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Why Northeast-Kolkata link via Myanmar — not Bangladesh — is significant

Background and Context

- India's traditional trade and connectivity routes to the Northeast have heavily depended on transit through Bangladesh.
- Due to recent **diplomatic tensions between India and Bangladesh**, alternatives such as the **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP)** have gained renewed strategic relevance.
- The KMMTTP is part of India's broader **Look East/Act East Policy**, aiming to connect Northeast India with Southeast Asia via Myanmar.

Overview of the Kaladan Project

- The project was conceptualized in the **late 1990s** and officially agreed upon in **2008** between India and Myanmar.
- It aims to establish a **multi-modal trade and transit route** between **Kolkata (India)** and **Mizoram (Northeast India)** via **Sittwe and Paletwa in Myanmar**.
- The core goal is to create a **strategic alternative route** for transporting goods from **eastern India to the Northeast** without depending on the Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck) or Bangladesh.

Strategic Significance

- The KMMTTP will reduce the transportation **distance by nearly 1,000 km** between Kolkata and Mizoram.
- It is expected to save **3 to 4 days of travel time**, improving **logistical efficiency** and **economic integration** for the Northeast.
- Offers a **strategic alternative** to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Myanmar border areas.
- Strengthens India's connectivity with **Southeast Asia**, aligning with the goals of the **India-ASEAN connectivity framework**.

Multi-Modal Components of KMMTTP

- The term "multi-modal" indicates that the project includes multiple transportation methods: **maritime, riverine, and road transport**.



1. Kolkata to Sittwe (Sea Route)

- Covers **539 km across the Bay of Bengal** by ship.
- **Completed** and operational.

2. Sittwe to Paletwa (Inland Water Transport on Kaladan River)

- **158 km stretch** navigable by small ships or boats.
- **Infrastructure completed**, including jetties and river ports.

3. Paletwa to Zorinpui (Road Link through Myanmar)

- **108 km four-lane road** planned through hilly terrain.
- Final approvals have been granted by the Myanmar government.
- The **Integrated Customs & Immigration Checkpost** at Zochawchhuah-Zorinpui became operational in **2017**.

4. Zorinpui to Aizwal and Beyond (Indian Road Network)

- Zorinpui is connected to Aizwal by road.
- National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) plans to **extend a high-speed corridor** from Shillong to Zorinpui.

Reasons Behind Delay

- Initially scheduled for **completion by 2016**, the project has seen repeated delays due to **political instability in Myanmar**.
- **Rakhine State**, through which the Kaladan route passes, has seen prolonged **ethnic conflict**.
- Myanmar's **ethnic composition**:
 - Though Bamar/Burman ethnicity dominates (65% of population), there are **100+ ethnic minorities** with ongoing **armed insurgencies** since 1948.
- The **2021 military coup** in Myanmar worsened the internal situation.
 - **Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army)** now controls only **21% of territory**.
 - The rest is held by ethnic militias, including the **Arakan Army (now rebranded Rakhine Army)**, which currently dominates Rakhine State.
- India's planned route passes through **areas controlled by Arakan Army**, which Yangon classifies as a **terrorist group**.



Current Diplomatic and Security Challenges

- For India, activating the corridor means navigating **Myanmar's internal conflict** without directly engaging terrorist-designated groups.
- There is a **security vacuum** in parts of the route, raising concerns for cargo safety and project sustainability.
- **India must now engage with both:**
 - The **Myanmar military junta**, which is internationally criticized.
 - **Ethnic militias** indirectly, without legitimizing them.

Way Forward and Strategic Recommendations

- India should pursue **quiet diplomacy** with the Myanmar government and **engage local actors** to ensure corridor safety.
- Use **backchannel negotiations** with regional stakeholders (ethnic groups, civil society, NGOs) to build trust.
- Avoid direct legitimization of insurgent groups but ensure **functional coordination** for transit operations.
- Leverage regional forums such as **ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral partnerships** to:
 - Promote **peace dialogues** and **regional stability**.
 - Support **humanitarian and developmental aid** in the region.
- Strengthen **India's border infrastructure** and **local employment** along the Zorinpui–Aizwal stretch to stabilize the Indian side of the corridor.

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