

## WHERE THE MIND IS WITHOUT FEAR: FROM 'BORDERS' TO 'TRANSITION ZONES'

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### **Abstract**

With renewed interest in forging social, economic as well and cultural- in the late 20th century India began to 'Look' east towards the South Asian nations which although had rich historical ties had drifted away in recent times. While India looks towards the east it needs to look through the Northeastern region. The importance of the region cannot be overlooked given its strategic and economic significance to the nation. New Delhi, for long has seen the Northeast region with a perspective that has implications for the nation's internal and external security environments. If the region has to effectively take part in the 'Act East' policy, there must be a sense of security among the people. Caught between terrorist and counter-terrorist actions, there prevails an atmosphere where no trade and commerce can effectively grow and prosper. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the way the region has been seen and treated so far if it has to effectively play a role in India's relation to Southeast Asia. Cultural connection beyond the political borders is a characteristic of this region. The beyond-border connections can be transformed into 'Transition zones' of not just culture but also commerce. So far, political boundaries have created economic barriers across traditionally contiguous regions. The making of such 'zones' has to address several dimensions. Most importantly local politics needs to be aligned with Federal Initiatives for subregional Cooperation.

**Keywords:** Region, security, connections, borders, politics, zones

### **Introduction**

"Geography is no longer a buffer. Events taking place across borders, near and far, impact us in a much more direct manner on us. In some cases, such developments affect our bilateral relations and regional relations; in other cases, they affect our economic and social fabric..... India is aware of the geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and Southeast Asia. I am convinced that by gradually integrating this region through cross-border market access, the

North Eastern states can become the bridge between the Indian economy and what is beyond doubt the fastest growing and dynamic region of the world."

Pranab Mukherjee as the External Affairs Minister of India in 2007.

Northeast of India is seen as the Northeastern frontier of South Asia. But it can, and has been, considered as the Northwestern border of Southeast Asia. The very idea that Southeast Asia is a natural region formed by natural frontiers is more 'colonial design' for administrative convenience than geographical reality. The term 'South Asia' itself is a product of an area study project undertaken by American Universities during the Cold War period. Several scholarly works on the culture, tribes, and religion of Southeast Asia include Northeast India as a large segment of the region's population is more closely related to Southeast Asia than the Indian mainland.

Regions and nations both are constructed and contested realities that do change over some time. The events during the Second World War Japanese invasion of Burma (now Myanmar) - became crucial in dividing the Indian Subcontinent from Southeast Asia. Such a division had very little to do with ground realities which presented a continuity wherein the historical ties did not stop at the international borders that resulted after the formation and consolidation of nation-states in the post-colonial period (Baruah, 2004).

Placing Northeast India in Southeast Asia should not be seen as an attempt to privilege its ties with Southeast Asia to the expense of mainland India rather it is to emphasise that living within the frontiers of modern nations has a powerful impetus in making some ties seem more natural than others. However, the attempts of nation-states have not gone unchallenged and we see the rise of various transnational organisations and associations in the late 20th century. What is of particular interest for us in this paper is to understand the territorial trap that has enclosed Northeast as being a sensitive border zone and the emerging opportunities that national economic and foreign policy like the 'Act East Policy' has provided for this region to get out of this trap and connect to its immediate and natural neighbours.

The Act East Policy recognises the importance of the North East of India as the gateway of the East countries and it is an extended corridor for growth, progress and prosperity of India, thus the development of the North Eastern region is a priority in the policy. The progress of North Eastern India is at the heart of the Act East Policy. The greater connectivity and economic integration of India's North East with its Eastern neighbours is to be considered a key focus area for the growth and development of the region. The North East India is poised to benefit from India's growing relations with South East Asia as the process of globalization through crossborder market access that can uplift people from poverty, and economic backwardness and bring in prosperity and inculcate entrepreneurial freedoms and skill. North Eastern region provides a unique platform in terms of growth opportunities it offers by interlocking the region with the neighbouring countries in South and South East Asia.

## **Objective**

The major objective of the paper is to inquire and explore the feasibility of transforming Northeast India from a 'border zone' to an 'economic zone' by connecting it to the east. The paper argues a case for building a 'cross-border' economic zone by devaluation of sufficient autonomy to local actors. It explores the prospects of such arrangements in the light of 'Act East Policy' and India's efforts to strengthen its ties with its neighbours the East and Southeast Asian countries in the light of changing economic and political dynamics.

### **Methodology**

The paper is largely based on insights drawn from scholarly works on the region as well as a large number of reports and writings published in numerous journals, newspapers, magazines and other related platforms. An argument is developed to emphasise the need to develop Northeast India if the 'Act East Policy' has to be a success story. Thus the methodology is mostly qualitative and explanatory in its approach.

