



Connecting South Asia Experimenting with the Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Model

Panchali Saikia
Research Officer, IPCS

There is a renewed emphasis to improve the physical connectivity with the Southeast Asian countries. This is not the first time and there has been initiatives earlier by the Union government of India. What has been said and projected, how far it has been able to implement it to ground reality remains a matter of contention.

Where is the problem in connecting with the Southeast Asian countries? Are there models outside the region, for example in Southeast Asia, from where India could learn? Especially, can India learn from the Greater Mekong Sub-regional initiative?

I MYANMAR & BANGLADESH'S CRITICAL ROLE IN LOOKING EAST

Some of the projects initiated nearly six years ago such as the Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport project, Re-opening of the Stilwell Route, Delhi-Hanoi Railway project stands crippled. For Instance, the Trilateral Highway project, an ambitious undertaking which was initially launched under the relics of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and later incorporated into the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC); has now lost its charm. Although the road infrastructure in Thailand is well developed; it is not operational as about 1,360 km of the road connecting Moreh (Manipur, India) to through Myanmar is yet to be completed. The project to up-graduate the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyoa road (about 160 km) in Myanmar across the border from Manipur; Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which envisages development of road and inland waterways from

Sittwe port in Myanmar to Mizoram; Rhi-Tiddim Road (about 60 km) in Myanmar adjoining Mizoram stands still (Panchali, 2011).

The reopening of the Stilwell Route/Ledo Road which is seen as a medium to extend trade linkages with Myanmar and China is not yet operationalize. There has been little progress in resurrecting this route, due to major disagreements between Indian and Myanmar governments with wary of threat of an increased insurgency in the Northeast, increase in the volume of contraband coming in from the Golden Triangle and a rise in arms trafficking. To successfully implement these development projects, what is required is cooperation and understanding among the countries concern. The absence of deep engagement with its immediate neighbours can be seen as the problematique.

To successfully implement its development projects, operationalize and improve its physical connectivity with Southeast Asian countries, India must first engage with its immediate neighbours Bangladesh and Myanmar, as they are the gateways to the East. This engagement should not be confined to bilateral understandings but should be broadened to a multilateral arrangement. This paper argues for the necessity of an effective sub-regional cooperation model in the region to achieve the proposed objectives to extend trade linkages with the Southeast Asian countries.

II LEARNING FROM THE GREATER MEKONG SUB REGION (GMS) ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Considering the constraint in implementation of these projects, it is essential to have a deeper

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies



B-7/3, Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi, 110029
91-11-4100 1900
www.ipcs.org

element of regionalism among these countries. The fast pace integration and cross-border connectivity of the Southeast Asian countries under the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic cooperation programme (GMS) portrays a successful sub-regional initiative in Asia (see Fig 1, 2, 3). The GMS is an economic cooperation program inaugurated in 1992 by six countries, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and Yunnan Province of China through the initiative of Asian Development Bank (ADB). In 2005, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China also became a member of the GMS-ECP. (ADB, 2012) This initiative has projected the development of the economic corridors in Southeast Asia to enhance connectivity within the region. It provides a benchmark for successful sub-regional and cross-border cooperation and has achieved significant progress in the construction of road networks and transportation regulatory arrangements.

The proposed GMS economic corridor networks, East West Corridor, the North-South Economic Corridor and the Southern Economic Corridor in the region will further enhance the economic growth of these countries. The upgradations of highways, improved transport linkages and ratification of Cross Border Transport Agreement (CBTA) have enhanced the intra-GMS connectivity and quadrupled the trade.

Over its 12 years existence the GMS has steadily evolved into a highly effective collaboration through two major elements, first, the 3 C's strategic pillar (connectivity, improved competitiveness, and enhanced sense of community). The key features of the are the Transport and Trade Facilitation (TTF): CBTA, Program of Action for TTF, Core Environment Program (CEP), Promoting GMS as a single tourist destination, Core Agricultural Support Program, Building capacity for development, management; comprehensive HRD Strategy. (ADB, 2012)

Second, is the process of implementing the listed

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projects. The projects are divided into two groups: (a) Sub-regional projects, under which each project involves, at least, two countries, (b) National project with subregional dimension which will benefit the whole region (Masami Ishida, 2008)

