

India-Myanmar Relations: Context of Contemporary Geographical Routes and Linkages

India and Myanmar should focus on their borders as connecting points; safe and secure borders are essential for faster trade. There is the other side of the story – greater economic integration will ensure augmented safety along the borders resulting in an ambience of economic prosperity. It is high time to think of developing these connecting links and making large-scale investment in developing road- and railway-linkages.

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While we talk of intra-Asian linkages, we transcend many political boundaries of nations. While we talk of India-Myanmar connectivity, we take into consideration two dimensions, i.e., land and maritime connectivity. The article deals with overland linkages between India and Myanmar, and the Eastern Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal and consequential India-Myanmar relations.

Overland linkage projects between Myanmar and India

There run four important linkage projects between India and Myanmar: (1) India-Myanmar Friendship Road (2) Rhi- Tiddim-Falam Road (3) The Stilwell Road project and (4) New Delhi-Hanoi Rail Link passing through Myanmar

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1. India-Myanmar Friendship Road:

Among the several projects, completion of the 160-km India-Myanmar Friendship Road (also known as Moreh-Tamu Road) in 2001 on Myanmar territory, connecting Kalewa, Kalemmyo and Tamu with Moreh, was imperative for sub-regional integration between two countries. Tamu (Sagaing Division, Myanmar) is the border area on Myanmar side, only 5 km from the Indian border point, Moreh (Manipur, India). With grant-aid from the Government of India, Kaly-Tamu Road was completely upgraded and opened in February 2001. Tamu-Kyigone-Kalemmyo section of about 82 miles and 4 furlongs was completed in September 2009. Kyigone-Kalewa section of about 17 miles and 4 furlongs has been under maintenance by the Indian side. This Friendship Road became one of the major parts of the Trilateral Highway project linking India-Myanmar-Thailand under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative, 2005. (See Map No. 1)

The Imphal-Mandalay bus service along the above-noted route has been a long-cherished dream of the people of Manipur, which is intended to bring closer ties between the peoples of Manipur and Myanmar especially the Myanmar-Manipuris. It may be recalled that a resolution was passed by the Manipur Legislative Assembly on 1 August 2003 for the introduction of the bus service between Imphal and Mandalay, according to an official statement.

V Chibber, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways Secretary, has stated that he is confident of economic prospects in the Imphal-Mandalay road-connectivity sector. The Government of India had been actively pursuing the matter (introduction of bus service between Imphal and Mandalay) with the Government of Myanmar. Mr Chibber made a direct assessment of Imphal-Moreh highway, and in March 2015, he personally inspected the building where visa-on-arrival facility would be opened as well as the Customs office at Moreh.

With this, preparations on the side of India are complete. The latest news is that the Imphal-Mandalay trial-bus-service was flagged off on 10 December 2015. The tourist bus, carrying 27 officials from both the State and Central Governments including five officials of the Union Ministry of Roads and Transport, travelled to Nay Pyi Taw via Mandalay. After the ceremonial flag-off, Transport Secretary M Lakshmikumar Singh said that the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) road agreement, on the anvil, would boost the bus service and open new opportunities for trade and commerce.ⁱ The Imphal-Mandalay distance is about 595 km, and Mandalay to Nay Pyi Taw it is 280 km. This bus service is not yet fully functional, as of writing.

Myanmar wants to repair/reconstruct 66 vintage bridges which dot the highway between Tamu and Mandalay. But heavy vehicles have been crossing these bridges without any problem. As such, these bridges would not pose any problem when a regular, full-fledged Imphal-Mandalay bus service is launched. Pointing out that a joint team of Indian and Myanmar officials had conducted a field survey on the alignment of a highway which would connect Imphal with Mandalay, Mr Chibber said that the new highway would take an additional hour for one to travel to Mandalay from Imphal. Informing that Maram-Peren-Dimapur road, Khongshang-Tamenglong road and Ukhrul-Tadubi road have been recognised as highways, Mr Chibber stated that Maram-Peren highway would be the third highway which connects Manipur with the outside world. Talking about Imphal-Jiribam highway, he clarified that no sanction is pending with the relevant Ministry for the construction of the highway. The amount of Rs 260 crore sanctioned by the Ministry has not been fully utilised (at the time of this statement). Nevertheless, the Border Roads Organisation had been promising that the highway construction work would be completed by March this year except for a 15-km-long section. The Secretary, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways went up to Nungba and inspected the condition of Imphal-Jiribam highway.ⁱⁱ