### **Looking East through 'Northeast'**

On 16 June 2007, the then External Affairs Minister of India announced the changing attitude of the Central Government towards the Northeast Region (NER). He made clear what was already known but never acknowledged officially. The Northeast Region was a buffer and a frontier for colonial British India and subsequently independent India and its main usefulness to India was to serve as such and remain governed within that paradigm. This was set to change, but this context also gives a glimpse into why the region was not part of the Look East Policy (LEP), despite being the only region in India that provides land connection to Southeast Asia. It is only 25 or more years after the announcement by the Narasimha Rao government that Northeast India has come under the purview of India's efforts to engage with its eastern neighbours (Sailo, 2012)

So far, Indian policymakers, considering the advice of security officials, considered it best not to depart too much from the way the region was treated by the British colonial administration as it suited the geopolitics of the time. The hilly regions of Burma provided the necessary buffer against China as well as the French, who were then moving up the Mekong River from Saigon (Thant, 2011). After it became part of India, being a frontier region, it was widely held that the NER's rugged terrain, difficulty and diffidence provided the best form of barrier against China and this suited the security establishment. The argument put forward was that opening the borders with greater physical connectivity would expose the region to greater armed activities giving way to higher vulnerability. Along with the external threat, the limited connectivity within the Northeast states made any attempt to connect the region to other parts of India, Bangladesh, or Myanmar economically unviable (Shekhar, 2008).

This inherent absence of proper connectivity within the region was the major cause of why economic development could not take off, at a time when Assam saw huge investments in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Barua 2005, p. 434). The encouragement of economic activities - trade, investments, tourism etc - also requires an understanding of the region in terms of its historical experiences in this regard. While we know that Assam had extensive trade links with Tibet through Bhutan and with Southwest China, there is very little evidence of trade taking place among the hill

tribes of the Northeast, though their cultural and social linkages with other hill tribes of Southwest China and Southeast Asia are well- founded. Hill tribes largely limited their economic relations with valley markets (in this case Assam) and there were no known mercantile communities amongst these tribes (Scott cited in Sailo, 2012).

The question of whether the NER will benefit by serving as a bridge between the Indian economy and the Southeast Asian economies, and whether any historical trade links between the NER and Southeast Asia can be built on to enable a trade to take place now, are important and key considerations in any effort to use the NER as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia. This paper will look at the evolution of India's Look East Policy and how it has come to incorporate the Northeast Region in the policy framework for deepening its relationship with Southeast Asia. It will also attempt to address the question of whether the need to incorporate NER has come about because of larger foreign policy objectives or whether it is part of a genuine effort to search for solutions to end insurgency and usher economic development in the NER.

Even before India renewed its engagement towards its eastern neighbours, in what is loosely identified as the Look East Policy (LEP) sometime in the beginning of the 1990s, Nehru had espoused a vision of a 'closer union' with the East based on 'geographical proximity, similarity of historical experiences, cultural identity, economic interests and common strategic concerns'(Muni, 2011). This holds particularly true for the Northeast Region and Southeast Asia which form a continuous geographical landscape with similar historical experiences, and strong cultural and language affinities which are even at times malleable and overlapping (Sailo, 2012). Even after Independence and the drawing of boundaries over what was once a single continuous economic unit, trade and economic activities continued to thrive across the international borders, albeit 'informally'. This was however not what Nehru referred to nor was it to be seen as a building block on which closer relations between India and Southeast Asia could be built. The focus has been on Buddhist and Hindu links as well as maritime trade between the two regions.

Even after India's engagement with Southeast Asia increased, the Northeast Region remained unaffected. India's trade with ASEAN has grown from US\$ 2.3 billion in 1991-92 to US\$ 45.34 billion in 2008-09 (Sailo, 2012). There had been phenomenal growth in trade between India and China during the same period. In the beginning, India emphasized the older ASEAN members -- Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Singapore played a particularly important role in facilitating India's institutional linkages with the regional grouping and enjoys the closest relations with India in the whole of the region. India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1992, a full ASEAN Dialogue partner in 1995, and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996. Initially, much of the emphasis of the LEP was on economic relations at the time the Rao Government conceived it (Mun 2009).

There has been a renewed focus on developing infrastructure along the Eastern border. A proposal has been made to construct an 'Asian Highway' and 'Asian Railway Link' and 'Natural Gas' pipeline. The proposed geographical niche for the Asian Highway is the Imphal (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) road going on to the Kalemmyo railway onto Mandalay in Myanmar. Four lane Asian Highway is also sought between New Delhi-Singapore linked to Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh

City, Phnom Phek, Bangkok, Vientiane, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalemmyo, Tamu, Dhaka, and Kolkata. Road construction has already started from Tamu to Kalemmyo, Myanmar (Goswami 2009: 9). There is also a plan to construct a 1,360 km Trilateral Highway from Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Bagan (Myanmar) targeted to be completed in 2016 (North East Vision 2020: 275). Moreh in Manipur is seen as the key to India's "Look East" policy and is also considered a strategic international trading point in the northeast region. Although trade in traditional goods on a head-load basis has been the customary practice for a long time, the Border Trade Agreement signed in 1994 gave it a legal framework. 'The Moreh- Tamu point in the Manipur sector was operationalised in April 1995 and a second border trade point at Champhai - Rhi in the Mizoram sector was opened in 2004' (Sailo 2012, p. 9).

