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Bridging borders, boosting growth: Revitalizing northeast India with the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway

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Abstract

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT TH) stands at the forefront of regional connectivity initiatives, representing not only a strategic infrastructural undertaking but also a key catalyst for enhanced economic integration across South and Southeast Asia. This paper examines the multifaceted dimensions of the IMT TH project and its proposed eastward extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. Drawing upon a range of studies—including background papers, integrative reports, and policy briefs from ERIA, Observer Research Foundation, RIS, and related institutions—the analysis reveals that while the highway promises significant trade facilitation, regional competitiveness, and socio-economic upliftment for India's North Eastern Region (NER) and ASEAN economies, several challenges remain. These include infrastructural bottlenecks, complex multilateral coordination, and unresolved security issues. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for harmonizing investment, institutional reforms, and cross-border facilitation mechanisms to fully unlock the transformative potential of the IMT TH corridor.

Keywords: India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, regional integration, ASEAN connectivity, infrastructure development, economic corridors, policy recommendations

1. Introduction

Globalization, regional economic integration, and infrastructural connectivity are critical drivers in today's international trade environment. Over the last few decades, the integration of regional markets has emerged as a central theme in trade policy debates, particularly in Asia where countries are actively pursuing connectivity projects to secure their economic futures. Among these initiatives, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT TH) is a flagship project that aims to create a seamless land link between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The project not only complements India's "Act East" policy but also represents a strategic response to evolving global trade patterns and geopolitical shifts such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (ERIA, 2020b). The IMT TH project is designed to revitalize historical connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia—a connectivity that dates back to ancient trade routes and cultural exchanges. With its proposed extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam, the highway is envisioned as a pivotal trade corridor that will promote faster movement of goods, enhance people-to-people exchanges, and stimulate economic development in underdeveloped regions such as Northeast India (Sapru House Paper, n.d.; ERIA-RIS Study Background Paper, 2020). Against a backdrop of rising trade protectionism and evolving global supply chain dynamics, this paper reviews the evolution, challenges, and policy implications of the IMT TH project. By synthesizing insights from multiple studies—including integrative reports and policy briefs—the paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the project's potential to drive economic growth, enhance regional trade, and contribute to geopolitical stability in Asia.

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2. Literature Review

The literature on regional connectivity in Asia has expanded significantly in recent years. Earlier works focused on the historical evolution of trade routes in the region, while more recent studies have shifted toward modern infrastructural initiatives. In the context of the IMT TH, the literature can be grouped into four interrelated streams:

2.1 Historical and Strategic Context

Scholars note that connectivity between India and Southeast Asia has deep historical roots. Ancient trade routes and cultural exchanges laid the foundation for modern economic ties (ERIA, 2020b). The resurgence of interest in these historical pathways, spurred by India's Look East and Act East policies, is viewed as both a revival of long-forgotten linkages and a strategic reorientation toward new economic partnerships in ASEAN (Sapru House Paper, n.d.).

2.2 Economic and Trade Linkages

A significant strand of research emphasizes the economic rationale behind regional connectivity. Studies underscore that enhanced transport corridors such as the IMT TH can facilitate trade by reducing transaction costs, improving market access, and fostering industrial linkages in economically lagging regions like Northeast India (ERIA-RIS Study Background Paper, 2020; TH Report, 2021). The potential multiplier effects on bilateral and multilateral trade flows are considerable, with increased border trade expected to contribute to the economic upliftment of both India and its ASEAN partners.

2.3 Infrastructure and Institutional Frameworks

Several studies critically assess the physical and institutional challenges facing large-scale infrastructure projects. The literature highlights issues such as delayed construction timelines, regulatory bottlenecks, and complex multilateral coordination as major impediments to the successful implementation of the IMT TH project (Observer Research Foundation, 2017; Observer Research Foundation, 2023). Institutional reforms and the establishment of robust governance mechanisms have been repeatedly

recommended to overcome these challenges.

