

2

ADVANCING ASIAN REGIONAL RAIL CONNECTIVITY

April 25th, 2025

A Panel Discussion was organized on “Advancing Asian Regional Rail Connectivity”, featuring speakers with extensive expertise spanning Indian Railways, international railway advisory, strategic infrastructure planning, and regional connectivity initiatives across South and Southeast Asia.

The event comprised two sessions: “South Asian Regional Rail Integration” and “Bridging Regions: South Asian Rail Connectivity with Southeast and West Asia.” The event was curated by M.Jamshed and Ms. Himani Agrawal

Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi, President of Chintan Research Foundation, opened with condolences to victims of the Pahalgam Attack before introducing CRF’s three verticals: the Centre for Climate Change and Energy Transition, the Centre for Economy and Trade, and the Centre for Geopolitics and Strategic Studies.

Dr. C Raja Mohan delivered an enthusiastic keynote emphasizing railways’ central role in development, trade, and statecraft despite the digital age dominance. “You can’t fax real stuff,” he quipped, stressing that both goods and data require physical conduits – from rail lines to undersea cables. He contextualized Asia’s rail development as a historical paradox - while colonial

“We are adding almost 5000 kilometres of rail track every year, which is equivalent to Swiss Railway’s entire existing network.”





powers used railways for exploitation and control, they inadvertently enabled pan-Indian political consciousness and regional integration.

Addressing India's neighbourhood connectivity challenges, Dr. Mohan highlighted difficulties in rebuilding cross-border rail links lost post-independence due to geopolitical sensitivities with neighbours like Sri Lanka and Nepal, plus bureaucratic constraints. He advocated for greater private sector participation, citing historical precedents of princely investments and inefficiencies of current state-led initiatives. He noted that geopolitics continues shaping infrastructure choices, whether China's outreach to Nepal or Tibet-Pakistan rail proposals, requiring India to act strategically and prioritize regional integration.

He concluded that connectivity transcends tracks and trains, deeply intertwining with sovereignty, national identity, and geopolitical competition. He emphasized that India's path to becoming developed by 2047 requires robust, strategic connectivity planning that balances commercial efficiency with national security considerations.

SESSION 1: South Asian Regional Rail Integration

The session featured distinguished panelists including Mr. M. Jamshed, Ms. Jaya Verma Sinha, Shri Vijoy Kumar Singh, Mr. R.N. Sunkar, and Mr. P.R. Parhi, graciously sharing their collective expertise in policymaking, infrastructure

development, and administrative innovation.

Mr. M. Jamshed addressed the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) project's three major corridors: Northern (China-Russia-Europe), Central (China-Central Asia-Europe), and Southern (Singapore-Southeast Asia-South Asia-Europe). While northern and central corridors are operational with growing container traffic, the southern corridor remains complex, passing through 22 countries from Singapore to Europe via Myanmar, India, and Iran. "This southern corridor is the most complicated and critical," he noted, citing numerous missing links requiring multi-country collaboration. He detailed India's cross-border connectivity progress: five active rail interchange points with Bangladesh plus the completed Agartala-Akhaura link, ongoing northeastern connections to Myanmar through Moreh, multiple Nepal cross-border links including the proposed Raxaul-Kathmandu connection, Bhutan's 56 km Gelephu-Kokrajhar line, and potential Sri Lanka connectivity via a 23 km rail bridge from Dhanushkodi to Talaimannar.

Ms. Jaya Verma Sinha highlighted that "South Asia is known as the least connected region in the world today," despite cultural commonalities. She recalled the emotional launch of the Maitree Express from Kolkata to Dhaka on Bengali New Year, offering seamless cross-border travel unlike India-Pakistan services requiring border train





changes. However, current realities are grim: “All three trains stand suspended; they are not running at this point in time,” due to geopolitical disruptions in Bangladesh, though some support for cross-border rail cooperation continues.

Mr. R.N. Sunkar clarified misconceptions about Indian Railways’ growth, emphasizing that India adds nearly 5,000 kilometers of track annually through doubling, tripling, and quadrupling corridors. “We are adding almost 5000 kilometres of rail track every year, which is equivalent to Swiss Railway’s entire existing network,” he stated. He highlighted landmark projects including the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link with 97 km of tunnels and the iconic Chenab Bridge standing 350 meters above the riverbed.

