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The Role of BIMSTEC in Revitalising India's Northeast

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Abstract

For India, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has an important role to play in leveraging the geostrategic location of the North East Region (NER) to stimulate cross-border integration. The NER is routinely seen as a potential springboard for India's 'Act East' policy, and for increased collaborations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, given the vast number of regional

connectivity projects and substantial investments in sectors like trade, tourism, technology and energy. This report examines the status of transport and communication connectivity between the NER and the BIMSTEC countries.

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Introduction

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC),¹ a subregional grouping of seven countries in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal, contains several opportunities and drivers of growth for development and cooperation. It is a “unique cross-regional grouping”² between South Asia and Southeast Asia, bringing together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand and their combined 1.6 billion people (or 21 percent of the global population), a total GDP of over US\$2.8 trillion, and an average economic growth rate of 6.5 percent.³ Since its inception in 1997, BIMSTEC has been positioned as a platform for regional solidarity, focusing on joint action through a common institutional framework with interconnected opportunities and challenges.⁴ For India, it is a platform to leverage economic and political developments through its ‘Act East’

policy with increased interconnections with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) through priority areas like connectivity for a conducive, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous Bay of Bengal region. With India becoming the third dialogue partner of ASEAN to inaugurate an ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee-India Meeting in 2013, the BIMSTEC can function as a liaison organisation in actualising these projects as there are common members in both groupings (i.e., Myanmar and Thailand).⁵ Two crucial developments on this front are the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (potentially extendable to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) and the Kaladan Multimodal Project.

India has already announced a US\$1-billion line of credit to promote projects such as these to connect the country physically and digitally to the ASEAN region, and a Project Development Fund with a US\$5000-million corpus to create manufacturing hubs in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.⁶

The geographic location of the Northeast has allowed India to put its Act East policy into action by leveraging the BIMSTEC platform and strengthening the country's position in the region. In December 2020, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla highlighted the Northeast as a “gateway” between the two pillars of Indian foreign policy—‘Neighbourhood First’ and ‘Act East’.⁷

The Northeast borders four BIMSTEC countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar), making it a key cog in regional cooperation. It is home to about 3.8 percent of the Indian population, covers 8 percent of the country's geographic area, and has approximately 5,300 km of international borders.⁸ India has been viewing this area from the perspective of increasing investments through transnational connectivity, particularly with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand.⁹ The Northeast presents a trillion-dollar economic opportunity that can be enhanced with better transportation, border infrastructure, e-commerce integration, and modernised cross-border supply chains—all of which are still unrealised.¹⁰ If this

potential is tapped, “Indian policymakers expect that the country's exports will pick up, that more investments will flow in, and that regional integration will serve as a positive springboard for greater global economic interdependence.”¹¹ This will bring development to the northeastern states and internationalise India's hinterland economy through maritime and cross-border hubs on the eastern coast with Bangladesh and Myanmar. “India's support for the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) East Coast Economic Corridor and its multimodal regional corridor from Kolkata to Kanyakumari reflects the domestic dimension of this new Bay of Bengal strategy.”¹² While the Northeast has historically remained ‘marginalised’ due to local insurgencies, the new connectivity projects will eliminate the region's ‘remoteness’ by linking it to the centre (New Delhi) through West Bengal, with Kolkata as liaison city.¹³

This report studies the connection of India's Northeast to the wider BIMSTEC region and answers three questions: How can BIMSTEC augment the Northeast to strengthen India's role in Southeast Asia? How have existing connectivity projects fared? Are there any bottlenecks in the process of achieving a comprehensive development connectivity plan in the region?

