

the Kaladan river by boat and from there it connects to the Mizoram state of northeast India by road.¹

The shipping route itself goes through the Bay of Bengal, which has been operational for quite some time. The sea route extends almost upto 540 kilometers. The next section of the transit is the river boat route through the Kaladan river, which is around 160 kilometers in length and connects the Sittwe port to the Inland Water Terminal and Hydro Power Project located in Paletwa. The latter part of the project consists of a 62 km's long two lane highway, which connects the Paletwa to Zochawchhuah, Mizoram.² The advanced section of the road extends further 100 kilometers to Aizwal, then through the Aizwal-Saiha highway and eventually furthering all the way to Assam. There are complementary railway routes as well, such as the Sittwe–Kyaukhtu railway in Myanmar, Kyaukhtu–Zorinpui in Myanmar in Myanmar and the Zochawchhuah (Zorinpui)- Sairangway in India which will be integrated within the project itself and will be constructed in future phases in to ensure better connectivity and cooperation.³

Historical Significance and Overall Importance

The introduction of Kaladan project, although undertaken in very recent times, the concept itself dates back to the 70's, even before the birth of Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, the idea of this project or the core concepts came to fruition due to the fact that, the possibility of India being able to connect through the northeast was nigh-on-impossible. Moreover, there were speculations about the then Pakistani regime of backing up the insurgent groups in the northeast. The concept was first introduced by famous Indian geo-strategist B.G. Verghese, who was the first one to push for a multi-modal transit to and the initial blueprint of this current project to then Indian Prime minister Indira Gandhi.⁴ Mrs. Gandhi has later introduced this to then military leader of Burma General Ne Win. However, the whole issue lost traction due to the independence of Bangladesh and the establishment of a friendlier regime under

¹ Thang, L.B., Oo, T. and Scott, A.B., 2015. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. *India-Myanmar Relations*, 7.

² ibid

³ ibid

⁴ Bhaumik, S., 2020. *The India-Myanmar Kaladan Project: Vision and Reality*. [ebook] Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher. Available at: <<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>>

Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Throughout a significant portion of the history, the sentiment didn't necessarily change until the electoral victory of Khaleda Zia over Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina, who actively opposed the proposition of any transit routes through Bangladesh using Bangladesh's roads and railways to connect to India's northeast.⁵ This started the insurrection of the Kaladan Multi-modal transit route which provides the alternative to connect to India's northeast.⁶

The project itself is pretty significant due to the fact that, the entirety of India is connected through to very small stretch of land called the "Siliguri Corridor". The Corridor itself is the only connecting link between India and its ever so volatile northeastern region, plagued by insurgencies and separatist movements. Considering the recent developments around the region following the Doklam Stand-off, accompanied by ongoing tensions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the corridor itself can always fall prey to turbulence and destabilization. This prospect is particularly chilling for India due to the fact that, it can entirely cut off the Northeast from India, which will only fuel the regional instabilities already persistent within the northeast and blind the government from any ongoing uprisings in the region. Thus, the Kaladan project has been introduced as an alternative or a saving grace for India should the nightmare scenario ever occur, thus India has to find a substitute for maintaining connectivity with and supervision over its northeastern region.

The project itself is at its final stages, as claimed by the relevant authorities. However, the completion of the project itself is long overdue, as it was originally scheduled to be completed in 2014. The Sittwe port has been operational for quite a bit of time now, with the Paletwa Inland Water terminal showcasing major progress.⁷ The major cause of delay was the inland road construction, which was also hit badly following the surge of COVID-19 across the globe. Be that as it may, major concerns have again surfaced concerning the completion of the project within the newest deadline 2023 due to having a series of ongoing hurdles in the region,

⁵ ibid

⁶ Pandit, S.D. and Basu, R., 2014. Connectivity, Development and Regional Integration: The Case of Indo-Myanmar Kaladan Project. *IUP Journal of International Relations*, 8(3), p.25.

