

## The Road to Mekong<sup>1</sup>: the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project

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**ABSTRACT** As India places the Mekong sub-region among its priorities under the country's 'Act East' policy, the ongoing India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project—currently the only land connectivity project between India and the Mekong countries and the wider Southeast Asian region—could prove to be a game changer. It is imperative to explore ways to ensure early completion of this strategic communication link. This paper focuses on the project's procedural, financial and bureaucratic aspects and provides recommendations to ensure its effective and timely implementation.

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian government is giving a renewed push to road connectivity with Southeast Asia. On 13 November 2016, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT Highway) Friendship Car Rally was flagged off in Delhi by Mansukh Lal Mandaviya, Indian Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways, Shipping and Chemicals and Fertilizers. According to the government, the objective of the rally was to sensitise stakeholders to the potential benefits of a motor vehicles agreement (MVA) between the three countries.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier, on 8 September 2016 at the 14th India-ASEAN Summit held in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had stressed the need for further strengthening Delhi's ties with the regional bloc ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Emphasising the significance of overall connectivity and physical connectivity in particular, as the first step to enhancing people-to-people contacts, Modi proposed the setting up of a Joint Task Force on connectivity to work on extending the IMT highway even further to

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Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Just a month before that, during the visit of President Htin Kyaw of Myanmar to India in August 2016, two MoUs were signed for the construction and upgrade of bridges and approach roads in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section and the Kalewa-Yargyi section of the IMT highway in Myanmar.<sup>4</sup>

Delhi's renewed diplomatic focus on the Mekong sub-region comes at a time when the region is seeing increased geopolitical competition among major powers, including China, the US, India and Japan, as their interests overlap and intersect in this sub-region.<sup>5</sup> As Delhi gives a further diplomatic push to strengthening ties with the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) and Thailand under the Modi government's 'Act East' policy, the IMT highway project could be a game changer for India-Mekong ties and the wider Southeast Asia. As India and ASEAN take the proposed joint task force forward, the need to complete the original stretch of the project from India to Thailand via Myanmar has become even more urgent. This paper examines the significance and current status of the IMT highway, focusing on its procedural, financial and bureaucratic aspects. It provides specific recommendations to ensure effective and timely implementation of the project—currently the only land connectivity project underway between India and the Mekong countries and to the wider Southeast Asia region.

## **STRATEGIC SALIENCE OF THE MEKONG SUB-REGION**

The Mekong sub-region, or what the Indian government calls the CLMV countries, forms a major part of mainland Southeast Asia and connects the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea, by land. For India, the strategic salience of the sub-region lies in the fact that it shares long

land and maritime boundaries with one of the CLMV countries, Myanmar, in the Bay of Bengal, and its important strategic partner Vietnam has maritime territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea—through which about 50 percent of India's trade passes. The direct impact of China's rise has been playing out in the CLMV countries in recent years, with China emerging as either the largest, or a major, trading and investment partner of all the CLMV countries. As China's wealth spreads to its immediate peripheries, poorer and smaller nations in the Mekong sub-region are being drawn towards the Chinese economy. On the strategic front, Beijing has been taking advantage of the geostrategic location of the CLMV countries to reach the Indian Ocean and to tie their economies with its bigger and stronger economy by building rail and road networks and laying energy pipelines.

China also plans to connect its southwest Yunnan provincial capital of Kunming with the Southeast Asian nations with new high- and medium-speed rail services. In November 2016, Laos signed a railway deal to connect its capital, Vientiane with Kunming.<sup>6</sup> The line is expected to be completed by 2020 with work on the Chinese side already underway since last December. Another rail line will run from Kunming to Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, China built oil and gas pipelines running from the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan through Myanmar<sup>8</sup> and also plans to build rail tracks and roads along the pipelines.<sup>9</sup> Along with these rail lines or what China calls the “pan-Asian Railway Network”, these corridors will be part of the China-proposed One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative and will form the “Indochina Peninsula Corridor”, one of the six trans-regional economic corridors of the OBOR. Importantly, all the CLMV countries have given official assent to the initiative, giving it varying

degrees of support. Laos and Cambodia have been “most supportive” of the OBOR.<sup>10</sup> During her visit to China in July 2016, Myanmar's state counsellor and foreign minister Aung San Suu Kyi “welcomed” the OBOR initiative.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its official statement going along with the OBOR, Vietnam has been the “least supportive”.<sup>12</sup> As China creates more corridors with and through the CLMV countries, its political and economic clout in this sub-region is going to grow further. The emerging China-initiated corridors have the potential of further tying the strategic interests of the Mekong nations to those of China.

