Should the Stilwell Road be Reopened?

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The Stilwell Road, running from Assam in India to Myanmar and further on to China, could act as a growth driver for the entire region. India’s "Act East" policy should factor in this road while planning for new developments in this region.

In the 21st century, political boundaries are not barriers. Rather they are opportunities for development. The Stilwell Road, which was lost in geostrategic calculus in the entire Cold War period, gained momentum with the onset of globalisation and launching of India’s "Act East" policy in the recent past. The road was considered as a prime mover for cross-border trade and economic integration in the region.
The myopic vision of state-centric approach took a back seat when trucks carrying goods from Baoshan, Yunnan province of China, through the Stilwell Road reached the border trading point of Pangsau pass in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh on 29 December 2015 for their display in the third Assam International Agri Horti Show 2016 at Guwahati. In the context of India’s North East, the reopening of Stilwell Road has wider ramifications for the region. Thus, the question arises should the Stilwell Road be reopened?

**The Extent of the Road**

The Stilwell Road, originally known as the Ledo Road, is named after the American General Joseph Warren Stilwell, who undertook the responsibility of constructing the project in December 1942 to open communication links for the Allied forces from India to free Burma (now Myanmar) from the clutches of the Japanese forces. After its completion in 1944, the road was used as a major supply route for the transportation of arms, troops and other essential materials for the Kuomintang Army of China in its war against Japan. The road, covering a distance of 1726 km, starts from Ledo in Assam (India) and goes across Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh (India) and Shindbwiyang, Bhamo and Myitkyina in Kachin (Myanmar) and further links Ledo-Burma roads junction to the city of Kunming in China. The road covers 61 km in India, 1033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China.
Initially, Myanmar was skeptical about reopening the Stilwell Road, because it ran through the insurgency-infested Kachin region upon which the Military Junta did not have any control (News K 2009). Later, the Myanmar government assigned a contract to Yunnan Construction Engineering Group of China and the military-backed Yuzana group in 2010 to reconstruct a 312 km road from Myitkyina in Myanmar to Pangsau pass at India–Myanmar border (Gupta 2012). India has renovated its portion of Stilwell Road and upgraded it to a two-lane highway, while China has made it a six-lane highway.
The rebuilding of the Myitkyina–Pangsau Pass would reduce the cost of transport by about 30% benefiting India, Myanmar and China for bilateral as well as multilateral trade. Generally, goods from North East India are brought through the narrow and overburdened road and rail network of the Siliguri–Kolkata corridor covering near about 1,600 km. This is then shipped through the Strait of Malacca to South East Asia and China. The present route takes about seven days whereas the same consignment through the Stilwell route can land in Myanmar and China in less than two days (Ramachandran 2011).
If the Myanmar segment is completed, then the Ledo–Nampong corridor can be connected to Muse, Lashio, Mandalay and Yangon (Myanmar) through Asian Highway 14 (AH14), Ruili, Wanding and Kunming (China) through Asian Highway 3 (AH3) and Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore through Asian Highway 2 (AH2) and further to Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) of the Greater Mekong Subregion through Asian highways 1 (AH1). It is envisioned that such type of transnational connectivity corridors would help in strengthening free trade architecture and eventually pave the way for regional and subregional cooperation. As the Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi mentioned,

Under the Act East policy, the northeast is envisaged as India’s land bridge to the South East and East Asian nations. Development of road infrastructure and connecting the region with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Bhutan are critical. It is imperative that infrastructure is created and upgraded to the same standard as that of the South East Asian nations (Kalita 2015).

Implications
The people living across the international borders of India and Myanmar have common ethnocultural ties, and reopening of the road would act as a catalyst for cross border trade. The Nampong Land Custom Station (NLCS) notified since 1951 remains largely non-functional and border trade is limited to informal channels. At present, Indian nationals are allowed to visit Pangsau market (Myanmar side) on the 10th, 20th and 30th of every month. Likewise, Myanmarese nationals living within 16 km of its border are permitted to visit Nampong every Friday to purchase their necessary items. [iv] However, with the inception of Act East policy and emergence of free trade architecture in the region, the central government is considering all possible means to start formal trade by renovating the NLCS.

Indian side of the Stilwell Road, a few kilometres away from Pangsau Pass. Courtesy: Jajati K Pattnaik.

