

Connecting India

A Road Map for New Roads

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Artificially drawn borders in an age of increasing globalization is anachronistic and regressive. India, as the largest country and the only one bordering all the remaining countries of South Asia, should push now for greater connectivity across its borders as a means of ensuring a more stable and prosperous South Asia. Those who talk about India's glorious past invariably emphasize how interconnected the country was with its neighbouring regions. While regionalization is proceeding at a fast clip in various parts of the world, connectivity is unfortunately often still quite slow and at places, yet to take off.

Why is connectivity essential to India and South Asia? How well is India connected physically with the countries of the region? What are the challenges to ensuring greater connectivity in the region? What concrete measures can be taken to push the process forward?

I WHY CONNECTIVITY?

India's objective of improving connectivity should be based on its long-term objectives and interests in Central Asia, West Asia and East Asia, including Southeast Asia. First, given India's energy requirements, physical connectivity in terms of roads and railways and gas pipelines through Pakistan, Myanmar and possibly also Xinjiang in China, is in India's long-term interests. Second, given the stalemate over important bilateral issues such as the Kashmir conflict and the Sino-Indian boundary dispute, improving physical connectivity across borders would provide the opportunity for increased cultural, economic and emotional contact between India and the countries involved, creating constituencies for peace within them. Third, such constituencies are likely to lessen the impact of vested interests, including both state and non-state actors, in the

various polities involved. This is particularly true of India's disputes and difficulties with Pakistan, Bangladesh and China.

Fourth, greater physical connectivity, including communication networks, is essential if economic partnerships such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and those on the anvil with Southeast Asia and China have to take off and, more importantly, be sustained. Physical connectivity would facilitate easier, cheaper and quicker movement of people and goods between India and its neighbours. Additionally, such physical connectivity with the economies of Southeast Asia holds the best promise for the economic development of India's insurgency-affected and resource-rich northeastern states. The trade potential of India's land-locked northeast can increase manifold if the region can get access to the Bay of Bengal whether through Bangladesh's Chittagong or through Myanmar's Sittwe. These initiatives would create still more constituencies for peace and progress in the countries involved. Fifth, physical connectivity is absolutely essential to better integrate the border regions of a country into the national economy and mainstream. Such integration is crucial to alleviating regional disparities that leave border regions lagging behind the rest of the country on several fronts, particularly economic, and which lead to the persistence of discontent and dissatisfaction, expressed often in the form of violent insurgencies.

Finally, with India's growing global profile, physical connectivity would not only provide depth to India's strategic presence in Asia but also enable it to address effectively non-traditional security challenges that are often also transnational in nature, such as drug-trafficking, sea piracy, maritime terrorism and natural disasters. Needless, to say, this is a process that will benefit not just India but the rest of South Asia as well.

II THE ROAD SO FAR

The Sino-Indian border is interrupted by Nepal and Bhutan and is divided into three major areas of dispute – the western sector, comprising Aksai Chin, the middle sector and the eastern sector which encompasses the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. And across this long border – approximately 4,000kms in length – are numerous historical routes through which civilizations have interacted over the centuries. However, India's physical links with Tibet were cut off one by one following the Chinese entry into Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama's flight into India in 1959 and the 1962 border conflict.

The annual pilgrimage of Hindu pilgrims to the holy mountain of Kailash Manasarovar in southern Tibet, through the difficult Lipu Lekh pass in the Indian state of Uttarakhand was the only substantial interaction across land borders officially sanctioned between the two countries until the reopening of the Nathu La in July 2006. Meanwhile, trade routes of old are now used for smuggling in the Ladakh region and in India's northeast, where these routes usually lie through Myanmar.

British India had numerous road and rail links, cutting across what later became the border between India and Pakistan, but were all severed after Partition and the 1947 war. Following the Simla Agreement in 1972, India and Pakistan decided in 1976, to start a rail service, linking New Delhi with Lahore. Running twice a week, this rail service was temporarily stopped, following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and was resumed only in January 2004. In February 1999, both countries also began a bus service between New Delhi and Lahore, which too was briefly stopped after attack in 2001.

As a part of the ongoing bilateral peace process, two bus services were started between the two parts of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) – between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad and between Poonch and Rawlakot in 2005 and 2006 respectively, carrying only members of the divided families of these two regions. Also in 2006, a rail service between the Indian state of Rajasthan and the Pakistani province of Sind and another bus service between the two Punjabs were started across the international border. In October 2007, the two countries, for the first time since 1947, allowed the movement of trucks carrying goods. However, even as measures are taken to make the Line of Control (LoC) irrelevant, India has continued with

the fencing of the LoC, as a defensive measure.