2. Rhi-Tiddim- Falam Road

Engineers and surveyors from Border Road Organisation of India and Public Works of Myanmar had prepared a detailed Project Report (DPR) of upgrading Rhi-Tiddim-Falam road since 2006. A technical team from India also visited to consult with the Myanmar government with regard to the Rhi-Tiddim-Falam road upgrading project in 2008. Again, a delegation from two countries conducted a reconnaissance survey in 2009 and India allocated USD 60 million for the respective project. At this writing, the draft MOU for the projects is underway to realise the upgrading project.

3. The Stilwell Road project

The Stilwell Road is named after an American general, Joseph Stilwell, and was built during World War II to free China from Japanese occupation. The road linked Ledo, in India's northwestern Assam State, with Kunming. About 1033 km of the road, which traversed northern Kachin State via Myitkyina, is in Myanmar. Trade between China and India has expanded rapidly in recent years, and both countries would benefit from a road link. India's past Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had told AFP that his government was keen to further the country's "Look East Policy", which aims to strengthen trade and other ties with countries

in Southeast Asia. Assam's State Minister for Industry, Pradyut Bordoloi, had also said: "We are widening and developing Stilwell Road on the Indian side, which will be completed in four to six months. But the rest of the project depends on the three countries agreeing to reopen the road".ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a strong will for reopening the road in all countries concerned, namely India, China and Myanmar. The total population of India, China and the ASEAN countries is nearly three billion people, about half of the world population. India and China are eager to reopen this road; India wants to open its landlocked northeastern states to trade with China and the ASEAN nations, while China is willing to send its products through the same route. Myanmar would be able to reap benefits handsomely from this trade by charging transit fees and gaining spin-off benefits from tourism.

It is interesting to note how this Stillwell road can be used as an alternative to sea transit routes. Myanmar could do the same as Singapore that has used its strategic location to profit from transit trade. The proposed Kyaukphyu deep-sea port and connecting highway projects will shorten the overall distance by thousands of kilometers, and will save money and time for China which could send its products to the west and Middle East through Myanmar, instead of the Malacca Strait. China and India have suggested to Myanmar's government that the 1726-kilometre-long Stilwell road, which could serve as an important road link between the world's two most populous nations be reopened. (See Map 3)

4. New Delhi - Hanoi Rail Link

There are also other rail link projects like the Jiribam-Imphal-Moreh line in the Indian State of Manipur and the Tamu-Kalay-Segyi line in Myanmar, as well as rehabilitation of Myanmar's existing Segyi-Chaungu Myohaung line. According to the state-run company, Rail India Technical and Economic Services Ltd that conducted a feasibility study of the proposed freight corridor, the Jiribam-Imphal-Moreh rail link is estimated to cost USD 649 million, the Tamu-Kalay-Segyi link in Myanmar USD 296 million, and the cost of refurbishing the Segyi-Chungu-Myohaung line has been pegged at USD 62.5 million. All these rail links would ultimately add to the New Delhi-Hanoi rail link proposed at the MGC ministerial meeting held in Phnom Penh in June 2003. The main tasks of developing New Delhi-Hanoi Rail Link are – (a) to link India's Manipur with India's main railway corridor, and (b) to re-establish and renovate railway networks in Myanmar.

India is planning New Delhi-Hanoi Rail Link along two possible routes. Both these proposed railway routes will connect Hanoi through Myanmar along different rail links. Route-I will connect Hanoi via Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. In Route-II, it is diverted to Bangkok via Ye and the newly-constructed portion of Ye and Dawei in Myanmar, then to Hanoi through Thailand and Laos. On both routes, the proposed link from Silchar (India) to Thanbyuzayat is common (See Map 4).

