

channels will have to be dredged, one across Adam's Bridge, the chain of islets and shallows linking India with Sri Lanka, just southeast of Pamban Island, and another through the shallows of Palk Bay, deepening the Palk Straits. The total length of these two channels will be 89 km (155 miles). The initial excavations will produce in excess of 80 million cubic meters of dredged silt and sand, and subsequent maintenance dredging to keep the passage open will require 100,000 cubic meters of silt to be removed per year.

Back in 1976, Sri Lanka and India reached an agreement dividing the sea between the two countries. One premise of the agreement was that there would be no international shipping in the Strait. Sethusamudram will be a cut through the Indian side of the Strait. Nonetheless, the project has drawn opposition from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in India and Sri Lanka. Although the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), in

## Developing Cooperative Alliances in the Region

Last year, India reached an agreement with Myanmar, signed in Yangon by the foreign ministers of India, Myanmar and Thailand, to develop transport linkages between the three countries. When complete, the 1,400-kilometer road corridor will be a highway of friendship linking the peoples of South and Southeast Asia.

India's plan to build a deep-sea port in Dawei, Myanmar, together with the new highway connecting it to Kanchanaburi in Thailand, will no doubt contribute further toward closer trade and commercial links between the two regions.

Dawei, the capital of Tanintharyi division, is on a long, narrow coastal plain (bounded by the Andaman Sea in the east), which runs to Kawthaung, the southern-most point of Myanmar, and which then continues to the Malay Peninsula. Building Dawei port has a direct security angle for the Indian Navy's ambitious Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) project at Port Blair. FENC will extend the navy's nuclear/strategic combat capability and aid in getting it deep-sea status. Dawei is located across the Andaman Sea on the Myanmar coast almost facing the FENC. India has another, more specific economic interest in Dawei port.

Last January, India reached agreement in principle with Myanmar and Bangladesh on the construction and operation of a pipeline that will bring natural gas from Myanmar to India via Bangladesh, according to reports by the Alexander Gas & Oil company newsletter.

Nagpur, prepared a full-fledged environmental impact assessment report for the Sethusamudram project, the controversy has not ended. The NEERI said that the proposed route will not trigger any environmental problem, and that 21 national marine parks that are situated in the general area will not be harmed.

Most of the opposition, however, centers on issues such as oil spills and pollution. Detractors point out that ships flush their wastes, unwanted cargo, and, accidentally, oil into the sea. In addition, oil slicks have begun to show up on India's west coast. As of now, ocean currents transport pollution and oil slicks south of Sri Lanka away from the peninsula, where they get diluted in the Indian Ocean.

Moreover, environmental activists point out that digging the ocean passage will stir up dust and toxins that lie beneath the ocean bed. They claim that the corals in the region have begun to die because of a modest rise in sea temperature. When the project is completed, the coastal currents will increase significantly, they say, and a systematic survey of the geology of the ocean bed under excavation is necessary.

There is a fear among some that an upsurge of coastal currents can lead to higher tides and more energetic ocean waves that will erode the coast. As a result, many of the harbors and coastal structures may become vulnerable, because they were designed based on present ocean dynamics.

At the international level, not much has been heard against the project. But the Tamil Tigers, which are seeking autonomy from Colombo, have little reason to like the project. A stronger Indian naval presence would completely cut off the Tigers' access to arms they obtain from southeast Asia. In fact, the Tigers are on the wane as the Indian Navy has begun to flex its muscles in the Andaman Sea.

## The Opposition

Some point out that bringing the entire Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea all the way to the mouths of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean is a policy laid out by New Delhi to contain China in that area. Since the late 1980s, New Delhi claims, Beijing has invested in naval bases to develop a safe line of energy supply from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. China has developed naval facilities on the Greater Cocos Island, which is part of the Andaman archipelago but belongs to Myanmar.

On Pakistan's Makran coast, China is building a dual-purpose naval facility in Gwador. China has access to the Iranian naval base in Bandar Abbas, located on the northern side of the Hormuz Strait in the Persian Gulf.

East of Gwador, China has reportedly negotiated a deal with the Maldives to build a base in Marao, one of the largest of Maldives' 1,192 islands. New Delhi claims that the base deal was finalized after two years of negotiations when Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Male on May 17, 2001 on his four-nation South Asian tour.