## PIVOT TO THE MEKONG SUB-REGION

With his visit to Laos to participate in the India-ASEAN summit, Prime Minister Modi has travelled to all the CLMV countries except Cambodia. In November 2014, Modi visited Myanmar to participate in the India-ASEAN Summit, during which he unveiled India's 'Act East' policy.<sup>13</sup> Since coming to power, PM Modi's government has been giving a renewed push to strengthening ties with CLMV nations. Recognising the rapidly changing regional dynamics and the need for India to step up its role and presence, the Modi administration has prioritised Delhi's engagement with the leaders of the CLMV nations. Modi has already hosted leaders from two CLMV nations—Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited India in October 2014,<sup>14</sup> and President Htin Kyaw of Myanmar visited Delhi in August 2016 and held bilateral discussion with the Indian leadership.<sup>15</sup> Two months later, Aung San Suu Kyi visited India to attend the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa and also held talks with Prime Minister Modi on key bilateral and regional issues.<sup>16</sup> During his visit to Hanoi in September 2016, Modi and his Vietnamese counterpart

decided to further expand and deepen their countries' strategic partnership.<sup>17</sup> During these high-level visits, several important bilateral MoUs and agreements were reached on a range of areas including defence, trade, and connectivity.

An important element of the Act East policy is using cultural diplomacy to further India's interests. Buddhism is the predominant religion of all the CLMV countries and Modi has been tapping the rich Buddhist connection between India and the CLMV nations. Like most of the leaders from the CLMV nations, President Kyaw of Myanmar and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen visited the most revered place for the followers of Buddhism—Bodh Gaya in Bihar—during their India visits.

Importantly, in August 2016, the Modi Cabinet cleared a proposal to create a \$75-million project development fund (PDF) to increase India's economic presence in CLMV countries.<sup>18</sup> This fund is aimed at driving Indian investment in the Mekong sub-region. The Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of India has begun working with the Ministry of Commerce to set up the PDF. Earlier, in November 2015 at the India-ASEAN Summit, Modi announced a new \$1-billion fund to boost physical and digital connectivity between India and the ASEAN nations.<sup>19</sup> To utilise this line of credit (LOC), India has shared proposals with ASEAN on digital connectivity involving a regional high-capacity fibre optic network, supplemented by a national rural broadband network and digital villages in remote areas. During the 14th ASEAN-India Summit in Vientiane, PM Modi asked ASEAN members to avail the LOC in implementing these projects.<sup>20</sup>

Bilateral trade between India and the CLMV nations has grown from \$0.46 billion in 2000 to