Mr. Vijoy Kumar Singh from CONCOR addressed the decline in container services to Bangladesh, noting operational constraints and infrastructure gaps. He emphasized that “Multimodal transportation is fundamentally containerized movement,” highlighting the need for complete

ecosystems including exporters, forwarders, and customs for viable cross-border logistics. Despite Indian support for Bangladesh’s proposed container depots in Sirajganj and Ishwardi, progress remains stalled due to infrastructural and logistical constraints.

Mr. P.R. Parhi stressed that intra-regional trade in South Asia remains globally lowest, rising only from 2-3% in 1990 to 8% in 2021-22, contrasting sharply with ASEAN’s 25%. He warned that without addressing infrastructural concerns, road transport will become unmanageable by 2045, making rail and waterways crucial. The BBIN initiative emerged as a practical alternative to stagnated SAARC efforts, with potential to increase rail traffic from 4% to 33% by 2045. “Unless the infrastructural concerns are removed, we are not going to achieve any progress,” he cautioned, emphasizing the importance of both physical and soft linkages.

SESSION 2: Bridging Regions – South Asian Rail Connectivity with Southeast and West Asia

The second session featured Col. Rajeev Agarwal, Mr. Manoj Srivastava, Mr. Prasanna Karthik, and Mr. M. Jamshed, focusing on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and broader connectivity challenges.

Col. Rajeev Agarwal highlighted IMEC as one of the most transformative initiatives announced during India’s G20 Summit in September 2023.



The corridor begins at India's western ports, moves through UAE and Saudi Arabia across the Arabian Desert, and reaches Haifa Port in Israel, connecting onward to Europe. Unlike China's BRI, IMEC involves financially strong, like-minded countries capable of independently funding their segments. The corridor encompasses green energy transmission, undersea internet connectivity, and broader economic development, aligning with India's "One Sun, One World, One Grid" initiative. However, the Gaza conflict disrupted regional momentum, emphasizing the need for alternative planning and integration of initially excluded countries like Egypt and Oman for enhanced resilience.

Mr. Manoj Srivastava outlined systematic challenges including 24-30-hour truck waiting times at borders like Petrapole, differing rail gauges, lengthy customs procedures, and lack of harmonized documentation. He emphasized the need for digitalization, standardized documentation, and harmonized legal systems, drawing on international best practices like OTIF frameworks. Citing successes like the Jayanagar-Bijalpura rail link, he stated that while connectivity visions are ambitious, addressing foundational border management challenges is critical for seamless regional rail integration.

Mr. Prasanna Karthik focused on physical linkages through India's western ports – Mundra, Kandla, and Jawaharlal Nehru Port – complemented by the upcoming Vizhinjam transshipment port scheduled for May 2 inauguration. He noted that a container ship carrying 20,000 TEUs would require nearly 80 trains handling 250 TEUs each, a scale current capacity cannot support efficiently. Drawing lessons from INSTC delays, he emphasized the need for substantial railway infrastructure upgrades and seamless customs procedures across countries. He stressed the vital role of private sector operationalization in logistics, particularly in tracking, customs, and transport management, while governments should focus on

enabling regulatory frameworks.

Mr. M. Jamshed concluded by discussing India's Act East Policy evolution from the 1994 "Look East" policy, highlighting projects like the 70% completed India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and 110 km rail link to Myanmar's Tamu. In Southeast Asia, the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link and China's high-speed rail to Vientiane are progressing, but full integration depends on Myanmar's connectivity. He emphasized IMEC as "India's moment" and "the cornerstone of economic progress across the region," providing a crucial alternative to existing routes through a region that has "never, since the ancient Red Sea route, been considered for such connectivity despite its game changing potential in terms of shorter transits, accessibility and multimodal connectivity."

Both sessions highlighted the critical importance of seamless rail connectivity, simplified border procedures, enhanced private sector involvement, and India's strategic role in eastward and westward connectivity. Key challenges include political stability, infrastructure gaps, regulatory harmonization, and the need for comprehensive multimodal transport ecosystems. Success depends on sustained political will, strategic planning, and effective public-private partnerships to realize the transformative potential of regional rail integration. ●