

Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project: Navigating Myanmar's Ethnic Conundrum

Webinar Report

Organized by: CUTS International

Date: October 1st, 2020, 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm (IST)

Opening remarks: Bipul Chatterjee (Executive Director, CUTS International)

Presenter: Sreeradha Datta (Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi)

Discussant: Major General Alok Deb (Retd.) (Former Deputy General Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses)

Concluding Remarks: Bipul Chatterjee,(Executive Director, CUTS International)

1. Introduction

1.1 CUTS International in collaboration with its partners as a part of their project 'Multimodal Connectivity in BBIN sub region' has published a briefing paper authored by Sreeradha Datta of Vivekananda International Foundation, Delhi. The paper titled '[*Kaladan Multimodal Transport Transit Project: Navigating Myanmar's Ethnic Conundrum*](#)' while discussing the significance of the project also highlights a way forward in battling the challenges being faced on ground. The webinar organized on 1st October 2020, thus, was attempted at discussing the efforts to ensure the implementation of the project. The meeting was conducted over Zoom and also live streamed on Youtube. Key panelist included: Bipul Chatterjee, Major General Deb and Sreeradha Datta,

2. Background:

2.1 The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTTP) project was the first cross-border project to be initiated in the NorthEastern region. While some of those planned later have become functional, KMMTTP is yet to gain that momentum. Not only has there been an inordinate delay in completing the same, but on ground hostilities from ethnic rebel groups have put the future of the ambitious project at risk.

2.2 Keeping this view, CUTS International under its M-Connect project organised a webinar to put forth the recommendations in the paper and deliberate on the scope of accelerating diplomatic efforts to ensure the successful completion of the Kaladan Multimodal project.

2.3 The purpose of the webinar was to bring together a panel of experts and academicians from across the region to deliberate on solutions to specific security challenges that hinders the project on ground.

3. Highlights of the Panel Discussion

3.1 In his opening remarks, Bipul Chatterjee emphasised on the importance of Kaladan Multi-modal Transport project in a time where the country's transit to the northeastern states through Bangladesh is being strengthened. "This project will help transform the landlockedness to land linkedness of North East India with mainland India and also the neighboring countries" he added.

3.2 Shreeradha Datta, the author of the briefing paper, highlighted the project was initiated almost two decades ago as an alternative route to the Northeastern states and has seen enormous delays which has also had financial implications.

3.3 The major underlying reason for this inordinate delay is the hostilities on the ground from the Arakan Army. However, India interfering with Myanmar's ethnic challenge would be self-defeating as the responsibility falls on the government of Myanmar. Certain back channel conversations involving India may be appropriate at this point. India should use all its good offices to completion of this project keeping in mind India's interest of connecting with South East economies and long term benefits accruing form it.

3.4 Major General Deb reiterated the importance of connectivity and this project. He pointed out that the project is line with India's Act East policy. It is India's single largest development activity in the foreign land worth INR 2900 Crore. The set-up of the project is such that the investment is done by the Indian Government and land and security is provided by the Myanmar Government.

3.5 Sitwe port once developed connecting with Paletwa will have the capacity of handling 260 cargos. KMMTTP project will have a life of its own and will prove have butter fly effect for India in terms of connectivity and integration.

3.6 While further noting that each leg of this significant project is vulnerable and the security of each of these is a task by itself. "However, the key issue that we need to keep in mind is of border security, smuggling, insurgents and trafficking, not forgetting that we are dealing with the Arakan Army active in the Rakhine state of Myanmar which is a declared terrorist organization and is allegedly funded by China. Whilst, the importance of the project can't be overstated. Once completed, the project will serve India in integration with

the South-East Asia.” Thus, border management and security agencies need to work together to tackle these.

4. Key issues emerged during open discussion

4.1 Participants from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal highlighted the importance of such projects from their geo-political and geo-strategic perspectives.

4.2 It was further explained how bio-diplomacy or the involvement of sub national and national entities has become more and more important to manage the on ground challenges. Especially from the perspective of this project.

4.3 A key point noted by the panel was the shift in the mindset of individuals regarding the connectivity and security issues. People now no longer associate vulnerable security conditions with developing connectivity infrastructure.

4.4 They further highlighted the importance of viewing bilateral connectivity projects from a larger lens and initiating dialogues on converting them into trilateral projects at the least for facilitating trade, investment and improved wellbeing for the local communities.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The panel concluded it is imperative now to view the bilateral projects from a larger lens and initiate dialogue to convert them into larger initiatives. Additionally, for these initiatives to work and to enhance regional cooperation we need to reach out to all the stakeholders, especially the people on ground to understand their benefits and challenges.

5.2 With respect to KMMTTP project, it is imperative for India that the local population in Myanmar is convinced that the project will serve their interests and they are one of the key stakeholders too. The ground support is crucial for the successful completion and implementation of the project”.

Press Release: [Para-diplomacy and people-centric approach needed for leveraging more benefits from the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project: Experts](#)

Media Coverage: [India to provide debt service relief to Myanmar under the G20 initiative](#)

YouTube Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fYB_630mHM&feature=youtu.be