India's Northeast and Subregional Connectivity

Connectivity remains a key priority area for BIMSTEC to accelerate long-term economic growth and development in the member countries. India is the lead country for this sector, focusing on the various forms of connectivity—trade, transport, digital, and people-to-people.¹⁴ The first meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Transport and Communication was held in April 2001 in New Delhi to discuss “Transportation and Cross-border Facilitation, Multimodal Transport and Logistics, Infrastructure Development, Aviation, Maritime Transport, Human Resource Development, as well as Communication Linkages and Networking.”¹⁵ Since then, a series of negotiations and meetings have taken place, including a study with the ADB to identify 167 projects (of which 66 are priority); the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicles Agreement for the regulation of passenger and cargo vehicular traffic (drafted by India in 2018) and the Coastal Shipping Agreement (drafted by India in 2017);

the establishment of the BIMSTEC Transport and Connectivity Working Group; and provisions to provide high-speed internet connectivity and mobile connection at affordable rates across the subregion.¹⁶

Various multilateral connectivity projects through the Northeast are already underway (see Table 1), such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project;¹⁷ the road from Dawki-Tamabil along India-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya that connects all continental ASEAN countries;¹⁸ and the construction of the 1.8-km-long Feni bridge connecting India and Bangladesh for the transport of goods from the Chittagong and Kolkata ports.¹⁹

At the April 2021 BIMSTEC foreign ministers’ meeting, Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar alluded to the need for a “paradigm shift,” along the lines of a legal framework, to raise the intensity of cooperation and regional integration,²⁰ which will help India grow to a US\$5-trillion economy.

When finalised, the master plan will link BIMSTEC with ASEAN, making Northeast a “logistical linchpin”.²¹

Tripura is an important part of the Northeast developmental drive. Its Sabroom town will soon be connected to Bangladesh through the Agartala-Akhaura railroad and the inland waterways port at Sipahijala district.²² As part of the inland waterways project, floating jetties over the Gomati River in Sonamur, Tripura, will be connected to the Yamuna River in Daudakandi, Bangladesh. It will also connect to the Haldia port in West Bengal and Varanasi, covering 1,400 km, creating a connectivity route for the movement of people and goods.²³

India has also linked its SAGARMALA (port-led development) concept with transnational maritime security in the Northeast for trade, tourism and people-to-people connectivity.²⁴ The India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transport and Trade is a case in point.²⁵ In October 2018, the two countries signed several agreements, such as the extension of protocol routes and standard operating procedures for the movement of cruise vessels on inland waterway routes and coastal shipping.²⁶ India has also been aiming to develop alternative multimodal transportation from its east

coast ports to the Northeast through Myanmar by using the latter’s inland waterways and roads to reduce its dependence on the Siliguri Corridor and further its Act East policy. In other words, the Northeast is being developed for India’s reintegration with Southeast Asia via BIMSTEC.²⁷

The Indian government has also emphasised on science and technology interventions in the Northeast, conceptualised and funded by the Ministry of Development of North East Region.²⁸ Additionally, the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 document outlines an “overarching framework” for development, identifying infrastructure and connectivity as “thrust areas”.²⁹

“Connectivity—trade, transport, digital, and people-to-people—is BIMSTEC’s priority; the aim is to facilitate long-term economic growth and development in member countries.”

Table 1:
Connectivity Projects in Northeast India

	Projects	Year of Inception	Funding (in US\$)	Status
1.	Bharatmala Pariyojana Project: 3246 km in Phase I (Approved for Northeast Region economic corridors)	2017	5,350,000 million	To be completed by 2022
2.	India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway: 1360 km long	2005	1,883.19 million	Under construction
3.	The Feni Bridge, connecting India and Bangladesh	2015	1,290 million	Operational
4.	Agartala-Akhaura Railroad: 15.04 km rail project	1996	9.68 billion	To be completed in 2021
5.	Delhi-Ha Noi Railway Link (Jiribam-Imphal-Moreh line)	2003	649 million	Operational
6.	Haldibari (West Bengal, India)- Chilahati (Bangladesh) Rail Link	Functional before 1965, revived since 2017	877.2 million	Operational since 2020
7.	Karimganj) Assam, India)- Silhet(Bangladesh) Rail Link			Under consideration

Source: Authors' own, using various government and non-governmental sources

On similar lines, India is also attempting to improve air connectivity in the Northeast. Approvals were given in 2019 to set up a new greenfield airport at Holongi in Arunachal Pradesh's Itanagar. Greenfield airports are also being considered in Ciethu and Kohima in Nagaland, and Tura in Meghalaya. These projects will form part of the BIMSTEC connectivity master plan.³⁰

Despite several projects already being underway or operational, there exist many bottlenecks that may slow down the progress of these and future projects.

