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SOUTHEAST ASIA RESEARCH PROGRAM (SEARP)

PRESS RELEASE

**MYANMAR AND STILWELL ROAD:
INDISPENSIBLE INGREDIENTS FOR INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY**

“Faster economic growth in the Northeast is possible only if people can explore trading opportunities with the Asian countries including China through the reopening of the Stilwell Road”, stated a report released by the Southeast Asia Research Program (SEARP) at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS). This was the recommendation of one of two reports which studied the scope of India’s Look East Policy (LEP) in the context of its relations with its neighbors and the present geopolitical climate. While one of the reports explores the specific option of opening the famed Stilwell Road that spans the Yunan province in China, Myanmar and India’s North-east, thereby providing a concrete and grassroots project for improving commerce and land linkages for all parties concerned; the other report provides a more broad-brush overview of India-Myanmar relations as not only a catalyst towards integration with the ASEAN countries but also a crucial regional strategic resource in itself. A primary recommendation common to both studies, is for the Indian government to utilize the existing apparatus of regional bodies such as BIMSTEC, BCIM, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and Kunming Initiative in the furtherance of the LEP.

“Reopening and developing the historical Stilwell, originally known as Ledo road, in the Northeast is tactically important. It is a fact that Northeast India is a resource rich, strategically positioned area which also shares an extensive international boundary of about 5500km with India's neighbors. The region holds great potential for India's connectivity and infrastructural ventures with Southeast and East Asian nations”, states the report on Stillwell Road emphasizing its importance in light of rising traditional and non-traditional security concerns. The report further states that, while India’s verbal enthusiasm does not match its action on the ground, China on the other hand has shown great diligence in motivating both India and Myanmar for doing their part to repair the road in their respective regions and consequently opening it up for trade. However once the road is operational, there shall also be significant concern on cheap Chinese goods swarming the markets in the Northeast and undermining the local economy. If the governments of China, Myanmar and India are not able to collaborate for the opening of this road, the report suggests the alternative of utilizing other subsidiary roads and land links including the Kaladan River which runs through Mizoram and Myanmar.

Both reports, assert that despite the challenges that exist there is more to be gained for India in both its regional and overall development if it capitalizes on the Northeast’s resources and proximity with its eastern neighbors and improves its transnational linkages. This is especially applicable to Myanmar which the second report states, is of “tremendous strategic and economic consequence” to India, given its central location with regards to both East and Southeast Asia. The report further recommends that, “A competitive streak is warranted when it is open season for major commercial and defense agreements” and that for the LEP to truly find its wings the emerging economies of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia should also be included in the policy’s framework apart from the booming ASEAN economies. Nevertheless, what can be concluded from both reports is that Myanmar is the crucial linchpin and successful engagements of India’s with its eastern neighbors cannot be accomplished or sustained by bypassing it.

The reports may be accessed at: www.ipcs.org

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