In the event of formal border trade, there would be buoyancy in both imports and exports with forest products, gold, silver, zinc, tin, coal, dolomite and other precious metals making their way into the Indian markets, while electronic gadgets, engineering goods, consumer items, and cement etc flowing into the Myanmarese market (Pertin 2015). As a result, it would strengthen the pace for cross border collaboration involving both hardware and software resources for the benefit of all the stakeholders in the region.

In this perspective, the Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, Gautam Mukhopadhyay also felt the need for transforming NLCS into a functional one to attain the economic interests of the North East (PTI 2015). He said “If one considers a catchment area with a radius of 1000 km, the region would be central to at least 10 countries. This geo-strategic concept gains eminence in the light of the country’s Act East Policy (PTI 2015).”

The reopening of the Stilwell Road would promote regional and sub-regional cooperation in South and South East Asia. It would enable India’s North East to collaborate with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) forum on trade, transport, technology, automobiles, machineries, electronics, petrochemicals, gas crackers, pharmaceuticals, herbal, fertiliser, polymer, agro-horticulture, education, banking, investment and tourism by harnessing their shared capabilities.

Bitta Chena, vice president of the North East Federation on International Trade, said, “Stilwell is the easiest and shortest route which connects India’s eastern part with South East Asian countries and would benefit both the region and sub-regions in terms of trade and commerce”. Conversely, Tokong Pertin, director of trade and commerce, Government of Arunachal Pradesh remarked, “The road can be used for trade and better understanding
for the two Asian economic giants (India and China) as well as among the BCIM countries." He expressed the hope that every possible support in terms of logistics would be provided so that it would go a long way in developing future trade and business among BCIM countries and ASEAN (China Reconnects..2015).

The reopening of the Stilwell Road would give rise to growth triangles in the region. Growth triangles are formed on the basis of different comparative strengths of contiguous regions by capitalising their natural resources, technology, finance and human resources for a successful trilateral venture. This concept was unveiled by the first Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong in 1989 in the form of Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle which coalesced the technology and finance of Singapore with that of the land, labour and natural resources of Ria Island of Indonesia and Johor of Malaysia (Heng 2006).

In the case of Stilwell Road, there could be possibilities of similar growth triangles such as (a) India, Myanmar and China Growth Triangle, consisting of Upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India, Yunnan Province of China and Kachin and Sagaing regions of Myanmar, and (b) India, Myanmar and Thailand Forum (IMT) consisting of Upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India, Kachin, Sagaing and Mandalay of Myanmar and Mae Sot of Thailand, based on amalgamation of their comparative advantages quite akin to the SIJORI Growth Triangle. [vi]

**Economic Threat**

India's prime apprehension is that in case the Stilwell Road is reopened, India's North East will be swamped with cheap Chinese goods. This kind of economic threat perception cannot be denied given the nature of easy overflow of Chinese goods into the markets of the North East. Equally, it is pertinent to mention that China has already spread its tentacles in our neighbouring South East Asian countries through several road and rail corridors, so this may not be a completely new development.

Rather, economic engagement with the North East through the Stilwell Road would dispel such Chinese threat perceptions and rightly balance our national interest in South East Asia vis-a-vis China. The former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, General (Retd) J J Singh said in this context,

> We need to focus on the opening of the historic Stilwell Road that linked Assam, Myanmar and Kunming during the Second World War. Only a small portion of about 150 kilometres needs to be made motorable from Pangsau Pass to Shingbwiyang. This road would connect Ledo in Assam with Myitkyina through the Pangsau pass on the Arunachal Pradesh-Myanmar border, and on to the frontier area of Yunnan province of China, a distance of about 600 kilometers. This recommencement of formal border trade will truly give a boost to the economy of northeastern states, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, Assam,
Nagaland and Meghalaya (2012:325).

Further, this perception can be addressed by identifying our resource potentialities and establishing supply-oriented industries to meet the demands of India’s border regions in Bangladesh, Southwest China and Myanmar. In this connection, it would be noteworthy to point out that special economic zones (SEZs) should be developed in the North East and potentialities of the region in pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals; hydro, herbal, horticulture, handicraft and handloom; tradition, technology, trade and tourism should be explored by tapping cross-border synergies. This proposition would remain a mere utopia unless the economies of the region undergo structural reforms with the free play of the market forces.