Although a preliminary study was done by the Indian consulting engineering company, RITES, in 2006, complete details of both routes are not available due to lack of data about the railway systems in different countries. On completion of these projects, it could be possible to promote regional cooperation, foster economic and social integration and increase trade and investment.

5. India-Myanmar Relations – Context of the Bay of Bengal

India and Burma (now Myanmar) together form the 'arch of Bay of Bengal', and it was from the ports in Bengal, Orissa and the Coromandel, there existed regular transshipment of ships. It is now crucial how India's relations with Myanmar can be developed in terms of new linkages in the Bay of Bengal arch.

Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project

In the contemporary context, a significant water project is the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project that was signed by the two ministers from Myanmar and India. Member-countries of the ASEAN are naturally endowed with some 51,000 km of navigable inland waterways which can play an active role in transport development. However, the infrastructures related to this endowment are under-utilised due to poor network, poor river ports and facilities, and poor intermodal connectivity.^{iv} There is an urgent need for developing inland water-transport connectivity to reap the large potential in reducing freight costs and the time-lag in trade. Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project is, by this logic, utilising Kaladan river transport and land transport for better connectivity.

It is aimed at an optimal utilisation of transport modes such as seaports etc. A major purpose is to develop Sittwe port (Myanmar) by the Indian Government for supporting the cargo-flow from Kolkata to Aizawl (Mizoram State, India) through Kaladan River (Myanmar). The project involves a major upgradation of infrastructure at Sittwe, located about 250km from the Mizoram border on the north-western coast of Myanmar where the Kaladan River joins the Bay of Bengal.

^v The project will connect Kolkata port, eastern India with the seaport in Sittwe (Arakan State) –

a total distance of 539 km. It will then link Sittwe to the landlocked area of Mizoram in Northeastern India via river and road transport (see red line on the map below). It will promote bilateral relations between India and Myanmar, and increase trade, on a nondiscriminatory basis, with Southeast Asian economies.^{vi}

Conclusion:

The aforesaid narrative shows two/three dimensions of India-Myanmar geographical linkages. First, there is a direct road linkage between these two countries via Assam, Manipur and Mizoram. Second, there is trans-Bay of Bengal maritime linkage, and third India-Myanmar extended railway linkages as a part of India-ASEAN network connectivity.

My contention is that these countries should focus on borders as connecting points, and safe and secure borders are necessary for faster trade. There is the other side of the story – greater economic integration will ensure augmented safety along the borders resulting in an ambience of economic prosperity. It is high time to think of developing these connecting links and making large-scale investment in developing road- and railway-linkages. The geographical corridors which I noted above can act as economic corridors for inter-regional trade developments. India and Myanmar are good friends now, and considering our past historical bonds and linkages, there are many things more to contemplate which will be beneficial to the generations to come.

References

ⁱ *Imphal Free Press*, 10 December 2015

ⁱⁱ Staff Reporter, “Imphal- Manipur Bus Service Likely in March” *The Sanghai Express*, Imphal, 21-Jan-2015

