

North East India in India's Look East Policy: Constraints and Opportunities

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This paper attempts to trace the shift in India's Look East Policy, from its beginning as purely a foreign policy aspect, to the subsequent inclusion of developmental aspirations of Northeast India into its ambit. Indeed, the impression about the region has transformed from that of a barrier to a bridge, from inhibitor to a facilitator between India and Southeast Asia. This study finds that despite certain initiatives India has failed to adequately involve and integrate the developmental priorities and objectives of the provinces of North East India in its 'Look East' diplomatic engagement. It highlights the challenges in adequately factoring the strong people-to-people and cultural connections between the peoples of both the regions and aims to suggest policy measures for India towards a holistic Look East policy.

[Key Words: Look East Policy, Southeast Asia, foreign policy, Northeast India, diplomatic engagement, cultural connection]

Introduction

India has always had close historical and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries over the centuries. 'The names such as 'Indonesia' and 'Indochina', for instance, signify the Indian connection with Southeast Asia' (Naidu 2010: 285). However, the Look East policy gathered momentum from the early 1990s, when Narasimha Rao, Indian Prime Minister, delivered the 'Singapore lecture' in 1994, addressing the significance of the relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The main reason behind this approach was that with the collapse of former USSR, in the post-Cold War era, the 'geopolitical framework of international politics changed drastically and therefore required new measures by India to deal with the emerging reality of regional actors instead of the super-powers of the Cold War period' (Goswami 2009:4). Bereft of a strong partner and an ally, 'India was forced to explore other options, both regionally and globally, in search of preserving and promoting its economic and strategic interests and there, the eastern neighbours offered a promising area of engagement' (Muni 2011: 5). Apart from this India was particularly concerned about China's increasing influence in Southeast Asia and particularly in Myanmar (Burma). According to some analysts, strategic

competition with China was the 'undeclared element' of Look East policy of India. For India, ASEAN's expansion eastward by including Myanmar in 1997 has had vital political and security implications. The inclusion of these countries was significant in that it provided a land connection for India to Southeast Asia through Northeast India. It enabled India to build on the 'fund of goodwill and close understanding' (Muni 2011: 13) with these countries and provided an impetus for deeper strategic engagement with them.

India made a conscious effort to reach ASEAN countries under its Look East policy. Likewise, ASEAN reciprocated India's positive gesture by recognising India as a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992 and as a Full Dialogue Partner in 1996. Simultaneously, India was invited to join the ASEAN Regional Forum, a multilateral security dialogue platform. The first ever India-ASEAN business summit was held in New Delhi in 2002. In November 2004, India and ASEAN signed the 'India-ASEAN Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity' at the 3rd India-ASEAN summit in Vientiane in November 2004. By 2006-early 2007, India was looking for greater integration with ASEAN +3 (ASEAN countries + China, Japan and South Korea). During the India-ASEAN summit at Bali, Indonesia on October 8, 2003, India signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, which proposed to set up an India-ASEAN Regional Trade and Investment Area. India also signed bilateral framework agreements with Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia in 2003 and 2005 respectively for free trade areas in goods, investment and services (Goswami 2009). On 28 August 2008, India also signed a free trade agreement with ASEAN. Further, India took part in the first East Asia Summit (EAS) held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 in which former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh emphasised that a virtual Asian Economic Community was emerging as a result of growing free trade agreements which he suggested should be made into a more concrete Pan-Asian Free Trade Arrangement (ibid.:6). Therefore in economic sphere, India would benefit from ASEAN a great deal, since this region has a combined population of over 550 million, a total GDP of US\$ 632.50 billion, a per capita GDP of US\$ 1314, a trade turnover of nearly US\$ 500 billion, not to mention its rich skillful human resources and excellent infrastructure development. Likewise, for ASEAN, India offers abundant natural resources and manpower with sustained development of science and technology (Goswami 2009:5; Naidu 1996). 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: 5). During former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar in May 2012, an agreement was signed to set up a joint committee to explore the possibility of developing rail infrastructure from India, through Myanmar, to Hanoi and other destinations in Southeast Asia. One of the significant features of India's Look East Policy is as Srikanth Kondapalli would argue is the 'minimalist foreign policy position—that Indian sovereignty and territorial integrity needs to be maintained and recognized' (Srikanth 2010:315) .