India's 1,751km-long border with Nepal runs along the Indian states of Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Sikkim. By the terms of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950, the two countries have an open border (based on the lines of the US-Canada border) allowing free movement of Indian and Nepalese nationals and providing also for 19 agreed immigration check-posts, 22 mutual trade routes and 15 third-country transit routes. In addition, 143 small customs posts exist along the border.

Bhutan's 699 km-long border with India – touching four Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and West Bengal – is also an open border, according to the terms of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949. There are also proper Bhutanese roads connecting the country to the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam.

The 4,351 km-long India-Bangladesh border runs through West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. There were three major rail links that existed between India and Bangladesh prior to September 1965, which were terminated when armed conflict between India and Pakistan broke out. Several road links between India and Bangladesh that existed prior to the independence of Bangladesh were also not resumed. These include three national highways connecting India with Bangladesh – National Highway 35 extends from Calcutta to Barisal and Bongaon in India to Dhaka; National Highway 40, meanwhile, connects Siliguri and Guwahati in India to Chittagong and Dhaka via Comilla in Bangladesh.

In addition, there are a number of state highways passing through Murshidabad, Balur Ghat and Haldibari that connect India with Bangladesh. Passenger services have been running on a trial basis between the two countries, commencing with the running of the Maitry (Friendship) Express on the 117km stretch between Sealdah and Bongobandhu East in Bangladesh. In 2007, passenger and freight services were also proposed between Sealdah/Kolkata terminal (Chitpore) to Joydebpur/Dhaka in Bangladesh, and again some trial runs have been made. The proposal is for a 10-coach daily train to run from Gede on the Indian side to Joydebpur across the border, and then on to Dhaka (approximately 330km).

Sri Lanka is the closest maritime neighbour of India, and in the current phase of good bilateral

relations, connectivity – physical, economic and people-to-people – is at an all time high, if not at its best. Air connectivity, between the two countries, based on the open-skies policy has been utilized to the maximum with more than 125 flights (out of which 102 are of Air Lanka) every week between the two countries. With Colombo's unilateral implementation of the visa-on-arrival facility for Indians, tourist arrivals from India are the highest in the country. Communication links between the two neighbours include direct digital microwave communication links and a submarine cable connecting Tiruchendur in southern Tamil Nadu and Colombo.

India has embarked on various sub-regional and regional programmes to link India's northeastern states with mainland Southeast Asia via both road and rail networks. Four Northeast Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland, account for India's 1,643 km-long land-border with Myanmar. In addition, to a maritime boundary of about 600 nautical miles with Myanmar, India also shares maritime boundaries with Thailand and Indonesia. The Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) islands form two tri-junctions of India-Myanmar-Thailand and India-Thailand-Indonesia, with Indira Point in the Nicobar Islands only 80 nautical miles from Aceh province of Indonesia.

At the bilateral level, India has developed the Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa road in Myanmar, which is connected with Moreh trading post in Manipur. India is also engaged in the Kaladan multimodal project, which will not only connect waterways in Mizoram and Myanmar but will also facilitate access of the northeastern states to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar's Sittwe. Also as part of the sub-regional Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI), a 1,360km-long India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway is being developed, which will connect Moreh with Mae Sot on Thailand's western border via Bagan, the ancient royal capital in central Myanmar. The project will be completed in three stages and the work has shown some progress. Again under the MGCI, India has embarked on an ambitious project of connecting Delhi with Vietnam's capital by rail.

India's initiatives to develop air-based connectivity with the ASEAN countries have occurred at two levels – bilateral and regional. India has entered into various liberalized air-services agreements with ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Under these agreements, the national air-carriers are allowed to undertake flight services

between select cities. India and Thailand also signed an air-services pact in 2006 under which the designated airlines of both countries operate an unlimited number of flights along certain air-routes. Thai Air has been operating flight services to and from Gaya, Guwahati and Varanasi. At the regional level, India has proposed an India-ASEAN open-skies regime which will facilitate greater air services between cities in India and the ASEAN region. However, this proposal is still at the formative stage and negotiations regarding its modalities are yet to begin.

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III THE CHALLENGES

Since 1947, India's connectivity with its neighbouring regions and countries, with few exceptions, has only declined. Over forty-five years after the conflict of 1962, India and China have still not shed their mistrust and continue to let little movement of either people or goods across their borders. The reopening of the Nathu La was a tentative first step in ensuring better connectivity between India and China, but it remains one that appears to be the subject of deliberate obstruction by central government agencies. Infrastructure development at Nathu La remains minimal more than a year after the opening of the pass and this does not bode well for other infrastructure projects on the anvil, such as the construction of roads along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in both the western and eastern sectors.