ⁱⁱⁱ www.nagalim.nl/news/archive-072006.html accessed on 22 June, 2014

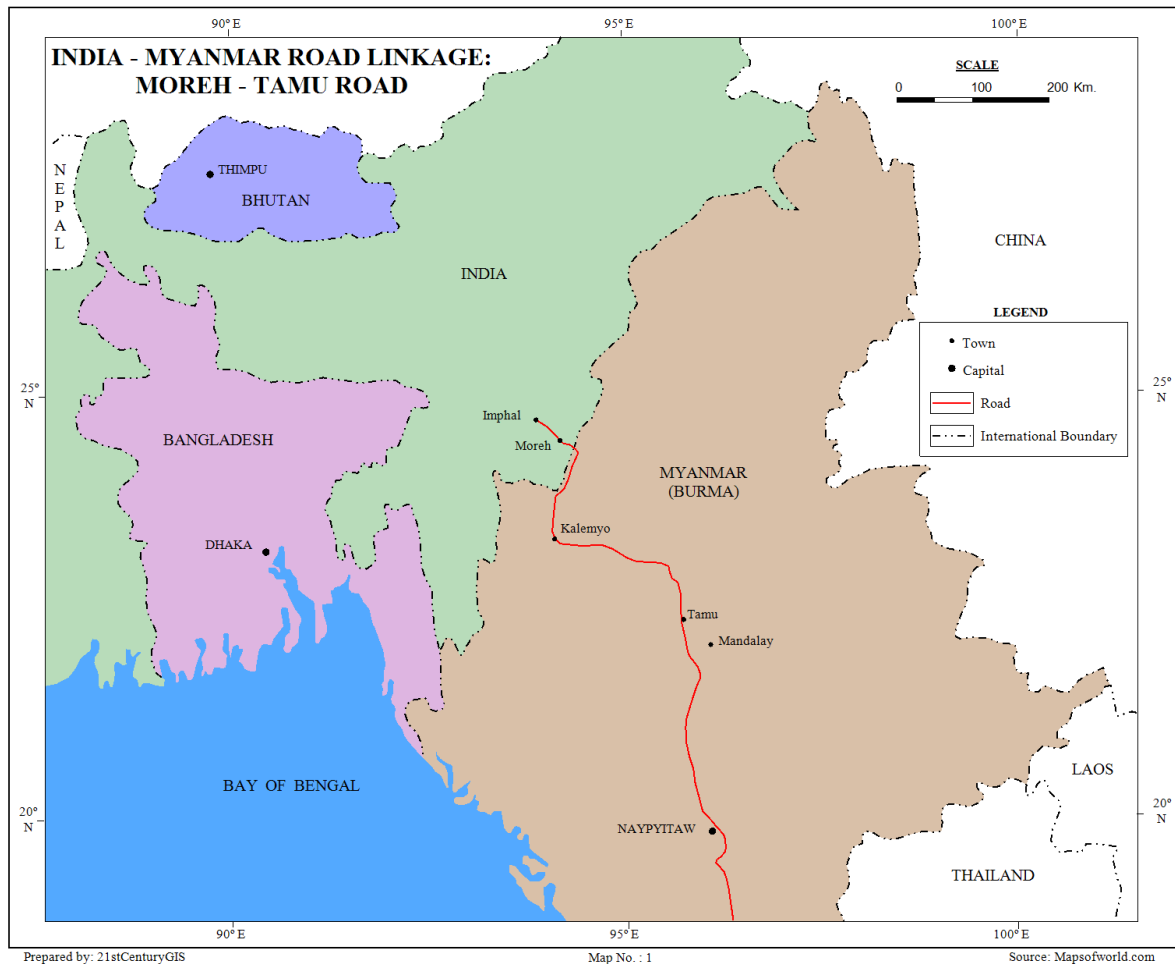
^{iv} Asian Development Bank, Report of 2011.