North East in India's Look East Policy

“Geography is no longer a buffer... India is aware of the geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and South-East 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.

Although North East forms a small part of India, the region is located at the tri-junction of South, East and South East Asia. With growing relations with South East Asia, it is but inevitable that its North Eastern region would be drawn into the overall Look East policy given its geographic proximity to the South East Asian region. North East India is perfectly placed to be a gateway to South East Asia, as the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland share a 1643 km long land border with Myanmar. In this light, Pranab Mukherjee, India’s former External Affairs Minister, rightly stated that ‘geography is opportunity’ and by gradually integrating this region in our Look East Asia Policy it will act as a bridge between the Indian Economy and exponentially growing East and South East Asian Economy. Further, it will also bring significant benefits to populations residing in North East India regions in a direct and participative manner. Some scholars would argue that such an idea of 'Looking East' through 'North East India' is crafted within the framework of neo-liberalism wherein 'heightened trade relations and free markets with South East Asia will uplift the North East out of the shackles of insurgency, poverty, and economic backwardness as maximizing the reach and frequency of market economics will result in political, economic and social freedom' (Goswami 2009:7). But the ground reality is not in tune with the neo-liberal arguments. The idea of 'looking east' through the North East on the one hand has its share of possibilities and on the other hand it has its own constraints as well. This paper is therefore primarily geared towards identifying: what are the challenges facing the Centre and especially the States towards implementing the Look East policy? What are the possibilities inherent in this approach of looking East Asia through the Northeast India?

Measures undertaken to look 'East' through the North East India

There is a proposal to build the ‘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 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 1,360km 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 as a strategic international trading point in the north east region. Although trade in traditional goods on 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: 9). At the institutional level, 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.: 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 (Bhattacharaya 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 North East (Sharma 2008). Apart from this in order 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 'it is possible for the North Eastern states to develop individual economic relations with, for instance, Thailand or Vietnam. 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: 10). The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation has been 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.

These countries also agreed to undertake joint transportation projects including the trans-Asian highway. This initiative is India's most significant venture in the region. The best part about the Mekong initiative is that it does have the potential for direct flights between Guwahati- Ho Chi Minh City- Imphal-Hanoi (Irom 2002). North Eastern Region Vision 2020 was released by the Prime Minister on July 2, 2008. The document visualize Look East policy as 'an important factor in promoting economic ties of the NER (North Eastern Region) States with its neighbours with a view to ending its economic isolation' (North East Vision 2020: 271). The vision document emphasizes that since North East India share cultural ties with the South East Asian countries, this cultural affinity can be a key foreign policy driver. However, the vision document do take cognizance of the fact that Look East policy in last 15 years has failed to yield any worthwhile dividend.

Constraints and Opportunities

Having discussed the measures undertaken to look 'East' through the North East India under the Look East Policy, it is imperative to discuss the opportunities inherent in this approach and also highlight the constraints which will explain the hiatus in terms of outcome at the ground level between the idea and its implementation. In the second phase of Look East Policy, the North East has been at the centre stage. The opportunities seemed to be many- Firstly; Northeast India would be the gateway to Southeast Asia. As External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee (2007) said, 'we are involved in a variety of cross-border development projects with Myanmar in diverse fields such as roads, railways, telecommunications, information technology, science and technology, power, etc'. These initiatives are aimed at improving connectivity between Northeast India and Western Myanmar and are expected to give an impetus to the local economies as well as bilateral trade. Through this it is expected that development deficit in Northeast can be overcome by integrating the Northeast with the Southeast Asian region ushering in prosperity of the entire region. For the Northeast, the future lies in emotional and political integration with the rest of India and economic integration with the rest of Asia (Chakraborty 2009:50). Much in the classical functionalist vein, a few commentators have drawn our attention to the spill over effects of such economic integration which may have a positive role in wiping out the scourge of insurgency from the region.

