

Thailand's Kra Land Bridge (Might) Reshape Asia

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Asia-Pacific Research, March 12, 2024

[New Eastern Outlook](#) 26 December 2023

Region: [South-East Asia](#)

Theme: [Economy](#)

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[This article was originally published on NEO in December 2023.]

Thailand's government has put together a serious proposal to build a land bridge across the Thai Kra Isthmus connecting ports on either side, providing an alternative for maritime shipping transiting the Malacca Strait, saving several days of travel in the process.

The project, if completed, would transform Asia's economic and even security architecture. The land bridge, along with the still-under-construction Thai-Chinese high-speed railway, would solidify Thailand's role as a regional logistics hub connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, and also moving freight and people from across Southeast Asia to and from China and the rest of Eurasia.

The development would seriously undermine US economic and military dominance over the region, prompting Western commentators to disingenuously condemn the project as damaging and dangerous in a bid to generate opposition to it.

The Kra Canal and Land Bridge: Old Ideas, New Impetus

The idea of creating a Panama or Suez-style canal across Thailand's southern Kra Isthmus isn't new. It has been proposed in many different forms over the years, with feasibility studies conducted periodically. Because of the difficulty of building a canal, the idea of building a land bridge instead has not only been proposed, but Thailand's Highway 44 completed in 2003 was built as the first stage of a much more ambitious land bridge infrastructure project.



Highway 44 was constructed with a particularly large median to accommodate the future construction of rail tracks and pipelines. Ports on either side of the isthmus also have yet to be built. While the project remains incomplete, the roadway serves the dual purpose of connecting other forms of traffic crossing the isthmus.

Under the previous Thai administration of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, a new feasibility study was conducted along with the drafting of proposals. More recently, the current administration of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin formally proposed the construction of a fully functioning land bridge during the 2023 APEC summit in San Francisco, United States.

In his [statement](#) at the summit, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin discussed the growing congestion through the Malacca Strait and the need for alternative routes. He described the land bridge as *“an additional important route to support transportation and an important option for resolving the problems of the Malacca Strait. This will be a cheaper, faster, and safer route.”*

The land bridge will reduce travel time by between 3 and 14 days, depending on the particular origin and destination of cargo.

The Thai prime minister’s statement also made it clear that the land bridge would not serve as a replacement for routes passing through the Malacca Strait, but rather as an alternative to existing routes, capable of moving up to 23% of the shipping currently passing through the Malacca Strait.

The new proposal, stretching from Ranong on the west coast to Chumphon on the east coast, would be constructed almost 150km north of the existing Highway 44 route.

In October, the Bangkok Post would report in an [article](#) titled, “China interested in Thai landbridge project,” that:

China Harbour Engineering Co (CHEC) is interested in a proposed 1-trillion-baht landbridge project that will link the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, according

to the government.

The Thai prime minister had been in Beijing at the time attending the Belt and Road Forum.

According to the same article, the current Thai administration will promote the project to investors between November 2023 to January 2024. Land expropriation would then take place between 2025 and 2026 with the project scheduled for completion by 2030.

Obstacles and Western Opposition

The land bridge would clearly benefit Thailand through the creation of jobs, the building of dual-use infrastructure, and development that would take place adjacent to the project.

More importantly, the land bridge would signify a leap forward for both commerce across Asia and between Asia and the rest of the world. It would create an alternative route that would allow for even greater volumes of commerce to move through the region.

While there are lingering questions over the feasibility of the ambitious project, a growing amount of opposition is being expressed among Western commentators, focused instead on the impact it will have on the “environment” as well as concerns regarding “economic dependence” on China.

For those following the rise of China and the success of its Belt and Road Initiative, these “concerns” have become common smokescreens used by Western governments, the Western media, and commentators who simply oppose and attempt to obstruct both China’s and Eurasia’s development as part of a much larger effort by the collective West to contain the rise of China.

Projects already in operation or under construction such as the high-speed rail projects connecting Thailand and Laos to China, as well as both the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, have faced particularly stiff opposition from the US. Washington has done everything from backing political opposition parties [vowing to cancel](#) joint projects, to sponsoring armed terrorists who are [physically attacking](#) the projects and the personnel building, maintaining, and guarding them.

These projects represent China’s strategy in hedging against a US maritime blockade meant to contain and cripple China’s economy. By attacking these projects both politically and by armed proxies, the US seeks to eliminate them as alternatives, making any future US naval blockade as effective as possible.

The Kra land bridge in particular would complicate US plans to cut off Chinese maritime shipping, otherwise forced to travel exclusively through the Malacca Strait.