^v IPCS 2008

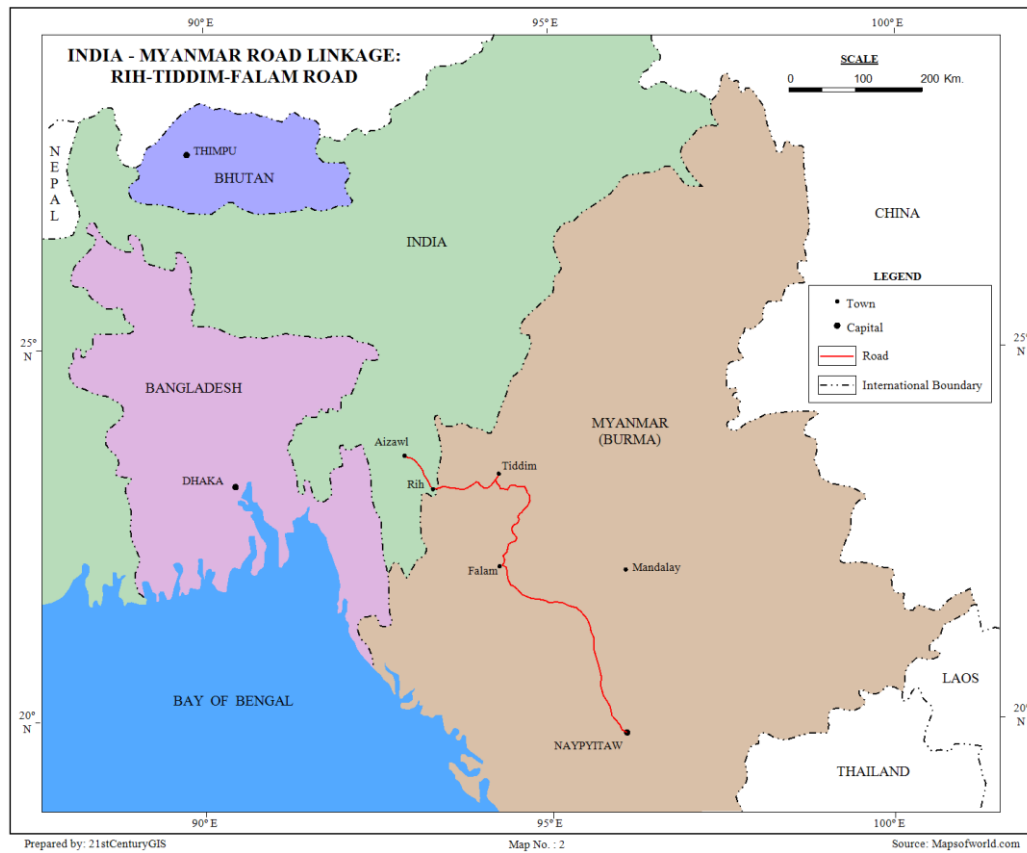
^{vi} Ministry of Commerce, Myanmar-relevant reports. 2010-2011

[NOTE: The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, cannot confirm the authenticity of any of the maps in this paper.]