Secondly, India has the advantage of cultural and civilisation links with Southeast Asia. India's cultural imprint on Southeast Asia becomes vivid in their art, music, language, mythology and other walks of life. Increasing connectivity between the two multi-cultural societies would revive the free mobility of people held centuries back. All this gives India in general and North East India in particular the enormous opportunity to promote its soft power in the region. As a result, a renewed focus on India's soft power was given during the former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the fifth India- ASEAN Summit in 2007 at Cebu, the Philippines stated, 'the age-old India-ASEAN linkages have been about our peoples mingling and interacting with each other...this should, I believe, remain a priority area of cooperation and, in fact, be given even further impetus.'(Chakraborty 2009:47). Samir Kumar Das has rightly pointed out that, 'While much of the official Look East Policy concentrates on the flow of goods and services, interest among the people of the NER regarding greater connectivity is heavily related to the idea of the possibility of a free flow of people -- building on the continuous cultural landscape existing among the border regions' (Das 2010: 343).

Thirdly, India is politically relatively well placed. Unlike most other great powers, which have had a history of interference and intervention, India has always been a benign power and the spread of its influence has always been peaceful. India's maritime boundaries with Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar and land border with Myanmar have been delineated and agreements have been

finalized. In fact, this has enabled India to forge strong security links with the countries of Southeast Asia.

Fourthly, as Samir Kumar Das would argue-

While India's Northeast, South Asia and South East Asia might have remained politically separate, it is also suggested that political borders that otherwise keep them separate have over time to adjust themselves to the changing economic realities and form a composite region of 'Northeast India, South and South East Asia' (NISASEA) much in the same manner in which say the European Union (EU) has taken shape over the last couple of decades. The economic integration of the Northeast with South East Asia will enable her to (a) counteract the disadvantages of partition and 'liberate' the Northeast from its presently landlocked and peripheral status by way of opening it to the port of Chittagong and connecting it to the proposed Trans-Asian highway passing through such places as Guwahati, Ledo, Jiribam, Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Laos; (b) reap the economic and political advantages that will follow on its being linked up with the 'powerhouses' of the South East Asian countries (Das 2010: 346).

Having outlined the opportunities in Looking 'East' through the North East India under the Look East Policy, it is noteworthy to mention that as the policy unfolded various constraints have surfaced which acts as an impediment in achieving the desired outcome from the policy- Firstly, Lack of Infrastructure in North East Region. State of roadways all across the North East is in a pathetic condition. The Northeast states' extremely limited connectivity within their own borders made any effort to connect the region to other parts of India, Bangladesh or Myanmar economically unviable (Vibhansu 2008).

Secondly, lack of local support in the North East Region. There is a general feeling of disgruntlement among the local community leaders regarding what we call the 'top-down' approach to planning. Neither Central nor the state government cared to seek views of local community, traders union while formulating North East Vision 2020 document nor regarding the issues to focused in carrying out the second phase of Look East policy in which North East is the gateway. So, as Biswas and Sukhlabaidya would argue that 'liberalization of the frontiers and boundaries, beyond the reaches of civil society' (2008: 15). Further, N. Goswami in interaction with local Hill Council leaders in border areas found that they considered 22 items listed as legitimate border trade items does not meet the demands of the people. The Look East policy also threatens the lives of small traders in Moreh town as the Asian Highway bypasses Moreh town.