2.4 Geopolitical and Security Dimensions

In addition to economic and infrastructural concerns, several authors discuss the geopolitical implications of improved connectivity. The project is seen as a counterbalance to China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative, offering India and its regional partners an alternative framework for economic cooperation that emphasizes transparency and multilateralism (ERIA, 2020b; Sapru House Paper, n.d.). However, unresolved security issues and cross-border disputes—particularly in Myanmar—pose significant risks to the corridor's long-term viability (Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

Collectively, the literature illustrates that while the IMT TH has the potential to be transformative, its success depends on addressing a host of economic, infrastructural, institutional, and geopolitical challenges.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-source analytical approach to synthesize findings from a wide range of primary documents, policy briefs, and integrative reports on the IMT TH project. The methodology includes the following steps:

Document Analysis: A detailed review and thematic coding of the attached documents, including the ERIA integrative report (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2020a), the background paper on Northeast India's economic linkages (ERIA-RIS Study Background Paper, 2020), policy briefs from Observer Research Foundation (2017, 2023), and research articles on the economic landscape of the project (Myo AUNG, 2018).

Thematic Synthesis: Identification of key themes such as economic integration, infrastructural development, institutional challenges, and geopolitical strategy. This synthesis builds on both historical perspectives and contemporary policy debates.

Comparative Analysis: Evaluation of the differing perspectives and recommendations provided by various authors and institutions, facilitating an integrative understanding of the project's multifaceted impact.

Policy Analysis: Extraction and critical review of policy recommendations, with an emphasis on practical measures that can address both immediate construction challenges and long-term governance issues.

This multi-pronged methodology allows the paper to draw comprehensive insights from diverse sources, providing a robust basis for the policy recommendations discussed in the concluding sections.

4. Analysis and Discussion: Impact on the Indian Economy

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT TH) project is poised to reshape the economic landscape of India—especially by reinvigorating the North Eastern Region (NER) and strengthening India's strategic and economic linkages with Southeast Asia. This section provides a detailed analysis of the project's potential economic benefits, the infrastructural and institutional challenges it faces, its strategic and security dimensions, and its broader implications for regional integration.

4.1 Economic Benefits for India

Trade Facilitation and Cost Reduction

The most immediate impact of the IMT TH is the reduction in transportation costs for Indian goods. By providing a direct, overland route from the NER to key markets in Southeast Asia, the project is expected to slash transit times, reduce border clearance delays, and lower the overall logistics costs. These reductions translate into a competitive advantage for Indian exporters. For instance, products that previously faced high shipping costs and long delays can now enter ASEAN markets more competitively. Research shows that when transport costs decline, the price competitiveness of exports improves, potentially increasing export volumes significantly (ERIA, 2020b). Moreover, the reduction in time and cost also supports industries that are highly perishable or sensitive to transit delays, such as agro-based products, where freshness is critical.

Revitalization of the North Eastern Region (NER)

The NER of India, endowed with abundant natural resources and a young labour force, has long been constrained by poor connectivity. The IMT TH promises to be a catalyst for economic revival in the region. Enhanced connectivity is expected to lead to:

- **Industrial Clustering:** The creation of well-connected industrial parks and economic zones along the corridor would promote the formation of clusters in sectors like agro-processing, textiles, and small-scale manufacturing. The potential spillover effects include increased employment, skill development, and technology transfer.
- **Infrastructure-Led Development:** With better roads and modern logistics facilities, previously isolated markets in the NER will have improved access to national and international markets. This improved market access can foster investment in ancillary sectors, including warehousing, cold storage, and transport services, thereby creating a multiplier effect on the

local economy (ERIA-RIS Study Background Paper, 2020).

- **Boost to Tourism and Services:** Improved road networks not only facilitate trade but also encourage tourism. The rich cultural heritage and natural beauty of the NER can attract tourists, which in turn spurs growth in hospitality, retail, and related service sectors.

Enhancement of Export Competitiveness

By improving transit times and reducing operational bottlenecks, the IMT TH can enhance the export performance of Indian industries. With lower transportation costs, Indian products become more price competitive in ASEAN markets. Sectors that have struggled with supply chain inefficiencies—such as perishables, textiles, and handicrafts—stand to benefit considerably. In addition, the streamlined movement of goods reduces the uncertainty associated with cross-border trade, potentially encouraging new exports and the diversification of export portfolios. Empirical studies have linked improved infrastructure with enhanced export performance and economic diversification (TH Report, 2021).