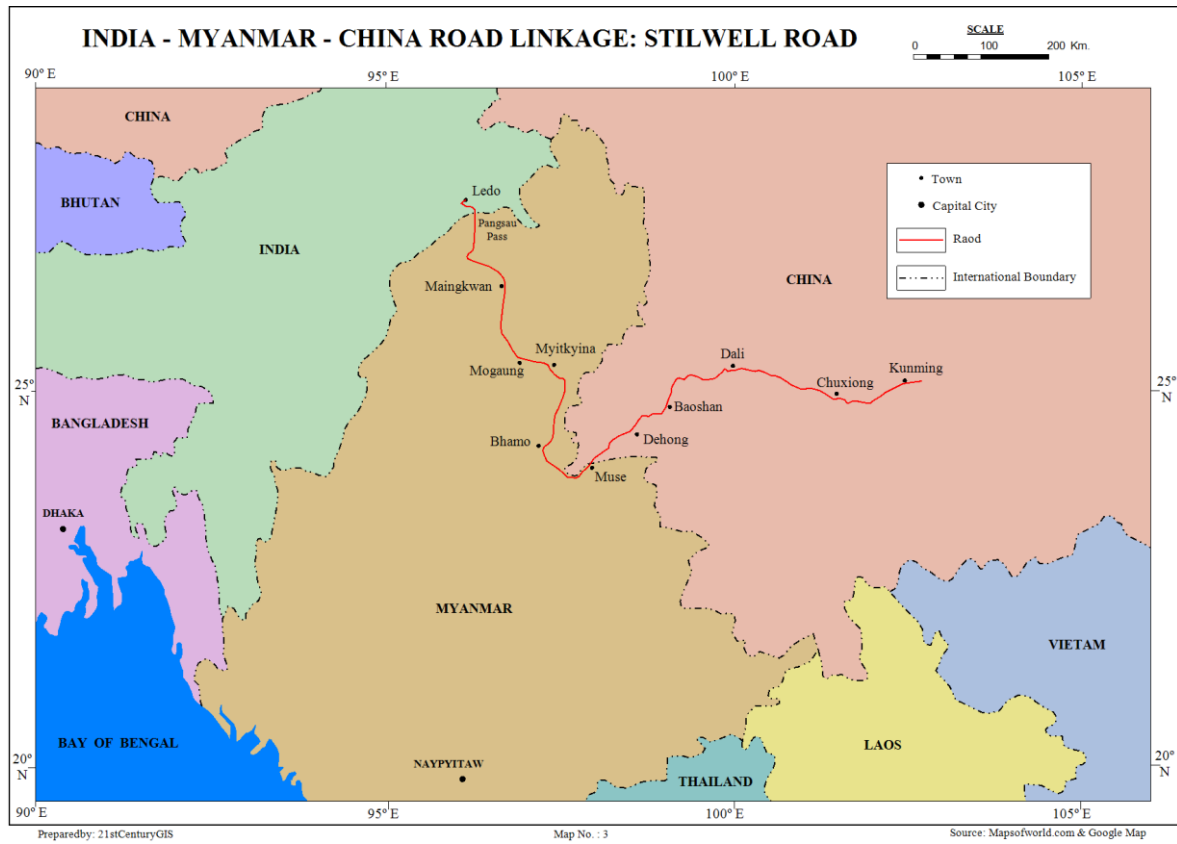
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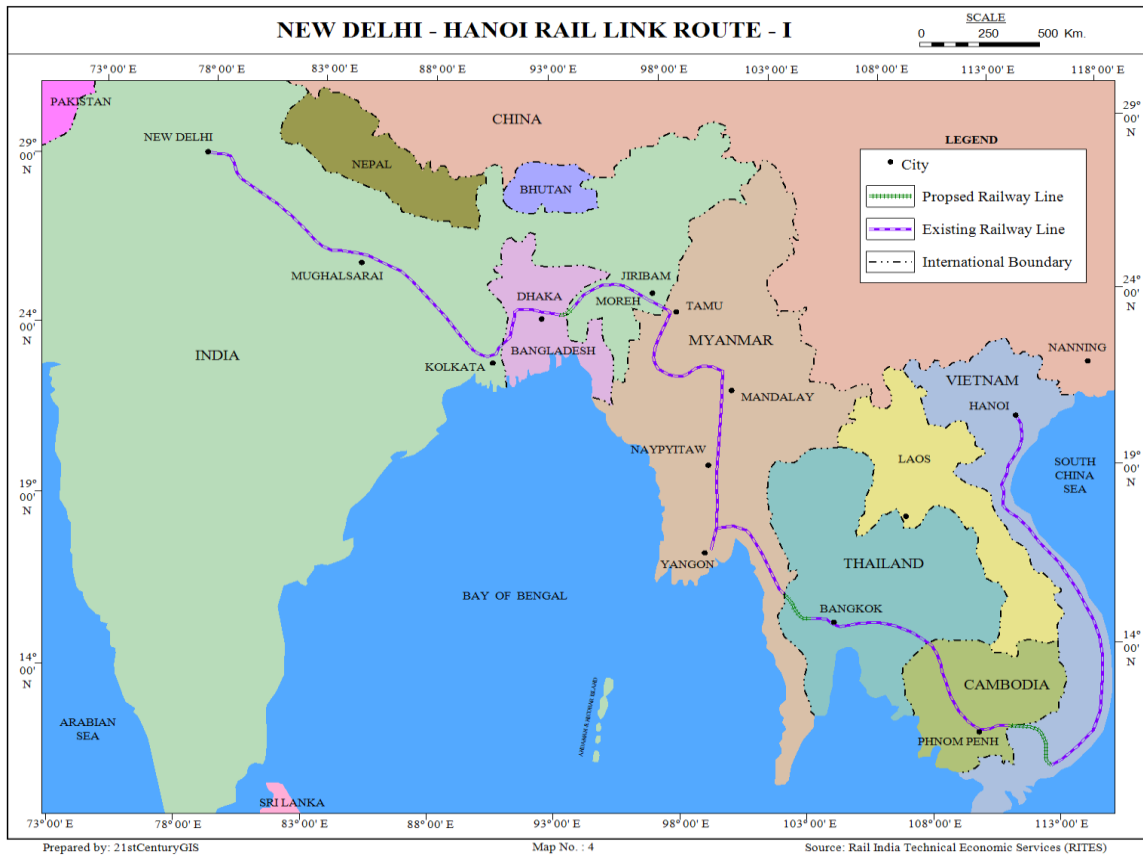