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developing an alternative framework for peace and security in the region

with respect to Pakistan, where despite the composite dialogue, improving physical connectivity between the two countries continues to be a slow process. Across the LoC, cross-border terrorism has been a major factor in India adopting a cautious policy in improving connectivity in Jammu, Rajouri, Poonch and Kashmir. In Ladakh, however, it is Pakistan which has adopted a go-slow approach, as evident in its reluctance to open the Kargil-Skardu road, fearing its implications for the Northern Areas.

The Indo-Bangladesh border has been highly porous and although some 50 per cent of the border areas are fenced and several thousand border troops are deployed on either side, illegal migration, cross-border terrorism and smuggling from Bangladeshi territory continues unabated. In the Indian state of Assam, these migrants affect state politics in a major way, having acquired a critical say in an estimated 50 of the state's 126 assembly constituencies. The influx of illegal immigrants in fact, suits certain local political parties who view them as potential vote-banks.

Illegal migration also occurs between India and Nepal. The exodus from Nepal into India was excessive during the period of conflict between government forces and the Maoists, but has come down drastically after the signing of the peace agreement. The Indian government introduced a system of identification cards for people who cross the border areas, but this has been far from effective. Dramatic changes in the political situation and the recent emergence of over a dozen armed groups in the Terai region of Nepal require special

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attention in order to avoid negative spillover into India. Both India and Nepal, and particularly, urban centers in the Nepalese Terai, have witnessed increased cross-border criminal activities in recent years. Further, Nepal has also

been used as a base for terrorist activity against India. In addition, there is a huge volume of illegal trade that is carried out between the two countries.

With Bhutan, besides difficulties of terrain, the presence of various Northeast Indian insurgent outfits in the country's southern jungles, has also affected physical connectivity projects with India. In this regard, following the Royal Bhutan Army's counter-insurgency operations against, these groups, the situation seems to have been mitigated somewhat, The Bhutanese government however, has to maintain constant vigil to ensure that such groups do not again set up camps in the country.

A promising land bridge between India and Sri Lanka cannot be realized as long as the ethnic conflict continues in the Island. The eruption of the ethnic war was also responsible for the suspension of ferry service between various ports of the two countries. As such there is need for constant patrolling over the waters between the two countries owing to the smuggling of essential commodities, such as fuel, and people between India and the strife-affected areas of Sri Lanka. There are also occasional clashes between both navies and between their navies and Sri Lankan rebel boats that make the waters unsafe for regular traffic.

Before India embarks on connecting its northeastern states with mainland Southeast Asia, these states need to be first connected properly with the rest of India by road and rail networks. The Delhi-Hanoi railway intended to facilitate greater movement of goods and people cannot be operationalized as long as India's border posts are themselves not connected with the Indian railway network. Cost overruns, delays in implementation and often plain inaction have affected several projects in this region. The Tamu-Kalewa Road, for example, was conceived in 1993 but was not completed until 2001. Similarly, though India has signed an agreement with the Philippines on establishing direct air-services between four cities in the two countries, Air India is yet to identify these four flight destinations.

Limited physical connectivity has meant that there has been little people-to-people contact in the South Asian region and between this region and other parts of Asia. Interactions have thus remained confined to the governmental and elite

levels. Consequently, the countries of the region continue to have an incomplete, often distorted, understanding of each other. One of the most important factors responsible for extremely limited connectivity between India and its neighbours has been the prevailing security-oriented mindset among Indian policymakers, which has turned the borders into an area of vigilance rather than of interaction and exchange. This complex of insecurity has always been at the forefront whether in the case of developing road and rail networks, easing visa regimes or liberalizing air-services.

IV THE ROADS AHEAD

If India and China truly want to be leaders regionally and globally, they will first need to understand each other better and interact more closely at the people-to-people level. This cannot be achieved if the two countries continue to stand and stare at each other across the Himalayan barrier, with arms crossed instead of walking together arm in arm. For a start, physical infrastructure at Nathu La itself needs to be improved and restrictions on the nature and number of goods that can be traded at the pass need to be removed. Further, a world-class highway between Nathu La and Kolkata, which would provide Tibet's shortest access to the sea, is necessary to take Sino-Indian economic ties to the next level. Such initiatives can also help achieve breakthroughs along other parts of the Sino-Indian border, notably between Ladakh and Tibet. Here, the opening of the Leh-Demchok-Kailash Manasarovar road would be a boon not just for pilgrims and tourists but also for the economy of the region. Further, illegal trade in this region must be regularized since it helps supply essentials on both sides of the border and cannot be stopped by any other measure.