Multiplier Effects on Ancillary Industries

Beyond the direct benefits in transportation and trade, the project is expected to generate positive externalities across multiple sectors:

- **Logistics and Warehousing:** With faster and more reliable road connectivity, there is significant potential for the growth of logistics hubs and warehousing facilities along the corridor. Such developments are likely to lower inventory costs and enhance supply chain efficiency.
- **Digital and Technological Integration:** The adoption of digital technologies for customs clearance, tracking, and supply chain management could stimulate the growth of an information technology sector focused on logistics solutions. This convergence of physical and digital infrastructure may further accelerate productivity improvements across the board.
- **Service Sector Growth:** The reduction in logistical friction can also stimulate growth in services such as finance, insurance, and consultancy, which are crucial for supporting trade and industrial activities.

4.2 Infrastructural and Institutional Challenges

While the economic rationale for the IMT TH is robust, its success hinges on addressing several critical challenges:

Delays in Construction and Upgradation

A recurring theme in the literature is the delay in the completion of key infrastructural elements. In Myanmar, in particular, issues such as protracted litigation over bridge construction and unresolved disputes over road alignments have resulted in significant setbacks. For India, these delays translate into postponed economic benefits and increased project costs. The delay in completing segments like the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road not only disrupts the flow of goods but also undermines investor confidence, making it imperative to resolve these disputes expeditiously (Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

Fragmented Institutional Coordination

The IMT TH spans multiple countries with diverse

administrative and regulatory frameworks. Within India itself, bureaucratic fragmentation can hinder the smooth implementation of projects. Coordination among state agencies, national bodies, and border authorities is essential for synchronizing customs procedures, logistics operations, and regulatory compliance. The lack of a unified framework often results in inefficiencies, redundancies, and delays. Establishing dedicated institutions—such as National Transport Facilitation Committees (NTFCs)—is critical to bridging these gaps and ensuring that infrastructure investments are effectively translated into economic gains (Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

Financial Constraints and Investment Gaps

The financing of large-scale infrastructure projects is a perennial challenge in emerging economies. Although the strategic importance of the IMT TH is well acknowledged, the magnitude of funding required for both initial construction and subsequent maintenance poses significant hurdles. Reliance on traditional public funding may be insufficient; hence, the exploration of innovative financing models—such as public-private partnerships (PPPs) and multilateral funding from institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNESCAP—is necessary. For India, ensuring financial sustainability is crucial, as delays or cost overruns can strain public resources and divert funds from other critical development projects.

Digital Integration and Efficiency Measures

In today's competitive trade environment, the integration of digital systems into infrastructure projects is vital. Although there is growing recognition of the benefits of digital customs procedures and real-time tracking systems, their implementation along the IMT TH corridor has been relatively slow. India's ability to incorporate state-of-the-art digital solutions will determine how effectively the corridor can reduce transit times and enhance trade efficiency. The lag in digital integration represents a lost opportunity for further cost reduction and improved transparency in cross-border trade.

4.3 Strategic and Security Dimensions

Beyond its economic impacts, the IMT TH project carries significant strategic and security implications for India:

Counterbalancing Regional Influence

The IMT TH is increasingly viewed as a strategic asset in the broader geopolitical contest with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For India, enhancing connectivity with ASEAN via the IMT TH is a means to assert its regional influence and offer an alternative, multilateral approach to regional integration. Strengthening this corridor enhances India's bargaining position in regional forums and provides a tangible counterweight to China's expansive infrastructure projects (Sapru House Paper, n.d.). This strategic counterbalance is critical for maintaining India's geopolitical autonomy and ensuring a stable regional order.

Security Challenges and Cross-Border Stability

Security remains a critical concern for the successful operation of the IMT TH. The region's volatile security environment—marked by insurgency, ethnic conflicts, and border disputes—poses risks to the continuity of trade and economic activity. For instance, unresolved conflicts in

certain parts of Myanmar can disrupt the smooth flow of goods and jeopardize investments in the corridor. India must therefore prioritize the development of robust security frameworks, including enhanced intelligence sharing, joint border patrols, and confidence-building measures among the partner nations. Addressing these challenges is paramount to ensuring that the highway remains a secure and reliable trade route (Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

Diplomatic Engagement and Policy Alignment

For India, sustained diplomatic engagement is essential to harmonize the strategic interests of the corridor's partner countries. High-level diplomatic dialogues, regular joint meetings, and the establishment of trilateral task forces are necessary to address cross-border challenges and ensure continuous policy alignment. Such initiatives not only facilitate smoother project implementation but also enhance India's regional influence by demonstrating a commitment to multilateral cooperation and transparent governance.