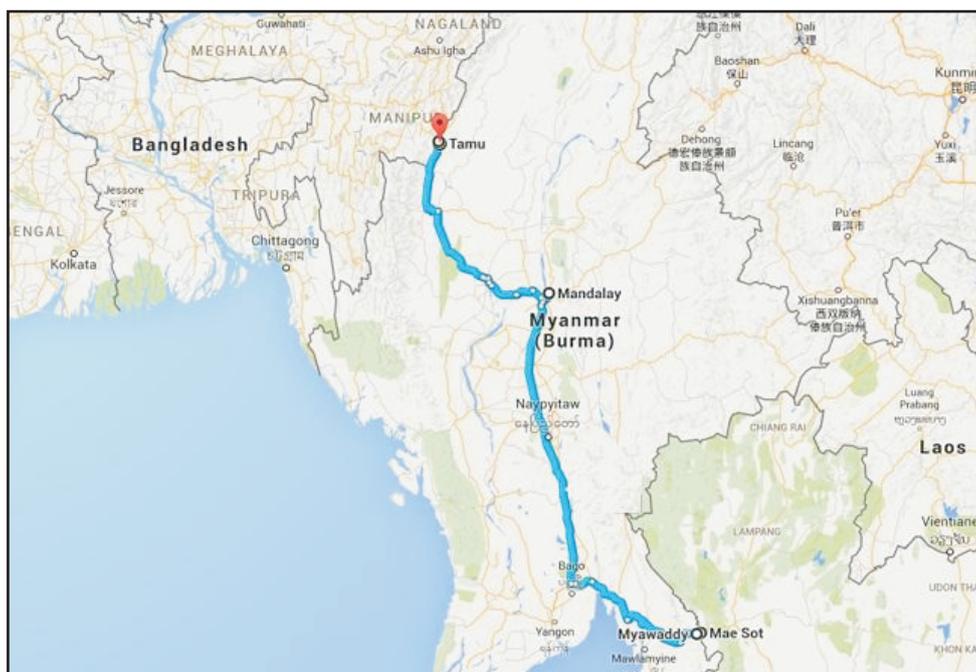
over \$10 billion in 2015-16, showing annual growth of 24 percent.<sup>21</sup> Recognising the trade potential, an India-CLMV business conclave was established in 2013 to create and provide a platform for decisionmakers and industry leaders to meet and identify opportunities for collaboration. The third conclave was held in January 2016, where Indian Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stressed the need for better connectivity and enhanced economic integration with regional value chains. The minister cited a Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) study and pointed out that there was a potential of about \$100 billion of additional exports to the CLMV countries.<sup>22</sup> As Delhi strengthens its connectivity with the Mekong sub-region, the land route needs to be given priority, as land connectivity, unlike air and sea, is more enduring, and once built becomes a permanent asset with much wider development impact along the corridor. It is in this context that the trilateral highway project needs to meet its 2020 deadline of completion.

## THE TRILATERAL HIGHWAY PROJECT: CURRENT STATUS

As Delhi reaches out further to the Mekong sub-region and the wider Southeast Asia, it is imperative to ensure better physical connectivity. The ongoing India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project provides an opportunity for Delhi to leverage it to achieve some of its goals. This, however, will be possible by exploring new ways of implementing the project. The idea of a trilateral highway from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar was conceived at the Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on Transport Linkages in Yangon in April 2002.<sup>23</sup> The 1,360-km IMT highway was initially scheduled to be completed by 2015. According to an official from India's MEA, the completion of the project is now expected by 2020.<sup>24</sup>

The IMT highway starts from Moreh in Manipur on the India-Myanmar border and runs via Tamu (Myanmar) to Mae-Sot in

**Map: India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Route**



Source: <http://www.knowmadicnews.com/2015/09/04/thailand-myanmar-india-road-trip/>

Thailand. The project will require about 78 km of new roads and the upgrading of existing 400 km of roads. In Phase 1, India has the responsibility of building 78 km of missing links, upgrading 58 km of existing roads, and possibly improving a further 132 km. Thailand has taken on the responsibility of upgrading a total of 192 km in this phase and another 100 km under Phase 2.

The India-Myanmar Friendship Road, built with Indian government assistance, running from the border at Tamu/Moreh to Kalemyo and Kalewa, was inaugurated in 2001. This road, which also forms the first segment of the IMT Highway, was resurfaced and handed over to the Myanmar government in 2009.<sup>25</sup> Though the road has helped movement between Tamu and Kalewa in Myanmar's Sagiang region bordering India, traffic remains low because of poor road conditions from Kalewa to Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city. In 2012, during then PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar, India agreed to undertake the task of repair/ and upgrade of 71 bridges along this Friendship Road.<sup>26</sup> (Myanmar had taken up the responsibility of fixing these bridges in 2001 but could not deliver.) India also agreed to extend assistance to upgrade the 120-km Kalewa-Yargyi road segment to the standard of highways, while Myanmar took on the responsibility of building the 65-km Yargyi-Monywa segment at the same 'highway standard'. In 2012, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Joint Task Force on Trilateral Connectivity was revived and a meeting was held in Delhi on 10-11 September to review the status of the project and discuss future steps.<sup>27</sup> From Monywa, a 136-km two-lane highway to Mandalay already exists.