All the GMS projects go through a uniformed process where both social and environment assessment is done. The study group proceeds to a pre-feasibility study followed by feasibility study, engineering design and finally project implementation. These projects are either funded by the member countries or the Asian Development Bank. Foreign investment companies have also contributed highly to the success of the GMS projects. The projects are monitored in all the stages by a monitoring group. The success of the GMS over other sub-regional grouping is also because of its frequent interactions between the member countries, both at official level and ground level. The GMS was upgraded into summit level dialogues which have contributed significantly to the local economic growth. The recent Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Summit was held in Yangon, Myanmar from 19-20 December 2011, which has set a new direction towards comprehensive cooperation, and expanding the region as a major economic zone. The Summit is based on a particular theme and a strategic framework is applied for a specified timeframe. The recent i.e. the 4th GMS Summit theme was 'Beyond 2012: Towards a New Decade of GMS Strategic Development Partnership', under which a new strategic framework will be applied for the next decade, 2012 to 2022. The progress of the projects is monitored and evaluated through the ministerial meetings, senior official meetings. A National Coordinating Committee is appointed in each country along with Forums/Working Groups operating in different sectors.

The GMS Economic Corridors Approach has increasingly becoming the key to GMS success. It will transform the GMS transport corridors into economic corridors. In June 2008 the GMS Economic Corridors Forum (ECF) was introduced as the overall body responsible for promoting economic corridor development in the GMS. The task of this forum is coordinating, networking, and facilitation of economic corridor initiatives. A Governors Forum was constituted to complement the ECF and address particular local issues. It will serve as mechanism for effective coordination among governors and local authorities of the provinces along the corridors. (ADB, 2012)

The key element of the GMS connectivity is the stages in the evolution of the transport development projects (ADB, 2012)

- Stage 1: Transport Corridor – basic

transport infrastructure

- Stage 2: Transport and Trade Facilitation Corridor
- Stage 3: Logistics Corridor
- Stage 4: Urban Development Corridor – improved infrastructure in corridor towns/cities and enhanced capacities for public private partnerships
- Stage 5: Economic Corridor

III

INDIA'S NORTHEAST: EMBRACING A SUB-REGIONAL GROUPING

There have been several initiatives in the last one decade to concretize a sub-regional cooperation such as the South Asia Growth Quadrangle initiative, Kunming initiative, the Bangladesh-China-India and Myanmar (BCIM) initiative, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Techno-Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC). However, nothing concrete has come out of these initiatives and the GMS model has cast a shadow over these regional grouping. A major question that arises is, on one hand where a sub-regional grouping has contributed to improve the connectivity in the region, on the other cooperation such as the BIMSTEC and MGC have failed to achieve such success. Whether it is named BIMSTEC, BCIM or MGC, India and its neighbours Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka needs to embrace into a similar working model as the GMS.

A major bottleneck in the existing structure is the absence of active participation from the India's Northeastern region. The sub-region in the eastern fringe of South Asia includes the Northeastern part of India along with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar and also the South Western China. The Northeastern region is an essential factor in extending linkages with the Southeast Asian countries, it is important this region jointly participates in the development process of the region. Similar to the GMS structure where the Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region are at the front line of China's participation in the regional structure, the Northeastern states too needs to be integrated into the sub-regional grouping in the eastern periphery of South Asia.

IV

BACKWARD INTEGRATION: NATIONAL PROJECTS WITH SUB-REGIONAL DIMENSION

Connectivity through the Northeastern states became a priority for India's foreign policy in 2003, providing a new dimension to the Look East Policy

The sub-regional projects such as the Kaladan Multi modal, Trilateral Highway, The Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) should be monitored by the sub-regional groupings. Along with the existing projects other alternatives should also be explored.

(LEP). It has been emphasized that the Northeastern region should be developed as a regional hub to improve the trade linkages between India and the Southeast Asian countries. But the policies initiated by the government do not complement the existing infrastructure in these states. India's Northeast is still deficit of infrastructure development. The connectivity within the region is extremely poor. The communication and transport linkages are bad not only between the states but also within the states. The presence of national highway is quite negligible in most of the Northeastern states.