⁷ Karmakar, R., 2021. *India-Myanmar Kaladan project in final stages: Jaishankar*. [online] The Hindu. Available at: <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-myanmar-kaladan-project-in-final-stages-jaishankar/article33844879.ece>>

including internal issues, presence of militia groups and last but not the least; The Coup and the political instability that followed in Myanmar. As a result, despite making relevant parties making major strides in terms of the completion of the project, every projection concerning full ensuing of operations, as long as the project is concerned, is definitely up for speculation.

Future Prospects and Challenges

The Kaladan project showcases the possibilities of huge economic strides for both the countries through boosting the economy of the countries. The project will also be significantly beneficial to the underprivileged communities' residing within its pathway. It has been claimed on more than one occasion that, the project itself will drastically improve the socio-economic realities of all the destitute communities that inhabit in the regions.⁸ The project will bolster the ties between and Myanmar to newer heights. It will not only ensure firmer integration of the India to its northeast, but also will promote and boost up the rather stagnant economic growth of both the countries. The project is also believed to be a key towards ensuring the mitigation of insurgencies and separatist movement going across the whole of northeast through introducing employment of youth and lessening the chances of these individuals being radicalized. This so far paints a very ideal picture.⁹

Nevertheless, there are also various challenges and controversies associated with it, aspects that may outweigh the existent opportunities and prospects to a major extent. The project itself lacks the presence of any forms of environmental assessment, which is a huge imperative for major projects like this one. The absence highlights the lack of awareness concerning the environmental toll it will take.¹⁰ The project itself also astronomically increase the possibility of a growing influx of drugs and arms trade causing major matters of concern for both the countries and even introducing the possibility of commencement of crime terror network within the region. The region through which the project will go through hasn't witnessed a lasting sense of prosperity for quite a bit of time, which may exacerbate the severity of the

⁸ Thedi diplomat.com. 2021. *Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project – The Diplomat*. [online] Available at: <<https://thedi diplomat.com/tag/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project/>>

⁹ Bhaumik, S., 2020. *The India-Myanmar Kaladan Project: Vision and Reality*. [ebook] Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher. Available at: <<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>>

¹⁰ ibid

ongoing complexities in the region even further. Arakan army, one of the key actors in the rakhine region, is going to be major hurdle in terms of overall execution of the project. ARSA is another issue that has be taken into consideration, especially following the Rohingya exodus, mass persecution of this group and the coup leading to the takeover of the Tatmadaw, situations will be less than favorable towards adequately facilitating the functions of the project.¹¹ The Arakan army and ARSA have both clashed and fought the Tatmadaw to a standstill. So, it is safe to presume that, both parties will be more than happy towards blocking any forms of nourishment towards the Tatmadaw. The project itself also has the potential to undermine the growing importance of Bangladesh. The key reasons behind the project itself is the promotion of connectivity between the Northeast of India and it's "mainland", bypassing the ever so vulnerable Siliguri corridor. This not only gives leeway to India to bypass Bangladesh and connect to Myanmar in various aspects, it can also lead to Bangladesh being left out of various economic opportunities. Moreover, with India leaning more and more towards future strategic endeavors with India, Bangladesh is constantly is moving towards the risk of falling in a geo-strategic jeopardy, which isn't going to facilitate Bangladesh's ambitions of maintaining strategic autonomy and furthering it's external goals within and beyond the region. Thus far, the project itself, although does showcase some significant opportunities to be harnessed in the future, the current circumstances also highlight the major challenges associated with the project itself.

Conclusion

India and Myanmar both have faced major drawbacks following the unraveling of a myriad of events in recent times. The Kaladan project will not only enable these two countries to address these issues that stir up economic and security concerns, but also provide the much needed thrust to ensure the economic revival and rejuvenation of these key actors. Having said that, the contemporary challenges and hurdles associated with the prolongation of the process insinuates a future that is unforeseeable.

¹¹ ibid

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