From Mandalay, the IMT route will be as follows: Mandalay-Meiktila Bypass-Nay Pyi

Taw-Phayagyi-Thaton-Hpa-An-Karaweik Myawaddy/Mae Sot. The road from Mandalay to Hpa-An has already been developed. In August 2015, the Karaweik-Myawaddy road, whose construction began in 2012, was opened.<sup>28</sup> The prolonged ethnic conflicts in Myanmar in this region have affected smooth implementation of the project. The trust deficit between the centre at Nay Pyi Taw and the peripheries has also created problems. Local rights groups, for instance, have alleged forced displacement and unfair compensation<sup>29</sup> during the upgrading of the 66-km Karaweik to Eindu road in Kayin state of Myanmar, for which the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a \$100-million loan as part of the Greater Mekong Sub-region East-West Corridor.<sup>30</sup>

A project that has been in the pipeline since 2003 is a bus service between Imphal and Mandalay. India and Myanmar finally agreed to launch service, covering a distance of 579 km, in 2012. A trial run of the bus was held on 9 December 2015 but the service is yet to be introduced. Infrastructural inadequacies in Myanmar, particularly bad road conditions, as well as lack of proper immigration and Customs points at the border are cited as key hurdles. India, Myanmar and Thailand have been negotiating an MVA for seamless movement of both passenger and cargo vehicles among these three countries. Once this is signed, the Imphal-Mandalay bus service is expected to become operational.

As pointed out earlier, the strategic significance of this highway cannot be overemphasised in the context of the growing cross-border transportation links that China has been building to connect with the Mekong countries. It is therefore imperative to look at this project in totality with an innovative and practical approach for timely completion and

smooth running of this strategic communication link.

On the Indian side, the project is being implemented by the MEA with the cooperation of its counterparts in Myanmar and Thailand and budgetary allocation from the Ministry of Finance. The road stretches requiring construction, upgradation or rehabilitation have been identified and assigned to the respective countries. Land availability for project construction (Right of Way or ROW) is assured and reportedly free of all encumbrances. Environmental and forest clearances are not an issue. There are no reports of any conflict or delay due to any railway/ highway crossing. Labour, construction materials and a conducive working environment are apparently available. It is important to note that the issues mentioned above are the major obstacles that prevent timely completion of highway projects in India. Further, the total quantum of work remaining on the IMT highway – i.e., bridges, cross drainage, pavement construction and appurtenances – are similar to those at any average highway project in India. There are no visible complexities as far as actual construction is concerned. What then is the cause of delay?

The processes of identifying the detailed scope of engineering work, preparation of project reports, EPC (Engineering, Procurement, Construction) bidding and execution management are being undertaken by the MEA under procedures laid down by the government, including systems of checks and balances. Such a price discovery process entails selection of the lowest bidder by the MEA, while financial control is exercised by the Ministry of Finance. To expedite the price discovery process for this strategic project, Ircon Infrastructure & Services Ltd.,<sup>31</sup> a wholly owned subsidiary of Ircon International Ltd. which operates under the Ministry of Railways,<sup>32</sup> has been

incorporated as 'Authority Engineer'.<sup>33</sup> While it brings the much needed technical capacity to aid procurement of a contractor by the MEA, it is susceptible to the bureaucratic delays common with government-owned companies in India. The 'Request for Proposal' (RFP) for construction of 69 Bridges including approach roads on the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road section is in the process of finalisation. It is one of the critical parts of the completion of this highway. The notice inviting tenders was first published on 19 April 2016<sup>34</sup> and the EPC contractor is yet to be finalised. In the corporate domain, this process usually takes less than three months. Actual construction work can only start after mobilisation (which usually takes 30-45 days). Therefore, even after the contractor is finalised, the actual construction will start sometime later this year. With 36 months allotted for construction of the bridges it appears unlikely that the project will be ready for full operation by end of 2020 as currently projected. Changes of government in participating countries impact international projects adversely, as decisionmaking is stalled during the transition period. In the present case, decisionmaking involves three participating governments and two ministries in India. Within the MEA, the existing infrastructure project delivery mechanism suffers from sub-optimal project specific capacity of officials dealing with such strategic projects. It is evident that the complexity of decisionmaking and the project delivery mechanism can be suitably addressed if the decisionmaking loops are re-engineered, incorporating best practices followed within India and worldwide. In this context, it is worthwhile to examine how China is able to deliver large infrastructure projects and if other options exist.