4.4 Broader Potential for Indian Regional Integration

The broader implications of the IMT TH for India extend well beyond immediate economic gains:

Creation of Economic Corridors and Industrial Hubs

The IMT TH is envisioned as the backbone for a network of economic corridors that will transform urban and rural areas along its route into vibrant industrial and logistics hubs. For India, the strategic development of hubs such as Moreh in the NER could pave the way for industrial clustering and technology-driven growth. These hubs have the potential to attract both domestic and foreign investments, fostering an environment conducive to innovation and productivity improvements (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2020a).

Inclusive and Sustainable Growth

One of the key long-term benefits of the IMT TH for India is its capacity to promote inclusive growth. By bridging the infrastructural gap between the prosperous metropolitan centres and the underserved NER, the highway can help reduce regional disparities. Policies that encourage green infrastructure, sustainable urban planning, and environmental conservation are essential to ensure that growth remains inclusive and sustainable. This focus on sustainability is not only critical for economic resilience but also aligns with India's broader development objectives.

Leveraging Social and Cultural Synergies

Enhanced physical connectivity can also strengthen the social fabric of the region. Increased mobility between India and ASEAN is likely to spur cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and tourism, thereby fostering a shared regional identity. These soft power gains are essential for building long-term trust and cooperation among the nations involved. For India, such socio-cultural integration can complement economic growth, contributing to a more stable and harmonious regional environment.

Technological and Logistical Advancements

The integration of advanced digital technologies within the corridor can act as a catalyst for broader innovation in India's logistics and supply chain sectors. As digital customs procedures, real-time tracking systems, and

integrated supply chain management become standard along the IMT TH, these technologies could set a benchmark for future infrastructure projects across the country. The resulting improvements in operational efficiency and transparency can have spillover effects into other sectors, enhancing overall productivity in the Indian economy. In sum, the IMT TH project offers a comprehensive platform for transforming India's economic landscape. Its success is contingent upon effectively leveraging its economic benefits while addressing the multifaceted challenges related to infrastructure, institutional coordination, and security.

5. Policy Recommendations for Advancing India's Economic Interests

To maximize the transformative potential of the IMT TH for the Indian economy, a multifaceted policy approach is required. The following recommendations build on the expanded analysis and aim to address both immediate challenges and long-term strategic goals.

5.1 Accelerate and Optimize Infrastructure Development

• Fast-Track Completion of Key Projects

It is imperative that the governments of India, Myanmar, and Thailand prioritize the resolution of outstanding construction issues. Special focus should be given to critical segments—such as the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa stretch—and to resolving disputes related to bridge construction. Implementing accelerated dispute resolution mechanisms, such as arbitration panels or joint technical committees, could help overcome legal hurdles and ensure that project timelines are met (Observer Research Foundation, 2017).

• Innovative Financing Mechanisms

India should diversify its financing portfolio for the IMT TH project by exploring innovative funding avenues. Public-private partnerships (PPPs), concessional loans from multilateral development banks (e.g., ADB, UNESCAP), and dedicated infrastructure bonds could provide the necessary capital. In addition, a long-term financing plan that allocates resources for both construction and maintenance is crucial to avoid future cost overruns and ensure fiscal sustainability.

• Investment in Ancillary Infrastructure

Beyond the core road network, complementary infrastructure—such as logistics parks, cold chain facilities, and digital monitoring systems—should be developed concurrently. This integrated approach will ensure that the highway's economic benefits are fully realized, as improved ancillary infrastructure can further reduce costs and stimulate industrial growth.

5.2 Strengthen Institutional Coordination and Regulatory Frameworks

• Establishment of National Transport Facilitation Committees (NTFCs)

Creating NTFCs at the national and state levels will help harmonize customs, border, and transport policies. These committees should be empowered to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs), coordinate

cross-border inspections, and facilitate rapid decision-making in case of operational disruptions. Such measures would reduce administrative delays and streamline the movement of goods (Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

• Cross-Border Coordination Mechanisms

A trilateral coordination body comprising representatives from India, Myanmar, and Thailand should be established to address cross-border issues. This body can function as a central forum for regular dialogue, policy alignment, and the resolution of technical and security-related disputes. Enhanced communication channels will build mutual trust and enable the rapid sharing of best practices.

