



A New Act East Approach: Revisiting INDO-ASEAN Relations via Northeast Window



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Abstract

The idea envisaged under the Look East Policy was to interact and build relationships with our immediate strategic neighborhood in the east, namely Myanmar, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. It was believed that trade with the neighboring countries would resurrect the economies of the border states in the region, bringing peace and stability. The objective of the policy predominantly focuses on the regional economic integration with renewed emphasis on the development of the North East Region of India. Most recently, development of the North Eastern Region has been the need of the hour and the Look East Policy for the advancement of the Region is Initiating a number of substantive endeavors. One among the several geostrategic imperatives that necessitate the development of North East Region is the border it shares with Myanmar. It was perceived if ASEAN was a gateway to wider Asia Pacific Region, Myanmar was a land bridge to ASEAN and North East Region the gateway to Myanmar. In spite of being at a congenial geographic location to grasp the benefits from Indo-ASEAN cooperation, the North East Region is cited as one of the remote landlocked regions of vibrant Indian Economy that has miserably failed to taste the fruits of development. This paper discusses how to Look East Policy is fundamentally induced to diminish India's internal development disparity by promoting the significance of the Northeast as gateway to east; to critically analyse the reasons for major disconnect between Look East Policy's vision and ground realities so far as northeast is concerned and to devise possible policy solutions for greater engagement and development of the region so that it will not remain just a corridor.

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1. Introduction

Look East Policy

It has been during the Janata Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, in 1991 that India initiated her *Look East Policy*, which was not only an external economic policy but marked a strategic shift in context of India's foreign policy and also her strong determination to play an important role befitting her image at the global level. Thus Look East Policy was an important plank of India's foreign policy since the early nineties. It received a unanimous support from all the seven governments that came to power in New Delhi at that time, regardless of their political ideologies. Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Finance Minister stated that,

"The Look East Policy is more than a Slogan or a foreign policy orientation. It has a strong economic rationale and commercial content. We wish to look east because of the centuries of interactions between us". (Devare, 2006)

It was out-rightly admitted by the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that during the Cold War India ignored her Southeast Asian Neighbors and felt that there was a need to re-engage them more energetically. After him, the role played by the successive Prime Ministers, especially by Shri Indra Kumar Gujral and Shri. Atal Bihari Vajpayee in developing durable and vibrant relations between India and ASEAN cannot be under-estimated. (Bandelj, 2002). Thus India engaged the countries of Southeast Asia which were conceived by India as a strategic imperative to reach out to the wider Asia-Pacific region.

2. Research Methods

The present study applied the qualitative methods. All data is analyzed descriptively. It is used a paraphrase to explain, elaborate, and explore regarding the phenomenon belonging. The conclusion is the last remarked based on the previous discussion and result.

3. Results and Analysis

Discussion

There were various interests of paramount importance which inspired India to 'look east' and 'to act east'. At the top place, it was the economic interest that forced India to exploit this region with an exclusive economic zone of two million kilometers and is currently collaborating with Southeast Asia in trade and investment. The strategic and security interests follow the economic interests. India is the member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is the platform where security issues are discussed. Extradition and energy security (petroleum and energy needs from other areas) are also the issues of prime importance besides mutual legal assistance on the criminal matters and take on terrorism and trafficking in human beings and arms (Naidu, 2000).

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA government) changed the name of this key foreign policy approach that remained the catchword since the rule of PV Narasimha Rao government in 1991. The Look East Policy is now known as the Act East policy. There was no political reason behind this name change however the Act East Policy is aimed at bolstering extensive security, political and economic ties with Southeast Asian countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been keen in strengthening the economic ties with the region for greater investment especially in the infrastructure sector (Jacob, 2014).

3.1 North Eastern Region (NER)

Cradled by five Asian nations viz., Bangladesh, Bhutan China, Myanmar and Nepal, the North Eastern Region (NER) comprises of eight sister states- (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura) and Sikkim. The strategic location of the North Eastern States can be emphasized by the fact that the region shares about two percent (2%) of the border with the mainland country and the rest of about ninety eight percent (98%) with other Asian Nations i.e., it shares a 4,500 Kilometers long international border with its South Asian neighbors and is connected to mainland India by a tenuous 22 kilometers long land corridor passing through Siliguri in the eastern part of the West Bengal, which is more appropriately called the "Chicken's Neck". (Hussain, 2009). Thus the Northeast

of India is a landlocked region with distinct characteristics and is the cusp where South Asia gradually converges with Southeast Asia. (Sarma & Mehta, 2003).

Until about 150 years ago, the North Eastern States of India were at the forefront of development. There was good access to international trade and investment. External trade was carried out through the sea route, inland waterways and through roads and railways. One of the earliest projects taken in late nineteenth century by the British Empire in India was the building railway route between Dibrugarh (Assam) and Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Guwahati was the hub of Indo-China Trade (Ng *et al.*, 1982). But the region was geo-politically isolated from the mainland India due to the great disservice caused by the partition of the country in 1947 because of which the North Eastern Region (NER) is one of the most backward regions of the country. B. G. Verghese during the partition of India stated that,

"It is the landlocked nature of the Northeast that caused the extreme isolation of the region and the loss of connectivity and market access as a result of the partition sets its economy back by at least quarter a century" (Lawson, 2014).