China has embarked on its 'One Belt One Road' dream which has more than 300 huge

projects<sup>35</sup> in various parts of Europe, Asia and Africa. To realise such gigantic infrastructure initiative, Chinese President Xi Jinping has set up an informal high-level body linking government, the party, and financial institutions. It is headed by Zhang Gaoli, a senior party official, and carries enough weight to seamlessly coordinate all components of bureaucracy, state-owned enterprises and other stakeholders. Almost \$82 billion has been provided to 'Policy Banks', i.e., government-owned banks to support the push for OBOR. India, for its part, has had a 'Development Administration Partnership (DPA)'<sup>36</sup> organisation within MEA since 2012. It is mandated to handle India's aid projects through the stages of concept, launch, execution and completion. While it has had its successes, it is also limited in many ways, and as a result, a substantial number of India's Line of Credit projects are moving at a sub-optimal pace. Indian DPA appears more bureaucratic and short on financial muscle; there is a lack of an effective team to deliver the projects of strategic importance.

The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) of India has been mandate to build and maintain roads on the frontiers and they have had many success stories, among them, the construction of roads in Bhutan. The BRO had completed the construction of the Tamu to Kalemtyo-Kalewa road (160 km) in 2001 and maintained it until 2009 before handing it over to the Myanmar government.<sup>37</sup> They have their strategic priorities and their organisational deficiencies prevent them from being deployed for such major project in Myanmar.

There are many examples in India where major projects have been taken up from the concept stage and delivered on schedule. It is not the first time that decisionmaking structure/level is sought to be reviewed and

refined to suit the specific project. Often, such redesigning of decisionmaking has yielded positive results. More complex, bigger and more challenging projects have been and are being completed within an acceptable timeframe in India, when structured suitably. The incorporation of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) Ltd., which has not only given Delhi a world-class project, but is also being replicated in many other cities of India, is a case in point. Contrast this with the Railway Ministry controlled development of the Kolkata Metro and one can easily see the difference it makes to adopt a project-oriented approach.

## WAY FORWARD

Having identified that the challenge is not so much in the engineering aspects as in decision-making, orchestration of financing, coordination and control, it is clear that there is an urgent need to review the current project format and embark on 'project mode' with a team that can be held accountable, so as to achieve project objectives before the end of 2020, the deadline for completion.

A Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) with joint ownership of all three countries could be incorporated. This SPV will be mandated to take over the project and ensure seamless movement of all types of projected traffic on the highway by 2020. To achieve that, it should:

- (a) Take over the rights and responsibilities of existing stakeholders through necessary legal and statutory provisions.
- (b) Raise funds from governments/ multilateral institutions/ the New Development Bank (BRICS Bank)/ buyers Credit from India's EXIM Bank and all other sources which can quickly finance the ongoing and pending works.

- (c) Identify and expedite the work remaining on various stretches within the three countries.
- (d) Finalise the 'Trans-regional Transportation Framework' (TTF) for movement of freight and people seamlessly. Needless to say, it should be fully integrated with ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) to make travel control and management smooth.
- (e) Ensure adequate care and maintenance of the highway during the operations phase.
- (f) Plan and implement further development to keep pace with increase in traffic.
- (g) This highway has the potential to evolve into a linear economic excellence zone. There could be 'energy independent smart villages' and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) alongside the highway providing employment opportunities to millions while suitably tapping Indian and overseas markets. Ensuring best environmental sustainability practices for the project.
- (h) Extend the highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the next phase.