Persistent Challenges

The successful implementation of the Act East policy depends on India's ability to balance the regional sociopolitical factors alongside establishing land, sea and air connectivity with the BIMSTEC and ASEAN countries. Stability in the Northeast will be difficult to achieve without the regional neighbours being made stakeholders.

The BIMSTEC region is currently under strain, with two countries, Myanmar and Thailand, engulfed in political turmoil. The Myanmar coup in February 2021 has hit the country's economy and impacted the region at large, and has put many projects crucial to the development of India's Northeast region at risk. A significant part of India's Kaladan multimodal project, for example, passes through Myanmar's Rakhine state. The concern is centred on the 110-km road in Myanmar, which

has already suffered a series of hurdles, including difficulty in land acquisition, the bankruptcy of a company involved in its development, and delays in construction due to clashes between the insurgent group Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw (the state armed forces).³¹ Several Indian workers have also reportedly been abducted by the AA while engaged in the Paletwa-Zorinpuri road construction.³² The coup has also impacted several infrastructure projects. Myanmar's economy is under strain as nationwide protests continue, banks and other financial institutions remain shut, international investments have been withdrawn as a form of protest against the military government,³³ and foreign aid from countries like Japan have been halted.³⁴

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway—crucial to the development of the Northeast as a gateway to ASEAN—is also under a cloud of uncertainty. India has reportedly offered to extend the highway to other countries, such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.³⁵ In December 2020, Bangladesh indicated an interest in joining the project.³⁶ India is involved in two sections of the 1360-km project—improving the 120km Kalewa-Yagyi road section to highway standard; and upgrading 69 bridges and approach roads on the 150-km-long Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road section.³⁷ The Indian government also plans to construct a road from Zokhawthar in Mizoram to Tedim in Myanmar’s Chin State to serve as an additional point of crossing from India to the trilateral highway in Myanmar. But the coup has halted these plans, with numerous reports of violence and deaths in the western Chin State.³⁸ The violence is unlikely to abate soon as civilian protests persist, insurgency groups rise, and the Myanmar army maintains its stance.³⁹

India’s Northeast was considered a ‘red zone’, with about 30 armed insurgent organisations with linkages and strategic alliances with similar groups in the neighbouring countries complicating the security situation in the region⁴⁰ and slowing development work. However, India and its neighbours have enacted policy to clamp down on insurgent groups. For instance, in 2003, Bhutan

launched Operation All Clear to dismantle camps of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Boroland, and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, which resulted in the killing or arrest of about 650 people.⁴¹ Similarly, in 2009, Bangladesh also shut down camps located in its territory and arrested several top insurgent leaders.⁴² Myanmar has made efforts to curtail Indian groups on its soil, including the coordinated military operations with the Indian Army in 2019 (Operation Sunrise)⁴³ and the handover to India of 22 insurgents in 2020.⁴⁴ The coup in Myanmar could lead to the revival of tie-ups within the insurgent groups.⁴⁵ Several militant organisations from the Northeast are in search of safe havens to survive and regroup.⁴⁶ At the same time, ethnic rebel groups in Myanmar are looking for revenues to recruit and support anti-coup protestors and fund offensives to deter the Tatmadaw.⁴⁷ Most of these organisations have had a long history of training, cooperating, accommodating and selling arms to Indian insurgents. The Kachin Independent Army (KIA), for instance, has trained and sheltered several Manipuri and ULFA rebels.⁴⁸

“Insurgencies, illegal migration, and drug and human trafficking continue to plague India’s Northeast and the wider BIMSTEC region, impacting the progress of connectivity projects.”