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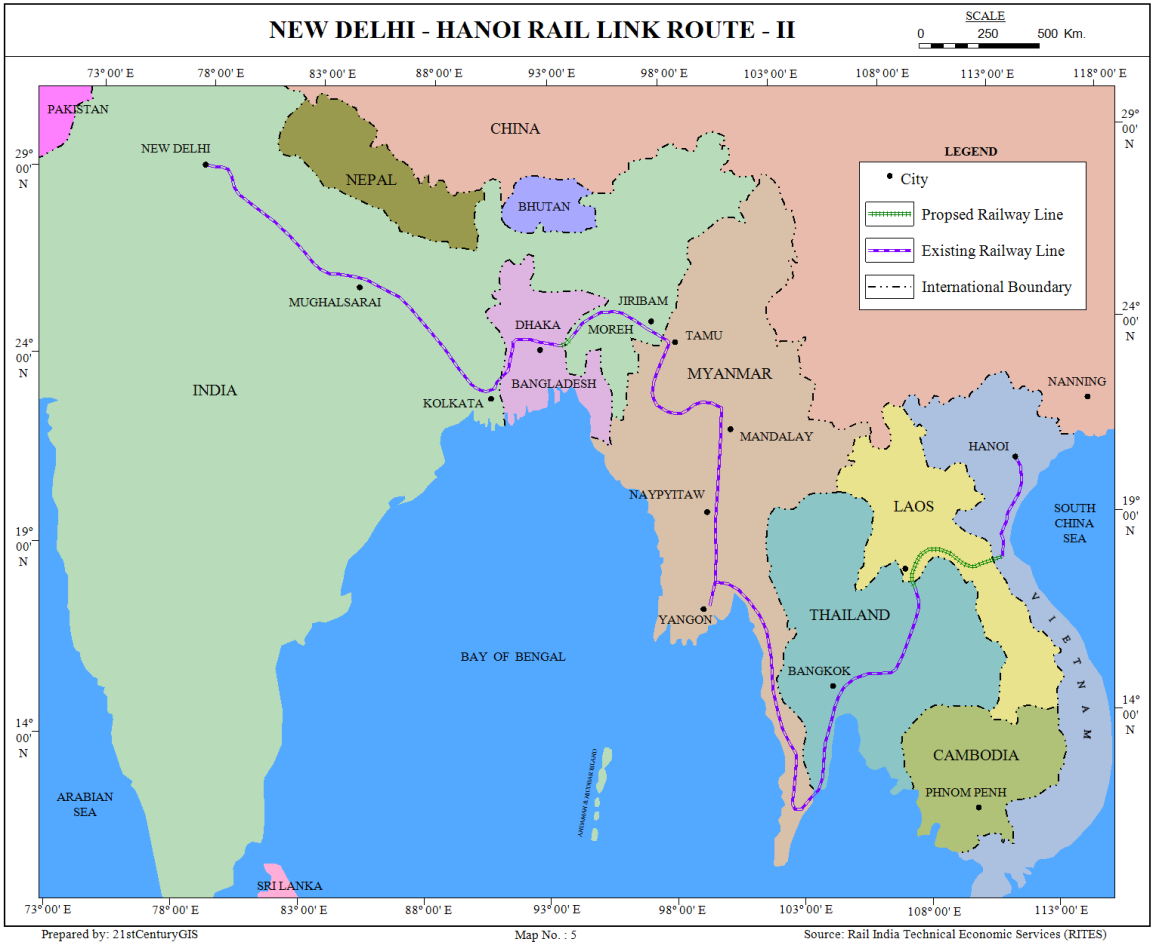
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Map No. 4

