to rattle India, Beijing’s intelligence agencies were like to explore possibilities of exacerbating disruptions by covertly funding some environmentalist mass fronts who oppose large infrastructure projects in the Northeast on grounds it adversely impacts on indigenous communities. This writer has personal knowledge of Yunnan-based academic fronts of Chinese intelligence approaching Indian academic researchers with offers to commission studies on the anti-dam movements in India’s Northeast under cover of ‘joint research’ during a Track 2 process called Kolkata-Kunming Forum.<sup>47</sup> Needless to say, ‘joint research’ is a well-known Chinese euphemism for intelligence gathering.

The Chinese also have their eyes on the ‘Siliguri Corridor’ that connects seven northeastern states to the Indian mainland and whose vulnerability to a Chinese armoured thrust from the Doklam-Chumbi Valley- Jaldhaka axis is a huge worry for Indian army

and its security planners.<sup>48</sup> Indian intelligence is investigating a reported sale of 6 Darjeeling and foothills tea gardens to a Singapore-based Chinese front company which initially established contacts with them as prospective buyers.<sup>49</sup>

That some Chinese companies have also directly invested in new tea gardens in Nepal, not far from the Darjeeling tea gardens purchased by their Singapore front, raises worries not merely related to possible Chinese efforts to subvert the unique brand value of Darjeeling tea by mass producing them in Nepal but also use of these tea gardens as base for intelligence gathering and special operations like sabotage on Indian military supply routes during a war or a tense border stand-off. That separatist rebels from North Bengal (Kamtapur Liberation Organisation) and Northeast (ULFA) set off explosions on rail tracks in the 'Siliguri Corridor' during the 1999 Kargil conflict with Pakistan to derail troop trains carrying soldiers to Kashmir. ULFA leader Paresh Barua, now operating from a base on the Sino-Burmese border, maintains close rapport with Chinese intelligence and publicly supports the Chinese territorial claims on Arunachal Pradesh (Chinese call it 'Southern Tibet') and lambasts Tibetan leader Dalai Lama for his visits to Arunachal in tandem with official Chinese protests on the same issue.<sup>50</sup>

Possible Chinese backing for Gorkha hardliners seeking a separate state carved out of West Bengal's Darjeeling-Dooars region cannot be ruled out. Indian intelligence is also factoring in possible sponsorship of a strong Bengali irredentist movement that could capitalize on growing Bengali alienation over the NRC-CAA issues that has led to exclusion of nearly two million residents of Assam state from the NRC and raised worries of similar exclusions of Bengali-speakers elsewhere in India. With a firm base in Bangladesh, the Chinese are quite capable of fishing in troubled waters in West Bengal, as they had during the 1967-72 Naxalite movement, when Peking Radio regularly extended 'moral and ideological support' to the 'Spring Thunder' rocking India.<sup>51</sup> The Manipur RPF/PLA which has close contacts with Chinese intelligence since their top leaders (the legendary 'Ojhas') were trained in a covert base in Tibet in 1975-76, have established close contact with the Communist Party of India (Maoists) and their China trained fighters have been known to training them. The Indian Maoists don't maintain open and direct contact with the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) because it feels the present leadership has betrayed the ideals of

Mao but their link with the Manipur rebels to secure Chinese arms is not impossible.<sup>52</sup> Chinese arms produced by a Burmese rebel group close to Beijing have been reaching the Indian Maoists in their strong base area in Central India through Northeastern rebels , as this writer exposed in a BBC investigation.<sup>53</sup>

To sum up, the escalating Rakhine imbroglio and the failure of the Burmese peace process to make much headway during the past decade , coupled with India's failure to carry the two-decade old Naga peace process to its logical conclusion, a final settlement, and work out peace deals with militant factions in Manipur and Assam (through which the national highways connecting Indian mainland to Myanmar pass and which are periodically disturbed by angry blockades by battling ethnicities or armed separatists who openly extort all from traders to truck-drivers) have created a ground for Chinese covert intervention in the link region connecting South to South-east Asia.<sup>54</sup>

India's efforts to situate its long troubled Northeast at the heart of its engagement with the 'Tiger Economies' of South east Asia may not really take off unless (a) Delhi manage to resolve the Naga, Manipuri and Assam-based insurgencies to turn a zone of conflict into a zone of tranquility (b) unless Myanmar is able to successfully initiate and carry forward a national process of ethnic reconciliation to accommodate aspirations of its vast numbers of battling ethnicities (c) unless India can successfully mediate a solution to the Rakhine and Rohingya problems between the Arakan Army and Myanmar authorities on the one hand and between Myanmar, Bangladesh and Rohingya groups for repatriation of the Rohingya refugees on the other (d) unless India can balance its relations between the Myanmar government and military and the non-state actors like Arakan Army (through the likes of Mizoram rebel-turned-chief minister Zoramthanga).<sup>55</sup> Beneath the clutter and chest-thumping 'Look East' rhetoric lies enormous policy challenges born out of the festering conflicts of a far frontier region where 'India begins to look less and less India and more like the highland societies of South-east Asia'.<sup>56</sup> India's rise as a major regional power not only depends on its diplomatic success at the global high table or its military-economic power or its alliances with the high and mighty. It depends on its ability to resolving long festering domestic conflicts like in the Northeast and defusing/mediating an end to insurgencies, new and old, in the neighborhood.

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## About the Centre for South East Asian Studies, Gauhati University

The Centre for South East Asian Studies, which was established in 2017 under the financial assistance of Government of Assam in the Gauhati University and currently being located in the Department of Political science, is the first of its kind in North East India. The North East India region has assumed crucial significance with regard to India's emerging relationship with South East Asian countries particularly in the context of India's Act East Policy. Against this backdrop the Centre for South-East Asian Studies has been designed to further dialogue and generate knowledge network to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the India and particularly North-East India in relation to East and South East Asia. In order to act as a knowledge hub for promoting India's relation with South East Asia, the Centre has proposed to undertake number of academic activities which includes organizing regular seminars and symposia, publication of peer reviewed books, monograph and journals by research scholars and faculty members, liaison with scholars and students in various universities of North-eastern region, promoting inter university research programme on themes of trans-border challenges and opportunities.

### Objectives of CSEAS

1. To generate knowledge and develop understanding about East and South East Asian region.
2. To produce insights on India's relation with East and South East Asian nations and provide policy inputs for deepening and strengthening their mutual relations.
3. To understand the significance and concerns of North East India in the context of emerging relationship between India and South East Asia and the need to integrate the interests of the region in this evolving pattern of relationship between them.
4. To facilitate the track I and track II diplomacy between India and East and South East Asian nations for a more engaged and sustained mutual relationship between them by establishing and developing contacts/networks of their institutions, academicians, students, civil society etc. through mechanism like students' exchange programme.

### People

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