The same point was further put by the historian David Ludden, but with the greater intensity when he said,

"Cut old routes of communication and mobility across new national borders more dramatically than almost anywhere in the world. The Bengal Assam railway tracks from Guwahati to Dhaka were torn up at the Cachar-Sylhet border, in 1965. Now it is much easier to communicate by phone or mail between Dhaka and London than between Dhaka and Guwahati" (Sutherland, 1962)

Apart from this the poverty, lack of infrastructural development, enthusiastic response, frequent insurgencies, the dearth of adequate funds due to poor governance in the states, the easy availability of arms and weapons from across the international borders utilized in armed movements and criminal activities are the impediments in the region's path to development. Along with it, the chain of demands ranging from the right to self-determination and autonomy to the agitation of the ethnic groups has put the region on the bed of rocks. Moreover, the geographic location of the North-Eastern region makes it more vulnerable to be the core of hostility with massive negative outcomes (Slingo *et al.*, 2005)

3.2 North Eastern Region Vision-2020

The Look East Policy which has been the part of India's Foreign Policy since 1990's, took the North East perspective at the official level only in October 2007 in a meeting of the then Foreign Minister, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee and the Chief Ministers of the North Eastern States on the initiative of Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER). The Look East Policy is the corner-stone of the 'North Eastern Vision-2020', a roadmap for the development of the region which was dedicated by the Honourable Prime Minister to the people of North East Region in July 2008 (Birthal *et al.*, 2006).

The Vision-2020 Document is meant to return the North Eastern Region to the Position of national economic eminence which it held a few decades back, so that the development process arises from and spreads out to the grass-root levels; and to ensure that the region plays a pivotal role in the vanguard of India's Act East Policy (Council, 1990).

3.3 Act east policy and development of North Eastern Region

The Act East Policy is expected to usher in the new era of development for the North East through the network of pipelines, connectivity, communication, and trade. In this context, the twenty days Car Rally deserves a special mention. In November 2004, the 8,000 Kilometre Mega India-ASEAN Car Rally was flagged off from Guwahati through the ten ASEAN member states, first through Myanmar and then Thailand, Brunei, Philippines, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore before crossing the finish line in Batam, Indonesia, on December 11, 2004. It was a successful Look East Policy Initiative. While inaugurating the event, the then Prime Minister, Mr. Manmohan Singh referred India's North East as 'the gateway to the Asian Century' and the 'commercial corridor' linking India with its Southeast Asian Neighbours (Coenen, 2007).

The Act East Policy is laying greater emphasis on the infrastructural development and promotion of connectivity facilities for trade and economic development. To uplift the North Eastern Region and to boost the connectivity between the Region and Southeast Asia, India has undertaken various bilateral and multilateral measures. In October 2008, India-Myanmar Joint Trade Committee was held in Mandalay (Burma), wherein an agreement was signed for opening new border trading depot and increasing the number of eligible trade goods. As per the agreement the border trade at the Tamu-Moreh (along Manipur) and Rhi-Zokhawthar (along Mizoram) border points were to be converted into regular normal trade by expanding the list of items that can be traded legally (Hussain, 1994). The road

construction has already been started from Tamu to Kalembo, Myanmar. Moreh in Manipur is seen as a key to India's Look East Policy. Mr. Okram Ibobi Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur referred to Moreh as the most strategic International Trading point (Pradhan *et al.*, 2017).

The Indian Government also signed an agreement with Burmese Military Junta for 'Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Transit Project' on 2nd April 2008 to connect the landlocked North East India via the sea route to Myanmar and open up trade links with Southeast Asia (Murdiyarso *et al.*, 2009). For the purposes of Burmese gas transfer through North East, India is planning to invest US\$ 100 million to improve the old Colonial Burmese port of Sittwe on the west Burmese coast. Besides transforming Mizoram into a major transit route in the region, the Kaladan project offers multiple opportunities to Mizoram by bringing investment and employment to the state (Sarma & Mehta, 2002).

Several other ongoing and potential infrastructural projects taken under the aegis of India's Look East Policy include India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway India-Myanmar rail linkage, the Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas and/or oil pipeline, Tamathi Hydroelectricity project and optical fibre network between North East India and South East Asia (Yesmin *et al.*, 2014). Apart from these projects the Mekong Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) and Kunming Initiative undertook to reach out to ASEAN have been benefiting this region. Mekong Ganga Cooperation Initiative launched by India in November 2000 at Vientiane, Laos to boost cooperation in tourism, culture, and education has the potential for direct flights between Guwahati-Ho Chi Minh City-Imphal-Hanoi. The Kunming Initiative acclaimed by China, Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh aimed at pushing the concerned governments to improve communication between South-western region of China with the North Eastern Region of India by developing appropriate road, rail, waterways and air links (Hussain, 2007).

With the signing of India ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, North East India has a chance to jump the bandwagon and get its share from the Act East policy by pitching especially in the Handicrafts sector. Thus we can say that India's Act East Policy is providing an invaluable vent to the North Eastern region to come out of its state of developmental and economic dormancy. The policy has turned the otherwise peripheral states to the central region of economic and developmental activity but at the same time there is growing discontent among the people in the North East that if the Act East policy becomes fully operational, the region would be exploited by being used as a transit facility between Southeast Asian countries and mainland India without bringing adequate economic development to the region and there would be loss of vegetation and biodiversity of the region due to industry. The dumping of cheap foreign goods in the North East would lead to the closure of cottage and small-scale industries in the region. All this would reduce the status of the North Eastern region to a mere 'virtual colony' (Hussain, 2006).

4. Conclusion

In spite of these contradictions, discontents, and concerns in several quarters with regard to the operation of India's look east Policy, the North Eastern region has been immensely benefited. The policy has resulted in proper utilization of the natural resources of North Eastern Region which in turn is paving the way for the development of the region by generating employment and thereby elevating poverty (Hussain, 2002).

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Statement of authorship

The author(s) have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author(s) have approved the final article.

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