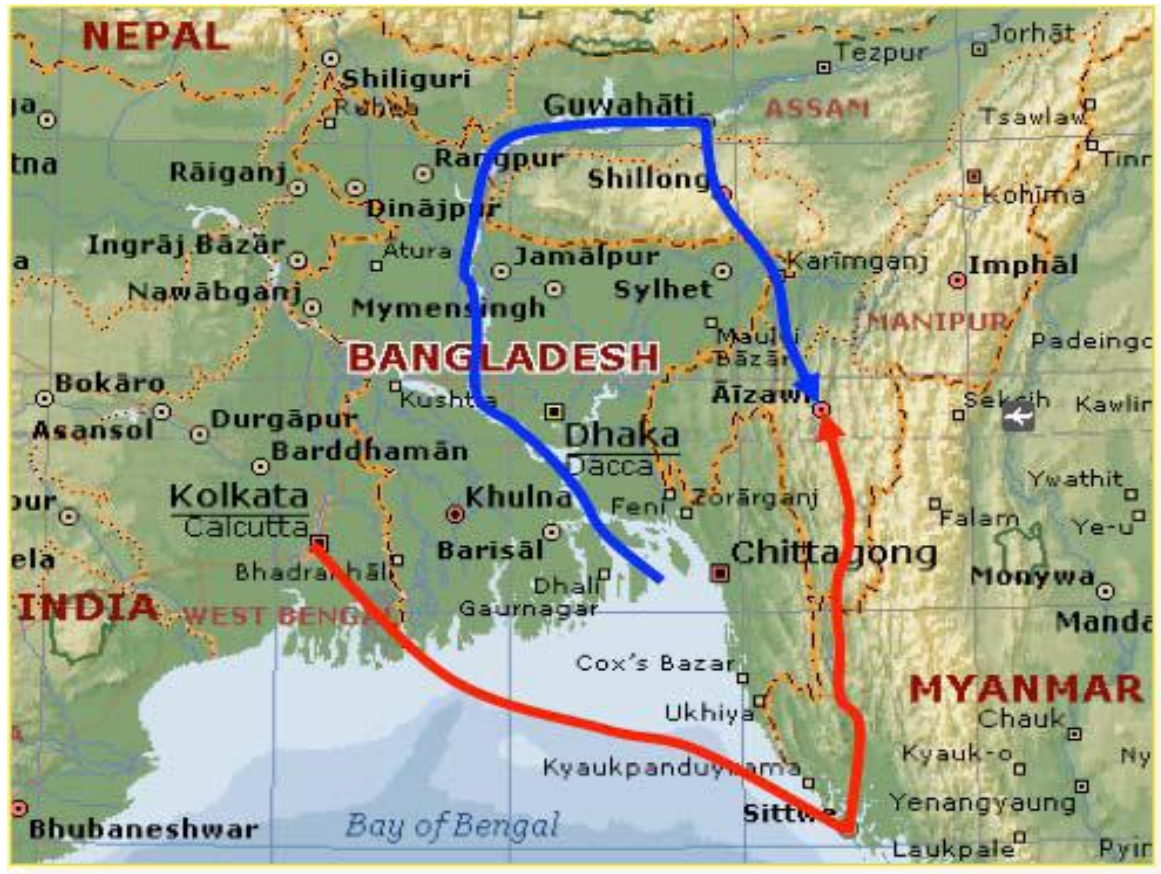


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Map No. 6

Kaladan Multi-modal Transport Project



Source: Myanmar Port Authority (2010)

Map No. 7

