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Khon Kaen: A New Urban Frontier of Sustainable Development for a national model of medium-size city development

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Abstract

Khon Kaen, Thailand's fourth largest city, is an important economic, education and health hub of the Isan, the Northeastern – and traditionally the poorest – region of Thailand. Its modernisation has been catalyzed by geopolitics and geoeconomics. Post WWII, this begun with the completion of the US security-driven highway (Thanon Mitraphap or the 'Friendship Highway') in 1957 during the Indo-Chinese wars, that was followed by the Thai Government's decentralization of tertiary education away from Bangkok, building the first university in the Northeastern region, Khon Kaen University in 1966.

Seeking to become a national model of medium-size city development, today the city has been preparing for the next wave of developments, ushered by local, national and regional infrastructure initiatives. This includes the city's 'Smart City' plan and the planned light rail; the dual-tracking of existing national single-track rail system; and, crucially, the Indo-Chinese corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that manifests in the high-speed rail project to link between Bangkok and Kunming (via the completed Laotian section) that includes a station at Khon Kaen.

The paper interrogates the historic and contemporary initiatives – from the impacts of past planning and development to the implications of contemporary plans. Can it '…become new urban frontiers of sustainable development?' We observe that Khon Kaen serves as a model of urban development that has been a part of national and regional economic corridors that can serve as a model for other comparable cities of the Global South.

Keywords: Sustainable development for Urbanization, Khon Kaen Urbanization, Second tier city sustainable development