What is required is first, connecting the Northeastern states with the other parts of the country. The Union government has proposed the Bangalore-Chennai Industrial Corridor next in line to Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC). What has not been discussed or given emphasis is the Eastern Economic Corridor. This Corridor will connect from Paradip port in Odisha moving through Jharkhand and Bihar and terminate at Kathmandu in Nepal. This will further open avenues for extending connectivity with China. The existing roads and Rail Roads will act as spur to provide for a much larger feeder area comprising of Bihar, Jharkhand, North Odisha, Eastern UP, Chhattisgarh, Eastern MP and North East. This Project will effectively have over 75% of India's mineral resources in its feeder zone including almost 80% of Coal and over 60% of iron ore resources. This corridor should further be connected to the Northeastern states. The long-standing North South - East West Corridor (NS-EW) highway project which proposes to provide a bridge through a 3,300 km long four-lane highway between Porbandar (Gujarat) and Silchar (Assam) should be immediately executed.

Second, infrastructure development and improving the transport linkages within the Northeastern region is essential. The seven's sister's corridor is one of the most important project which has not been given enough consideration. This corridor proposes to link the capitals of the seven

states and the Indian border points with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Fig.5). From the EW Corridor, the road will extend to the Golden Jubilee Rail link border point which will further connect Assam (Kokrajhar) with Bhutan. This road will extend through Akhaura in Tripura to Ashuganj Port border point with Bangladesh. It will also link up with the existing Moreh-Myanmar-Friendship road and two other border points: first, Zowkhathar in Mizoram and second, Avakhung in Nagaland which again will extend to Myanmar. This corridor will be connected further to the NS-EW highway.

Most of these infrastructure projects are only on papers and have not been operationalized. This is mainly due to the either financial restrains, geographical condition of the Northeastern region and the problem of transferring heavy construction materials from far flung areas. Another major hindrance has been that the land required to construct the roads or broaden the highways has not been acquired. Land acquisition is a major hindrance, mostly because of the lack of land records. The cadastral survey that is needed for reporting on land records is absent in most of the Northeastern states.

The sub-regional projects such as the Kaladan Multi modal, Trilateral Highway, The Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) should be monitored by the sub-regional groupings. Along with the existing projects other alternatives should also be explored. Along with connectivity to the landports of Myanmar the deep sea ports along the coastline of Myanmar; such as Kyaukpyu in Rakhine State, Kalgauk in Mon State, Dawei and Bokpyin in Tanintharyi Region should also be considered and given emphasis. The GMS Southern Economic Corridor alignment (Ho Chi Minh City-Phnom Penh-Bangkok) further extended to Dawei in Myanmar can provide an alternative sea route to connect India and Southeast Asia. The Dawei port further extending its routes to Chennai in India will reduce congestion in the Malacca Strait.

V CONCLUSION

Connectivity will be improved only if these projects are executed within a time frame. A review and monitoring mechanism will help to ensure transparency and a time-bound implementation. Effectively monitoring/evaluating progress in the development projects will also keep a track of the flow of funds. A study team is needed for the

feasibility study of the projects; which will coordinate with the monitoring groups that will ensure that the projects are implemented within the time frame. Geographical information systems and monitoring centres are required in major areas and border points. Regular meetings should be held between the monitoring groups, representatives of the state governments and local bodies to discuss on issues based on the data collected by these centres. Check points are required at both land ports such as Moreh, Tamu and deep sea ports such as Dawei, Sittwe etc.

These arrangements can be provided only under a sub-regional structure where understanding and cooperation is build between the member countries. The representatives of the member countries should meet frequently at the ministerial level meetings and summit level endorsing a strategic framework for the regional development. At the ministerial and senior official level, the monitoring and evaluation of the projects should be operated. It is also important to actively engage development partners, the private sector and other stakeholders in a constructive dialogue towards further enhancing support to the regional programme.

Increased mobilization of private investments and economic corridor development, including public-private partnerships is needed in the Northeastern region. To avail this it is important the information is reached to the foreign investors. The summit level dialogues will ensure and provide information to the business groups and investors on the possible openings.

Under such grouping once the transport links are build the next goal should be to transform the transport corridors into genuine economic corridors and development of the border points as Special Economic Zones (SEZ). Development of Economic Corridors will create links to the major markets and the nodal points – Centers of enterprise development. It will further extend the benefits of improved transport linkages to remote locations and integrates them with more prosperous areas and open up investment opportunities. Such arrangements will also bring together the stakeholders including policy makers, private sector, media, academics, financial institutions and civil society of the sub-region to discuss policy related aspects of sub-regionalism based cooperation.