The Board of Directors of the proposed SPV will be the highest decisionmaking body for project financing, execution, operations and management. It should have various verticals for smooth functioning. These could be:

- (a) Financing and project cost management
- (b) Construction and Future Infrastructure Development
- (c) TTF and its Operations & Maintenance (O&M)
- (d) O&M of Civil Engineering Infrastructure
- (e) EEZ Development, Operations and Maintenance
- (f) Performance Monitoring and Internal Coordination

The concept of SPV is well-known and being practised in Myanmar and Thailand. The SPV so formed for the IMT highway should use a multipronged approach to deliver the project in its entirety. These could either be the EPC route, or the PPP (Public-Private-Partnership) route using BOT (Build, Operate and Transfer), or a hybrid of the two, based on the bankability and value prospects of each project component. Considering the likely economic potential of this connectivity, the financial viability of this project cannot be doubted. If suitably structured and completed without further delay, it will not only be a strategic advantage for all stakeholders but would also provide much needed economic opportunity in the Mekong sub-region.

## SUGGESTED ROADMAP

Many projects of national importance are being executed through the SPV route in India. In the infrastructure sector alone, in addition to the DMRC, there are many such entities under various ministries. To name a few—the Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Ltd. (DFCCIL),<sup>38</sup> the National Highway Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd. (NHIDCL)<sup>39</sup> and the Bharat Broadband Nigam Ltd. (BBNL)<sup>40</sup> have been working in project mode, tapping international finance and executing through Indian and foreign contractors in EPC/PPP mode. It shows there is enough capacity and precedence in the country to take up the SPV route.

The setting up of the SPV for the IMT highway will involve the following steps:

- (a) Signing of an MoU between participating countries, which agrees to incorporate such a commercial entity – i.e. SPV – under the laws of a particular member country. It may be better to set up such an SPV in Nay Pyi Taw (Myanmar) as the maximum

length of the IMT highway will run through that country.

- (b) Equity holders, i.e., member countries, can then assign various rights and responsibilities for development of the project to this SPV by way of signing commercial contract agreements with it in accordance with applicable laws.
- (c) Right of Way (ROW) should be transferred to the SPV by respective stakeholders.
- (d) The SPV should approach multilateral financial institutions to line up funds.
- (e) Depending on the bankability of a particular stretch, the appropriate route for delivering it should be followed – be it EPC or PPP(BOT) or a hybrid of the two.
- (f) The SPV should continue overseeing operations and maintenance of the highway, its further widening and extension up to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, along with the development of EEZs and other future projects alongside the highway.

## CONCLUSION

India's diplomatic interests in the CLMV countries remain intact, as is evident from the existence of a CLMV division in its foreign office, apart from the establishment in 2000 of the sub-regional bloc called Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). However, the Mekong sub-region has hardly taken centre-stage in Delhi's foreign policy priorities. As the Indian political leadership changes this narrative by placing the Mekong sub-region among its top diplomatic priorities, the challenge is in sustaining the

focus and ensuring that the initiatives are effectively implemented on the ground. The IMT highway could prove to be the jewel in the crown of the 'Act East' policy. It is thus imperative that all alternatives available are explored to ensure early completion of this historic project. It would not only provide a much needed link for the people of India to connect with the people of the Mekong sub-region, but also a strategic reach for India against rapidly growing Chinese presence and influence in that region.

As Delhi takes transport connectivity beyond its borders, the need for stability, improved infrastructure and active participation of its borderlands in regional diplomacy has become ever more critical. India's northeast is where the IMT highway begins. No transnational corridors can be leveraged for mutual benefits without first preparing the borderlands. For a long time, governments and key stakeholders from the northeastern states have supported the idea of opening up the border for greater economic interaction with their neighbouring countries. They have supported the various connectivity projects including the IMT highway project. At the same time, there have been voices from the Northeast cautioning against the danger of the region merely becoming a transit point for the emerging corridors. The IMT highway ought to be a development corridor to ensure that benefits accrue to local people along the highway. India's Northeast has long earned the title, Gateway to the East, and it is high time this vision is translated on the ground. The IMT highway holds the potential to do so. 

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## ENDNOTES

1. The Mekong sub-region refers to the five mainland Southeast Asia nations (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) that form the Mekong River basin. 'Greater Mekong sub-region' is a broader area that includes the five Southeast Asian nations and two Chinese provinces - Yunnan and Guangxi. In this paper, the term 'Mekong sub-region' is used to refer to the former, interchangeable with 'CLMV' (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam).
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