The Chin organisations and KIA and United Wa State Army of Myanmar also act as middlemen and arms suppliers for several insurgent groups in India’s Northeast.⁴⁹ Given such ties, these organisations could easily supplement each other’s needs. Insurgents in the Northeast can raise funds for groups in Myanmar through extortion money or provide new arms and drug trafficking routes in return for being sheltered and carrying out operations against India.⁵⁰

Intensified armed protests against the coup will leave the Tatmadaw preoccupied and give the insurgents a situation to exploit. Such developments can also jeopardise the progress of the infrastructural work in the subregion.⁵¹

The Northeast and wider BIMSTEC region also face issues like illegal migration, and drug and human trafficking. Drug production and trafficking are rampant in the Golden Triangle region.^a Northeast India is also along the heroin trafficking route, with many labs located near the Indo-Myanmar border.⁵² In 2020, methamphetamine and Yaba tablets worth over US\$5 million were recovered from the Northeast.⁵³ The Golden Triangle region is estimated to have generated over US\$70 billion in profits in 2019,⁵⁴ with much of this capital often used as seed money to buy weapons for the ethnic armed groups in the border areas of Myanmar and Thailand, fueling conflict and insecurity in the region.⁵⁵ The pandemic-induced weak economies, rampant poverty and constant ethnic discord have also led to a rise in human trafficking in the area.⁵⁶

a A vast mountainous region located at the confluence of the Ruak River and the Mekong River at the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, which is among the world’s major opium cultivation and heroin producing areas.

Towards a Development-Focused Approach

Resolving these and other regional sensitivities can only happen through an approach focused on creating institutions to plan and implement developmental projects to minimise or eliminate political and social issues;⁵⁷ Japan's involvement can serve as a template. Japan has been involved in various capacities in the BIMSTEC nations. The Northeast has emerged as a convergence between India's Act East policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.⁵⁸ Japan and India are collaborating in countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar to promote infrastructural linkages and development.⁵⁹ Japan's development work in the Northeast is also expected to boost connectivity between the BIMSTEC member states.

Japan is funding the North East Road Connectivity Improvement project^b through the Japan International Cooperation Agency, which aims to ensure infrastructural developments in the Northeast boost connectivity with countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar. The bridge between Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya is a significant development on this front; it aims to improve regional connectivity by connecting Bangladesh with Bhutan through Dalu (in Meghalaya on the India-Bangladesh border) and Hatisar (in Assam on the India-Bhutan border) via Tura and Phulbari in Meghalaya, and Dhubri, Srirampur and Samthaibari in Assam.⁶⁰

^b Phase-I has covered improvements of National Highway (NH)-51 and NH-54 in Mizoram and Meghalaya, respectively. Phase-II helped in the improvement of and laying bypasses along NH-40 in Meghalaya and constructing bypasses for NH-54 in Mizoram. Phase-III supported the construction of a 20 km four-lane bridge between Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya.

Overall, the North East Road Connectivity project has helped in the upgrade of transit infrastructure, thereby improving regional development in the Northeast. In 2020, Japan provided an official development assistance loan of about US\$13.2 million for Phase-IV of the project,^c continuing to promote socio-economic development in the region.⁶¹

At the same time, India has also become a member of the India-Japan Act East Forum, which primarily oversees projects targeting the economic modernisation of the Northeast. These include the national highways of Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura; biodiversity and forest management in Sikkim, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya; and water supply and sanitation in Assam.⁶²

An urgent need is capacity building in terms of skill development, skill enhancement, and improving staff knowledge and competencies.⁶³ The involvement of local stakeholders is essential to this process and will result in the inclusive development of the region, thereby creating job opportunities and economic growth. While the

central government is focusing on these aspects,⁶⁴ a consolidated approach considering the views of locals will bring about holistic development.⁶⁵ Moreover, to strengthen internal connectivity in the Northeast, locals must be made aware of the benefits of greater economic engagement with the larger BIMSTEC and Southeast Asia regions.

“Establishing institutions to plan and implement development projects that will address political and social issues can revitalise the Northeast and neighbouring BIMSTEC countries.”

c Phase-IV includes the improvement of NH-208 connecting Kailashahar and Khowai section in Tripura State.