Thirdly, the problem of insurgency in North Eastern Region acts as a hindrance to investments and economic development, as people live in a constant state of insecurity. 'In Manipur, where the border town of Moreh is situated, nearly 30 insurgent groups are functioning and extortions are rampant' (Goswami 2009:16). In such an atmosphere where state is unable to provide basic security to people any policy whether it is the Look East Asia policy is

difficult to succeed. There also exists a 'strong linkage between many of these insurgent groups with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) across the border in Myanmar. The insurgency situation in Chandel and Thoubal districts, Manipur through which the NH-39 is routed at present and later the Asian Highway will ply, is an eye-opener' (ibid:17).

Fourthly, the States' Incapacities is also a major constraint. It's mainly North Eastern Council (NEC) and the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) entrusted with the responsibility to facilitate the opening of North Eastern states to South East Asia. However, unfortunately functioning of both bodies is not satisfactory. This further compounded with North East India's dismal condition with regard to locally generated revenues to sustain the economy.

The Union Government contributes nearly 35, 000 crores every year for a population of say 32 million. 85 per cent of Arunachal Pradesh's funds are given by the Centre, Assam is provided 51 per cent of Central funds; Manipur, 80 per cent; Meghalaya, 70 per cent; Nagaland, 80 per cent, Sikkim, 40 per cent; Tripura, 72 per cent and Mizoram, 70 per cent. Therefore, ideas of local financial autonomy and future burgeoning local trade with South East Asia are a misnomer (Goswami 2009: 20).

The regional development agenda is underpinned by national security imperatives which characterise relations between the various levels of governance ensuring minimal deviation, 'contestation of the development agenda is limited by national security from above and ethno-nationalism from below' (Mcduie-RA 2008:186). Indeed, without generating enough local resources, it is but impossible for most of these states to suddenly hope for redemption across the mountains from South East Asia for their economic enlightenment.

Fifthly, lack of coordination between the Government agencies. The Look East Policy, as we have already noted, is a Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) driven matter from New Delhi. Security in Northeast India is a Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Ministry of Defence (MOD) driven matter, as is seen by the presence of a large number of armed troops in Northeast India, along with certain special laws such as the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). Therefore Northeast India is a special case where the MHA-MOD-MEA triad is active in controlling matters. Security is of national concern and it is particularly true in Northeast India, where along with raging insurgencies, a large network of illicit trade in goods, arms and narcotics is thriving. Nonetheless, efforts must be aimed at streamlining policies to make them actually work on the ground and not be guillotined by the lack of policy coordination and a sort of clash of operational interests of the MHA-MOD-MEA triad. Coordination between policy formulations between various state governments in Northeast India has been another problem which is plaguing development in the region. The North Eastern Council (NEC) which serves as the nodal agency for disbursement of grants and developmental aid to states in

Northeast India has been suffering from lack of coordination and active participation from member states.

These problems are further compounded by change of ministers and their team dealing with this policy from time to time. Many ministers in the earlier UPA-I government who were ardent advocates supporting the developmental aspirations of Northeast India under the Look East Policy such as Pranab Mukherjee, Mani Shankar Aiyar and Jairam Ramesh were in different ministerial capacities in the present UPA-II scheme of affairs. Now with the BJP coming into power there is a further delay, as any new government seeks time to adjust and formulate its policy.

Conclusion

Geographical proximity and ancient links certainly are the major propellers of India's Look East Policy. But before Delhi could exploit that, it will have to overcome two of North East's perpetual deficits: the deficit of democracy and development. Festering—and multiplying—low-intensity conflicts in the North East are clearly inconsistent with India's image as a rising power and Delhi would do well to resolve these conflicts even as it pushes ahead with the Look East policy to turn the 'arc of instability' (the rebellious Indo-Burma frontier region) into a shared economic space with great promise for growth and prosperity (Bhowmik 2009: 48). To consider North East as a homogenous region with common developmental goals decided by the Centre is a mistake. As a young Assamese scholar describes 'it is politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest'. There is no denying the fact that Looking 'East' through the North East India under the Look East Policy is a commendable exercise but that has to be guided through 'bottom-up' approach and not 'top-down' approach where primary role is played by the North East in deciding the contours of Look East Policy and Centre plays the role of a facilitator.

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