• Regulatory Harmonization

India should work toward aligning its regulatory frameworks with those of its regional partners. Harmonization of trade policies, tariff structures, and technical standards will reduce regulatory friction, making it easier for businesses to operate seamlessly across borders. This effort may involve bilateral and multilateral agreements to set common standards for infrastructure projects.

5.3 Enhance Security and Diplomatic Initiatives

• Bilateral and Multilateral Security Frameworks

Given the security risks along the corridor, India must invest in robust security measures. This includes joint border patrols, enhanced surveillance systems, and intelligence-sharing arrangements with Myanmar and Thailand. Establishing a dedicated security task force for the corridor could ensure a rapid response to any emerging threats and maintain uninterrupted trade flows (Sapru House Paper, n.d.).

• Institutionalize High-Level Diplomatic Engagements

Regular high-level meetings and joint task forces should be institutionalized. These forums would enable India to present a unified position on regional connectivity issues and negotiate solutions to any policy discrepancies. Institutionalized diplomatic engagement is essential not only for addressing current challenges but also for pre-emptively resolving future disputes that could affect the corridor's operation.

5.4 Promote Technological Integration and Digital Solutions

• Digital Customs and Trade Facilitation Platforms:

India should prioritize the implementation of digital customs clearance systems, real-time cargo tracking, and integrated supply chain management platforms. Such technologies can drastically reduce processing times at borders and provide transparency in trade flows. Pilot projects could be initiated along the corridor to demonstrate the benefits of these systems before a broader rollout.

• Investment in Smart Infrastructure

Incorporating smart sensors, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and data analytics into road maintenance and management can enhance the resilience of the corridor. These technologies can provide early warnings of infrastructure wear and tear, enabling proactive maintenance and reducing the likelihood of disruptions.

5.5 Foster Regional and Social Integration

• Development of Economic Hubs and Industrial Clusters

Targeted investments in urban infrastructure and industrial parks near key nodes along the IMT TH can transform these areas into vibrant economic hubs. Special economic zones (SEZs) and innovation clusters should be developed to attract high-value industries, stimulate research and development, and create job opportunities in the NER.

• Promotion of Cultural, Educational, and Tourism Exchanges

Alongside physical connectivity, efforts to promote cultural and educational exchanges can strengthen the social bonds that underpin economic cooperation. India should invest in cross-border cultural programs, academic collaborations, and tourism campaigns that highlight the shared heritage and mutual benefits of regional integration. These initiatives can enhance people-to-people connections, ultimately supporting long-term economic growth.

• Environmental and Sustainability Measures

Policy frameworks should incorporate green construction practices, sustainable urban planning, and environmental conservation measures. These initiatives will ensure that infrastructural development does not come at the expense of environmental sustainability. Incentives for renewable energy integration, eco-friendly materials, and waste management systems can help build a more sustainable economic corridor.

Collectively, these policy measures will not only address the immediate challenges facing the IMT TH but also set the stage for a long-term transformation of India's economic landscape. They aim to ensure that infrastructural investments yield tangible benefits for trade, industrial development, and regional integration while safeguarding security and promoting sustainability.

6. Conclusion

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is a project of monumental significance. By reconnecting historical trade routes and forging new linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia, the highway promises to catalyse economic transformation, enhance regional integration, and bolster geopolitical stability. The evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that while the economic rationale is robust, the project's success hinges on addressing a range of challenges—from infrastructural bottlenecks and financial constraints to institutional fragmentation and security risks.

Accelerating infrastructure development, establishing effective coordination mechanisms, and leveraging digital innovation are key to unlocking the corridor's potential. Moreover, the project's strategic significance as a counterbalance to competing regional initiatives reinforces the need for sustained diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation.

In conclusion, the IMT TH and its proposed eastward extension can serve as the cornerstone of regional economic integration in Asia. They offer an opportunity to enhance trade flows, spur industrial development, and promote inclusive, sustainable growth across the region. The recommendations outlined in this paper provide a roadmap

for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and international partners to realize the transformative potential of this landmark initiative. Future research should focus on monitoring project progress, assessing its impact on regional trade flows, and refining policy frameworks to better address emerging challenges.

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