

NORTHEAST KOLKATA LINK VIA MYANMAR :

GEOGRAPHY

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

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

India is establishing a direct trade route between the Northeast and Kolkata via Myanmar, bypassing Bangladesh, to reduce strategic dependence and counter Dhaka's restrictive trade stance. Simultaneously, India has curbed Bangladeshi garment imports through land ports in retaliation to earlier Bangladeshi restrictions on Indian yarn exports.

1. Strategic Shift in Connectivity

- India is establishing a direct link between its Northeast and Kolkata through Myanmar, bypassing traditional dependence on Bangladesh.
- This marks a change in strategy aimed at ensuring autonomy in trade and regional integration without relying on Bangladesh's land or port access.

2. India-Myanmar Border and Importance

- India shares a 1,643 km-long border with Myanmar, touching Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram.
- Myanmar acts as India's eastern gateway to Southeast Asia under the Act East Policy.
- Enhancing infrastructure in Myanmar boosts India's physical and geopolitical presence in the region.

3. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP)

- A major India-funded connectivity project linking Kolkata to Mizoram through Myanmar's Sittwe Port.
- Phases:
 1. Kolkata to Sittwe (Sea) – 539 km – Completed.
 2. Sittwe to Paletwa (River) – 158 km – Completed.

3. Paletwa to Zorinpui (Road) – 108 km – Partially completed; delays due to insurgency in Rakhine.
 4. Zorinpui to Aizawl & Shillong – Ongoing road extension under the Shillong–Silchar–Zorinpui Corridor.
- KMTTP supports multi-modal cargo movement via sea, river, and road, cutting transport time and bypassing the congested Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck).

4. Broader Connectivity Vision

- Complements the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, enhancing trade, tourism, and people-to-people connectivity with ASEAN nations.
- Aims to integrate Northeast India with the East-West industrial corridor under India's national infrastructure plan.

5. Geopolitical Rationale

- Triggered by a controversial statement by Bangladesh's interim government calling Northeast India 'landlocked' and dependent.
- India's strategic response: Diversify routes to avoid reliance on one neighbour and assert regional autonomy.
- The move aligns with India's geopolitical goal of reducing dependence and counterbalancing Bangladesh's diplomatic positioning.

6. Economic & Strategic Advantages

- For Northeast India:
 - Better market access for goods and raw materials.

- Opportunities for tourism, local employment, and regional



industrial growth.

- For National Security:
 - Enhances Indian presence in Myanmar to balance China's growing influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (e.g., Kyaukpyu Port, CMEC).
 - Promotes stability in sensitive border regions like Chin and Rakhine states, where Indian interests are at stake.

7. Trade Retaliation Against Bangladesh

- India has restricted Bangladeshi ready-made garments (RMGs) from using land ports in Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram.
- RMGs must now be routed through Kolkata or Mumbai ports with added inspection, increasing logistics costs.
- This move is in retaliation to Bangladesh's earlier restriction that Indian yarn exports must only use sea routes, excluding land-based entry.

8. Impact on Regional Trade

- Bangladesh's garment exports to India were heavily land-route dependent (93% share).
- India's new route shifts that balance, making land-based trade less viable and encouraging regional stakeholders to use Indian infrastructure.
- Encourages Bangladesh to reconsider trade policies that limit Indian exporters' access.

9. Challenges Along Myanmar Route

- Security issues: Armed insurgent groups like the Arakan Army operate in Rakhine and Chin states, posing threats to project personnel and timelines.
- Terrain: Difficult hilly terrain delays construction and raises project costs.
- Competition: China is expanding parallel infrastructure in western Myanmar, creating strategic rivalry in the region.

10. Broader Diplomatic Message

- Through this strategy, India signals readiness to adapt and retaliate diplomatically and economically when regional partners impose unfair conditions.
- The route serves not just as a trade corridor but as a symbol of India's strategic self-reliance and regional assertiveness.

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