Conclusion

Although the development of the Northeast has garnered some political attention, there is still no comprehensive policy for such initiatives in the region. This could be due to two reasons. First, the region is often treated as a gateway to engagement with BIMSTEC and ASEAN and not as an intrinsic part of India's regional development framework.⁶⁶ Second, given the central government's focus on strategic and security considerations due to the prevailing vulnerabilities in the region, the developmental aspect through infrastructural connectivity and the market has been largely ignored.⁶⁷


The integration of physical connectivity through the "rationalization and harmonization of various collaborative policies across the neighbours, rules and laws within the region" will facilitate complementarities between the Northeast and India's neighbours and serve as lever for a shift.⁶⁸

BIMSTEC can play an instrumental role in promoting and preparing the Northeast to unleash its potential by hosting various connectivity projects for subregional development. This effort must begin by developing the Northeast through the following ways:

- Integrating the Northeast with the rest of India through stronger infrastructure linkages will build a robust cross-border production chain network, particularly with Southeast Asia and Bangladesh.
- Reestablishing ties with the Indian diaspora in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand is important to engage them in cross-border investments for cultural collaborations or even greater people-to-people contact.
- Economic collaboration and investment programmes with the neighbouring countries through industrial parks (such as those being developed by the ADB in Assam).⁶⁹

- Special economic zones can also be set up for specific projects like timber and food processing in the eight Northeast states. Smart cities can also be established.
- The Northeast states must expedite the completion of ongoing rail, road, inland water transport and aviation projects, and improve border infrastructure with adequate storage facilities.
- The states must focus on capacity building to complete projects on time.
- The signing of the Convention on International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) will facilitate seamless trade and transportation in the region. India has ratified the TIR Convention, while Bangladesh and Myanmar are yet to do so. India may play a constructive role to encourage the two nations to ratify it soon.
- A Northeast Trade Portal can be set up to enhance trade connectivity and economic growth in the region. The involvement of development banks such as the ADB and high-income countries like Japan will be key for the development of connectivity in Northeast India.
- There is scope for infrastructural development in the banking sector and micro, small and medium enterprises in the Northeast. Local entrepreneurs should be assisted with financial and administrative support so that improved infrastructure can be utilised for the economic growth of local areas.
- Greater focus is needed to enhance the connectivity of inland waterways and river routes in the Northeast, like the Sagar project in West Bengal. Multimodal connectivity in this regard is essential for greater linkages.
- The Northeast is culturally rich and is a biodiversity hotspot. It has huge potential to attract tourists from BIMSTEC countries, and here, the adoption of a connectivity master plan is crucial. To facilitate greater tourism, policymakers must prioritise the easing of visa requirements and consider implementing visa-free travel or visa-on-arrival schemes for certain destinations.

“BIMSTEC can host connectivity projects for subregional development; this effort must begin by first developing the Northeast.”

Once the Northeast achieves stability and meets its development goals, a symbiotic relationship can be created between the region and BIMSTEC through connectivity projects. This will be dependent on the ability not only of the governments and policymakers, but also of the people of the Northeast, to visualise and actualise the potential of such multilateral engagements. 

Authors' Note

This report is drawn from the points raised by the speakers at ORF's International Webinar on *Exploring Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal Region: Importance of India Northeast*. The report encapsulates the discussion conducted on the first day of the webinar on 5 March 2021 at 3 p.m. that covered the topic of **Proximity to Connectivity: Importance of India's Northeast in BIMSTEC**. The session was chaired by Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Senior Fellow, ORF Kolkata, and had the following speakers:

- Ambassador Pinak Ranjan Chakrabarty, Visiting Fellow, Regional Studies Initiative, ORF
- Mrinal Talukdar, Senior Journalist, Guwahati, Assam
- Dr. Rupakjyoti Borah, Professor and Dean at the School of Social Sciences, Kaziranga University, Assam
- Dr. Vijaylakshmi Brara, Associate Professor, Center for Manipur Studies, Manipur University
- Dr. Pahi Saikia, Associate Professor for Political Science, IIT Guwahati, Assam

