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### **OPENING STILWELL ROAD: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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The Stilwell Road also known as Ledo road, connects Assam to Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, China through northern Myanmar. It was used as a route for trans - regional movement between Assam and Myanmar till early 19th century. The road was constructed during the World War II, from 1942 – 45 - and was used as an alternative route to the Burma road of the Western Allies. However, this road has been closed and been in a state of disuse since independence of India in 1947 because of security reasons.

Steps are being taken to reopen this route as part of Kunming initiative or Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM), a sub regional forum, established in 1999. This regional initiative aims to bring socio-economic development in the region by facilitating connectivity, trade and investment, and people to people contacts amongst these countries.<sup>i</sup> However, there have been concerns and divided opinions voiced by member countries like India and Myanmar in the past for opening of this road, as potential commercial benefits are stacked against the security concerns of the respective states.

#### **Present Status**

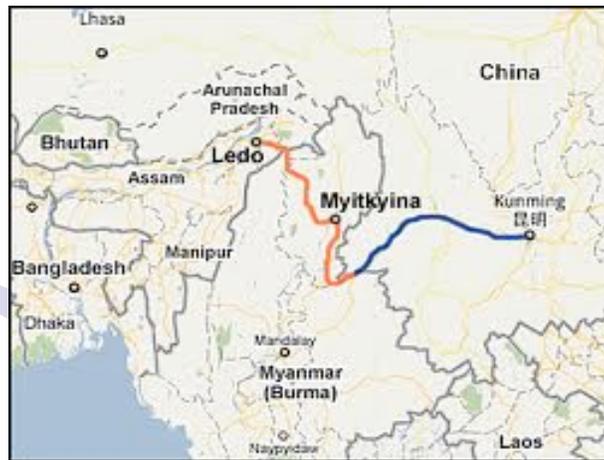
The 1,726-km long Stilwell road may become functional sooner than later as China has already upgraded its portion of 632 km into a six lane mountain highway capable of handling modern container traffic. Myanmar, the linchpin of the connectivity, as major portion (1033 km) runs through its territory, has finally agreed to upgrade its portion through Chinese investment. A Yunnan based Chinese company, Yunnan Construction Engineering Group and a local Myanmar company, the Yuzana group will jointly construct the stretch between Myktina, capital of Kachin state and Pangsau pass upto Indian border.<sup>ii</sup> China has already constructed the road upto Tanai of



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Kachin district. India is still reluctant to upgrade its portion of 61 kms from Ledo to Indo- Myanmar border due to security and commercial concerns.



Stilwell Road

### Opportunities

The revival of this strategic road network can provide a base for future economic and cultural cooperation between India and China and South-east Asia. It will reduce the distance to China from earlier 6000 km to around 1750 kms and can easily handle the major portion of the burgeoning economic trade with China because of cost and time benefits. Presently, it takes more than three weeks to tranship cargo from Kolkata to China by sea, a duration which can be cut down to less than a week if transported by Stilwell Road to Yunnan in China. This connectivity can also help achieving India's Look East Policy's goal of engaging with South East Asian countries. It can make use of Myanmar for channeling exports to the ASEAN region by other trans-ASEAN networks linking Myanmar to other ASEAN nations. It would also enhance people to people contacts through tourism, commercial activity etc and help bring greater understanding amongst the people of connected countries.

The Stilwell road will provide a huge opportunity to North East India, specially the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, to transform their economy due to opening of trade and commerce with China and ASEAN countries. Reviving border trade at Pangsau Pass, along the border with



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Myanmar, will reduce time, cost and distance involved in trade. It may also encourage mainstream Indian industry to invest in production hubs in North East India to make goods meant for export to China and SE Asia. Therefore, NE India has the potential to become a regional hub for its neighbours to obtain Indian automobile components, pharmaceuticals, fruits, vegetables, textiles or cotton yarn. Correspondingly, Indian traders will have access to electronic gadgets, blankets, consumer durables, teak, gold and semi-precious stones from the other side.

There are many other unexplored potentials like horticulture, floriculture, biodiversity and tourism in this region of Northeast India, Myanmar and South West China. A large number of ethnic groups living across this region have common or similar cultural and social fabric which can be regenerated.

### **Challenges**

The prevailing security scenario in the region, characterised by insurgency, ethnic division transnational crimes acts as the major obstacle in translating such a dream to a reality. Myanmar had resisted the opening of this road as it passes through the borders with China and India where ethnic conflicts have taken place; in this region Myanmar has little control over Kachin state, home to Kachin Independence Army and other insurgent groups operating in North East India.

There is apprehension amongst the Indian security set up that Chinese, – in the event of war between the two countries, could use this road to move its troops and supplies to Arunachal Pradesh, an area it claims as its own.<sup>iii</sup> There are differences between China and India over the boundary issue, as evidenced by regular incursions, intermittent standoffs between the two militaries; and claims and counter claims. Therefore, opening of this road is likely to be a cause of concern to India as it opens an access from China to Arunachal Pradesh through Myanmar.

There is fear that it would lead to a deluge of cheap Chinese goods and consumer durables to Northeast India. Already, India is at the wrong side of growing trade imbalance with China and it would worsen the trade imbalance in their favour. Therefore, there is a genuine apprehension that



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instead of developing the economy of Northeast India, the Stilwell road may actually undermine the local economy.

### Way Ahead

While there are strategic concerns within the defence establishment, that opening of Stilwell road would make India vulnerable to possible Chinese attacks, but these are overridden due to huge potential of development of trade, prosperity and thereby peace in the region. It will be in better interest of India to develop the infrastructure and its portion of the Stilwell road, as accrued commercial interests are likely to outweigh the pros of its non construction. And if we were to upgrade our infrastructure and capability in this border region, then we also can cause vulnerability to China along the same road.

### Conclusion

There are no two opinions that opening of Stilwell road has potential of trade and commercial development in India, Myanmar and China. It can also act as a catalyst of transforming North East India into a regional productivity hub. However, because of the security apprehensions of India, opening of Stilwell road is likely to be deferred, which will indeed be a pity since the benefits of opening the road far outweigh maintaining status quo.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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<sup>i</sup> BCIM Economic corridor : Prospects and issues by Brig Vinod Anand, accessed at <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2014/june/02/bcim-economic-corridor-prospects-and-issues>

<sup>ii</sup> India divided on opening of Stilwell road by Subir Bhaumik, the Irrawaddy of 13 May, 2013 accessed at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/india-divided-on-opening-of-stilwell-road.html>



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<sup>iii</sup> India yet to decide on opening of Stilwell road accessed at Infrastructure today, May 2013,  
<http://infrastructuretoday.co.in/News.aspx>