With Pakistan, bus and train services across the international border need to be expanded in terms of frequency and the number people they cater to. Even if Pakistan is hesitant, India should take unilateral measures in allowing more Pakistanis to visit New Delhi and beyond. An increased inflow is automatically bound to increase the demand for more services from within Pakistan. The number of truck services should be increased further, and again, India should not wait for reciprocity. Such an expansion in terms of physical connectivity should not be focused only

across the well-defined Indo-Pak border, but also include the LoC in J&K. There is increasing demand to open the Jammu-Sialkot and Kargil-Skardu roads and also to open the LoC itself for trade. Given the political and emotional impact that opening the LoC will have for various sections inside J&K, India should adopt a proactive policy in improving physical connectivity with the other side.

Such a process should also have the long-term objective of reopening the Silk Route, thus connecting J&K with Tibet, Xinjiang and the rest of Central Asia. Northern India's link to Central Asia could help revitalize a whole host of towns and cities along the route – Srinagar, Leh, Kargil, Skardu and Gilgit, among others – that last saw prosperity several centuries ago.

India's borders with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan demand effective management to check illegal migration and cross-border insurgent or terrorist activity. However, it has also to be acknowledged that illegal migration is largely a result of economic factors and hence, India will need to pay greater attention to the economic conditions of its neighbours. It will need to be more generous in its terms of trade with these countries and offer to develop physical infrastructure within these countries that would help generate employment and economic returns within them, thus reducing economic migration. Since it cannot be denied that this migration takes place also because there is a market for labour from Nepal and Bangladesh, it is essential for India and the countries involved to ensure not just effective policing of the borders but to create a humane system for the movement of labour that would meet both political and economic requirements.

With China planning to extend the Qinghai-Tibet

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Railway into Nepal, India should view the development as an opportunity rather than as a threat and look to having the railway extended into its states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and thus provide all the economies thus linked additional opportunities. Similarly, improved road and rail links with Bangladesh are essential for the development of India's northeast – transit routes through the country would, for example, drastically reduce the cost of several essential commodities in the Northeast Indian states. Similarly, plans for transporting gas from Myanmar to Bangladesh and via Bangladesh to India, which have been hanging fire until now, form another potential cooperative venture of benefit to all concerned. In return, India could also allow road and rail links between China's southwest and Bangladesh via Myanmar and the Northeast.

Though there are no land routes with Sri Lanka, historical evidence indicates that Adam's Bridge was once in use between the two countries. Reviving this idea, a land-bridge linking Talaimannar and Dhanushkodi, the two nearest points in Sri Lanka and India respectively, is now being planned. Such a link would facilitate the effective movement of both passengers and cargo, resulting in increased economic opportunities for both countries. The land bridge would also offer tremendous scope for industrial linkages especially between southern India and Sri Lanka. Rail connections would provide competitive advantages in the case of high volume traffic and is something that is likely to be of immense benefit to Sri Lanka in terms of its industrial development. The land bridge could also connect Sri Lanka to India's Southern Region Electricity Grid with the Kudankulam nuclear power plant serving as a base load station. There are also hopes that under the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project, ferry services between the two countries can begin operating again. The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement has been extremely successful and a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) is currently under negotiation between New Delhi and Colombo. The success of CECA, however, will depend heavily on the quality of physical connectivity between the two neighbours.

Three steps need to be taken for better physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia. First, a trans-border bus service connecting Imphal in Manipur and Mandalay via the Moreh-Tamu

border post should be started along National Highway 39. Such an initiative will not only facilitate greater trade and movement of people but help in kick-starting India's grand plans for connecting northeastern states with mainland Southeast Asia. Moreover, all the projects should be approved or under construction should be implemented in time. Second, complementary services such as visas-on-arrival need to be provided to Southeast Asian tourists. The largest influx of Indian tourists in Southeast Asia have been recorded where they have enjoyed the visa-on-arrival facility. Finally, maritime connectivity via the Andaman and Nicobar islands should be developed. This will ensure mitigation of security threats emanating from the uninhabited islands of the A&N group, greater surveillance in the maritime region and the emergence of the A&N island group as an important tourist destination. Efforts should also be made to facilitate direct tourist entry to the islands rather than forcing them to take a circuitous route via New Delhi or Kolkata.

While it is certainly necessary to acknowledge that years of mistrust and suspicion are not easily forgotten, it is just as necessary for India and its neighbours to remind themselves that these years are but a small part of a much longer history of togetherness, coexistence and exchange. It is time therefore, to see if returning to traditional forms of interaction by renewing and revitalizing historical routes and using modern technologies to open new ones might not be a way to break out of the current security-driven framework of bilateral and multilateral interactions. At the very least, such moves should provide an additional push towards finding solutions for existing disputes, if not an entirely new framework for dispute resolution.

As home to one-fifth of humanity, it is imperative for South Asia to be at the forefront of innovation and change. This is essential not just for its economic development and the prosperity of its millions but also for peace and stability in the region. Improved physical connectivity is only the first step forward in this process.



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