Before finalising the road map of Stilwell, it is highly necessary that the economies of the North East come up with specific manufacturing products and earn “Make in North East” image across the border by capturing the neighbouring markets, specifically in China. As Tamo Mibang, Vice Chancellor of Rajiv Gandhi University said,

The Stilwell Road can connect Arunachal Pradesh to the South East Asian countries both in terms of cultural and economic cooperation. He categorically said that we should first move from cultural cooperation to trade cooperation. Moreover, Arunachal Pradesh should not be a dumping ground of foreign products; rather the export potentialities of the state should be identified so as to play a meaningful role in India’s Act East policy.[vii]

Problem of Insurgency

The second apprehension is that the Myanmar part of the Stilwell Road which passes through the insurgency-ridden Kachin Province—often used as a safe haven for the North East insurgent groups, might pose security threats in sustaining cross border trade and movement across the regions. But this problem can be resolved through multipronged strategies. At first, attempts should be made to secure peace constituencies across the borderlands which are afflicted with insurgencies. In this respect, both India and Myanmar should generate a congenial atmosphere through back channel methods and sustain a dialogue process with their respective insurgent groups in order to bring them back into the social mainstream.

Moreover, academia and civil society organisations across the borders should intensify their efforts for peace building. Then, efforts should be channelised to generate confidence among disgruntled youth and then wean them away from the path of insurgency by addressing their legitimate grievances with adequate rehabilitation packages. Lastly, geopolitical boundaries should be transformed into potential economic opportunities to
Dealing in Arms

The third apprehension is that if the Stilwell road is reopened, then drugs and small arms may sneak into North East in huge quantities jeopardising the peace and stability of the region. Myanmar, located in the opium-producing golden triangle, acts as the land bridge to such regional/sub-regional cooperation and in the event of cross border trade, this road corridor may be transformed into a potential drug corridor. It is reported that the drug cartels use near about 30 trafficking routes. In this context, the potential threats emerging out of these drug corridors cannot be easily overlooked.

It is also pertinent to mention that the state-run Chinese arms manufacturing company that is, China North Industries Corporation (Norinco) of Yunan which is geographically contiguous to the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur supplies unlawful weapons to the buyers across the African and Asian rebels (Uninathan 2011).

Hence, any kind of illegal arms smuggling from across the border would pose serious challenges to the peace and security of North East India. Unless this unlawful smuggling of arms is stopped, it would be quite difficult to materialise any regional/sub-regional cooperation or cross border synergy in the region. Yet, this problem can then be addressed specifically by India and Myanmar by reinforcing joint surveillance mechanism through information- and communication-induced technology as well as intensifying border patrolling to check illegal entry of drugs and small arms. No doubt, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between India and Myanmar on 10 May 2014 for sharing intelligence information, synchronising patrolling across the international border, exchanging information to combat insurgency, arms smuggling and drug trafficking and initiating measures to foil illegal cross-border movements, if realised in true spirit, would ensure “peace, stability and security” across the international border (MEA 2014).

Conclusions

The implications of reopening the Stilwell Road outweigh our apprehensions. At the external level India can resolve those cross border threats by having diplomatic parleys with Myanmar and China. At the internal level, the union government should work in unison with the state governments, all the stakeholders of the region to address the domestic challenges and create adequate space for trade to take off. Moreover, the political will with a vision for cross border trade and economic integration would fetch huge dividends in terms of growth, development and sustainable future.

[i]The Look East policy was announced by the Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in 1991 to reinforce India’s economic and strategic engagement with its Eastern neighbours based on shared history and culture. The policy was transformed into Act East policy under the
present political dispensation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi focusing on a robust and result-oriented diplomacy to achieve India’s national interest in its Eastern neighbourhood.


(iv) Collected from my field visit to Nampong on 30 November 2015, For details refer, Tokong Pertin, Arunachal Information, Vol.4, no. 40, 1 January, 2016, p.5.


[vi] Derived from the author’s field visits to different parts of Arunachal Pradesh close to China, and Upper Assam during January 2015-January 2016 and Pangsaung market (Kachin Province of Myanmar) on 30 November 2015.

[vii] Culled from an Interview with Prof Tamo Mibang, Vice Chancellor of Rajiv Gandhi University at his official residence on 11 November 2015.

References