The Diplomat, a Western publication [partnered with](#) a network of Western government and corporate-funded policy institutes, in its [article](#), “A Bad Idea Revisited: Thailand Pitches Prayut’s ‘Land Bridge’ to Beijing” by Mark Cogan, uses the common smokescreens of environmental concerns and fears of Thailand becoming overly dependent on China, to condemn the project and encourage opposition against it.

Cogan cites small environmental groups which suspiciously turn up to oppose the construction of any infrastructure project anywhere in Thailand, especially those including China as a partner. Cogan links to a Nikkei Asia [article](#), “Thailand pushes dream of ‘land

bridge' to boost economy," which claims:

Somboon Khamheng, a coordinator of the group, says environmentally destructive economic stimulus measures are unnecessary, adding that residents depend on the area's natural resources to make their living.

Somboon Khamheng can be found promoted by US government-funded Thai language media outlet [Prachatai](#) in which he eagerly supports US-backed opposition party Move Forward. Move Forward's politically-motivated opposition to Thailand's cooperation with China is much less veiled than Cogan's or Somboon's.

Besides Somboon's association with US interference in Thailand, it is also important to point out his claims are invalid. The "natural resources" locals "depend on" are often in the process of being depleted by unsustainable exploitation prompted by poverty, driven by a lack of local infrastructure, development, and access to modern economic opportunities - all of which would be resolved if construction of the land bridge moved forward.

The use of "activists" like Somboon and US government-funded organizations citing environmental and social concerns as grounds to oppose development is a strategy the US uses all across Southeast Asia in an attempt to block everything from roadways, rail projects, dams, and power plants, to factories, economic zones, and of course, the land bridge itself.

Western commentators like Cogan regularly cite these activists and organizations, deliberately ignoring the implications of the pervasive US government funding behind their activities. The narrative comes across to ordinary readers as genuine concern for natural resources and local communities, when in reality it is a malicious strategy meant to sabotage ties between China and other nations in the region and arrest badly needed development, thus perpetuating poverty.

Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy?

Cogan then warns about the dangers of Chinese investment.

In his article, he claims:

Leaning so heavily on China would also be problematic. China's reputation as an economic development partner in South and Southeast Asia is decidedly mixed. The financing of large-scale infrastructure projects has increased its sphere of influence in some areas, but has raised concerns both domestically and internationally. Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is a prime example. With Colombo struggling to meet its international debt obligations, a controlling stake in the port was leased for \$1.12 billion to a state-owned Chinese firm for 99 years. The Gwadar Port, funded by China in Pakistan, has raised similar concerns among Western countries, who worry about China using the facility for military purposes.

What Cogan does not mention is that Sri Lanka's debt is owed primarily to Western financiers, not China, a fact that is pointed out even [elsewhere within](#) The Diplomat itself.

It should also be pointed out that Cogan's claims of "worries" among Western countries of China using Pakistan's Gwadar Port for "military purposes" are baseless. Even if China did, it would pale in comparison to the hundreds of military bases the US alone operates around

the globe, including in nations the US is illegally occupying.

Cogan also says:

For the land bridge to not become a geopolitical concern, Srettha needs more than just Chinese investors; he needs to build assurance and confidence from Western partners as well.

Cogan then complains about Thailand's prime minister meeting with the leaders of Russia and Saudi Arabia, revealing the position of extreme Western chauvinism Cogan sees the world from.

In reality, Thailand does not need the West's approval to build infrastructure within its own sovereign borders. It also doesn't need the West's permission to seek investment or cooperation from other nations, including China, Russia, or Saudi Arabia.

The only limiting factor for Thailand should be whether or not the project is actually beneficial.

The fact that the US and its vast global-spanning network of opposition groups oppose all development, feasible or otherwise, reveals the true threat to global peace and prosperity. It is not China who seeks to invest in and build around the globe, but the US who hides behind environmental and social concerns to obstruct national development, prevent the construction of badly needed infrastructure projects, and all in a bid to prevent the rise of Asia.

Developing nations, including across Southeast Asia, as well as newly industrialized nations like Thailand are rising because of industry and infrastructure, driven by growing trade with a rising China. Together this is creating a stronger Asia. In fact, this emerging Asia is so strong that it is clearly in the process of surpassing the collective West. Rather than cooperate with and benefit from the rise of Asia, the collective West, led primarily by the United States, seeks to arrest development in Asia and thus arrest the rise of Asia.

The Kra Isthmus land bridge is just one of many projects that may or may not contribute toward a prosperous Thailand and a rising Asia, but the decision to construct it rests solely with Thailand and its chosen partners. Only time will tell whether or not the project is viable and whether Thailand and its partners move forward with its construction, or if the US will succeed in leveraging its network of opposition groups and political parties to obstruct it and other development projects, and hinder Thailand and the rest of Asia on the path toward prosperity.

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