At the institutional level, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has developed links with the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI). The CII and NASSCOM have established linkages with the Myanmar Computer Federation (MCF) since 2004. North East India Federation of Investment and Trade signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UMFCCI on bilateral trade in July 2009 (ibid, p. 12). A past feasibility study conducted by the Rail India Technical and Economic Services Ltd on the proposed freight corridor estimated the Jiribam- Imphal-Moreh rail link to cost US\$ 649 million (Bhattacharya 2008).

Further, 'the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility' connecting Indian ports on the eastern side and Sittwe port in Myanmar through a riverine transport corridor and road in Mizoram is considered to provide an alternate trade route to the Northeast. Apart from this to transfer Burmese gas transfer through North East, India is planning to invest \$100 million in improving the old colonial Burmese port of Sittwe on the west Burmese coast. Some scholars are of the view that 'the North Eastern states can develop individual economic relations with, for instance, Thailand or Vietnam (Dubey, 2014). Many analysts are of the firm belief that this kind of a two-way model will create a truly federal system of democracy in India' (Goswami 2009, p. 10). The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation was launched by India on November 10, 2000, at Vientiane, Laos to boost cooperation in tourism, culture and education. The signatories were India, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

North Eastern Region Vision 2020 was released by the Prime Minister on July 2, 2008. The document visualizes the Look East policy as 'an important factor in promoting economic ties of the NER (North Eastern Region) States with its neighbours to end its economic isolation' (North East Vision 2020: 271). The vision document emphasizes that since North East India shares cultural ties with the South East Asian countries, this cultural affinity can be a key foreign policy driver. However, the vision document does take cognizance of the fact that the Look East policy in the last 25 years has failed to yield any worthwhile dividends. Besides delineating the importance of grassroots and participatory development as a way of going forward, the vision document also visualises the development of the region in parallel with the Look East Policy. It affirms that India's Look East Policy holds the potential for the region to break out of its landlocked borders and engage in cultural, economic, and tourism-related interactions with its international neighbours.

### **Framing a 'Transnational' region**

The increasing economic and political activities hint towards the formation of a transnational region. This new phenomenon has a lot in store for the Northeast Region of India. We need to keep in mind that when national borders define economic space decisions about locating economic enterprises often work against border regions. Borders usually tend to distort the market due to strict tariffs and related regulations. Manufacturers avoid locating markets near the border since trade barriers limit the option of the market for goods and raw material supplies. Producers often look for domestic markets which difficult to find closer to the border. Thus, the border effect encourages the producers to locate industries away from international borders if there is the absence of any visible and practical initiative to do so.

But, on the positive side, if we begin to imagine the economic integration of the Northeast with its immediate neighbours then there would be a different scenario altogether. Borders regions shall cease to be borders in any meaningful sense after an effective economic integration. Such integration shall give rise to economic activities in the border regions due to the availability of existing markets on both sides of the border as well and a steady supply of raw materials can be largely assured. The removal and relaxation of tariff barriers and restrictions on third-country products could make border zones attractive sites for investment. Such effects, if not immediate, are bound to open new economic opportunities. A striking example of such an arrangement can be seen in North America. The border regions of North Mexico have benefitted immensely from the integration of the Mexican economy with the United States after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). North Mexico has witnessed a manufacturing boom since then as many US industries have moved to Northern Mexico to benefit from low labour costs.

Another significant impact of creating such a transnational zone would be the political dividends it would bring with it to the region. The NER of India has had a long history of struggle for politics of recognition. Most of the time the central authority of the nation sees this struggle as a threat to the integrity of the nation. This was true for many regions of Europe before the conclusion of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 when the EU's committee of regions was established to give voice to local and regional interests within Europe. Today, several regional embassies in Brussels carry out para-diplomatic functions in the name of the regions. Many of these regions transcend national boundaries. Such an arrangement has been effective in compensating for the marginalisation of regions within nations.

Finally, to give a meaningful context to the Act East Policy, where real development can take place in Northeast India as a spinoff of trade and economic activities, there needs to be a re-imagination of Northeast India as a bridge and as part of a larger composite region that should eventually include Southwest China (Sichuan), Bhutan and Bangladesh besides Myanmar (and eventually the rest of Southeast Asia), with which the region is known to have traditional trade and cultural links before the present-day international boundaries came into existence.

### **Conclusion**

In the era of globalisation, the regions are witnessing a twofold development. On the one hand, there has been a decline in the importance of the region due to cross-national flows of people, ideas, and capital. On the other hand, the region has seen a resurgence in academic writings, economic policymaking, and international relations as well as in corporate circles.

The evolution of the Northeast as a consideration in India's Look/Act East Policy and its transformation from a barrier, a frontier, and now to a bridge cannot be traced to a decisive moment nor can it be attributed to a particular change in policy or attitude of the Central Government in New Delhi. It has grown out of a gradual process. There are internal dynamics as well as external events that have led to the shift and the interaction between internal discourse and foreign policy considerations is a continuing process. As the NER assumes some measure of prominence in India's Look/Act East policy, new debates incorporating the aspirations of the people from the region will need to be initiated to define the national interest that considers local concerns.

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