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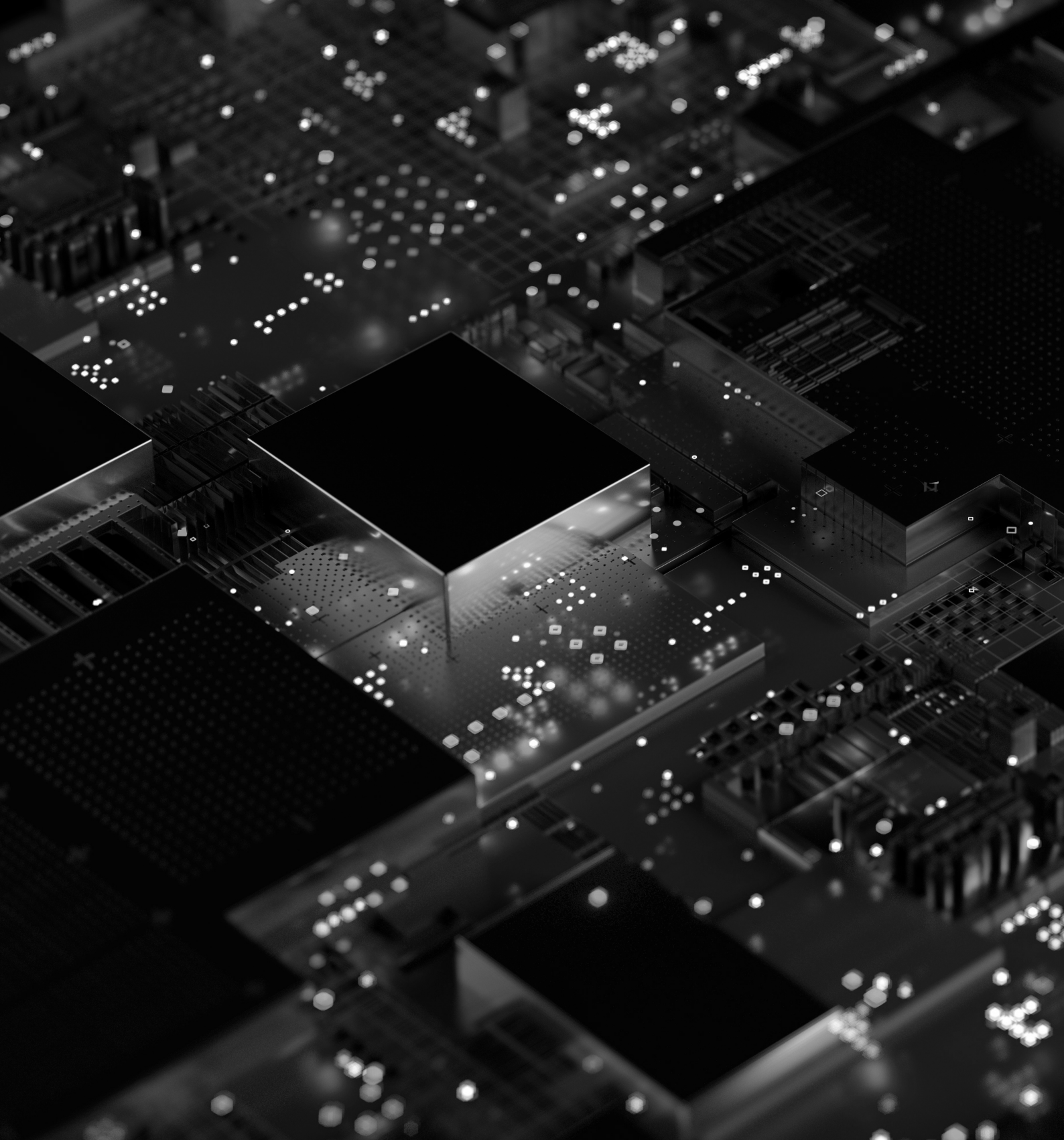
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