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**“India’s Northeast: Bridge to East Asia”**

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## Introduction

The 'Look East' policy (LEP) was developed by India as a part of international engagements with its Eastern neighbours. It coincided with the economic reforms that the country was implementing. The policy was not confined to economic ties between India and its eastern neighbours, but developed into broader ties, which included political, economic, security and cultural linkages.

The emphasis that has been laid by the Government of India on strengthening relations with its neighbours is based on the need to develop a greater strategic role for itself in the region by deepening ties with partners, such as Japan, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is in tandem with India's desire to develop as a manufacturing hub and improve its trade with the Southeast Asian countries. What further propels this policy is the fact that India shares land connectivity with these nations, traditional linkages and cultural similarities through their linkages with India's northeast. To show a heightened sense of commitment and initiative, the current government has renamed the policy as Act East Policy (AEP). Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his opening statement at the 12th Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit (November 2014), said, "Rapidly developing India and ASEAN can be great partners for each other. We are both keen to enhance our cooperation in advancing balance, peace and stability in the region. A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become the 'Act East Policy'."<sup>i</sup> In building the AEP, the Northeast of India occupies a very 'strategic' position to accomplish the goals that the policy envisages. Ms. Sushma Swaraj, Minister for External Affairs has stated in a briefing of the governors of the north-eastern states in October 2015 that, the north east is a 'natural partner' in India's AEP being India's land bridge to ASEAN. She added that the AEP is also a means to strengthen the stability, economy and prospects of India's north eastern region.

This paper briefly charts the role that India's Northeast can play in bringing India and East Asia closer by building bridges that will lead to economic gains and strengthening security cooperation, bringing benefits not just to India, but also helping in the development of India's northeast.

## **India's Northeast: Bridge to East Asia**

Geographical borders are political demarcations between political entities that can act as both barriers and bridges. Border regions are not just physical spaces, but also act as social and cultural spaces that involve the flow of people and goods; as an economic space that involves the flow of goods and services and as zones of vulnerability in both traditional and non-traditional security dimensions.<sup>ii</sup> To develop a better policy on border, one should not look at the security aspect only and thus ensure that there are largely closed borders. Nor should the emphasis be only on building open borders, which help facilitate the movement of people and goods. The nation has to build a policy that balances both aspects. The border areas have to be developed through an approach that balances economic, political, security and societal and cultural linkages. Borders need to be seen as facilitators of exchange and they need to be transformed from underdeveloped buffers to bridges between neighbouring states.

The Government of India's foreign policy has always emphasised the need for regional integration and regional cooperation, especially with a view to economic cooperation through organisations, such as the SAARC. Due to political reasons, SAARC has been unable to enjoy much success and this has, to some degree, prompted India to engage with its eastern neighbours, devoid of the rivalry and distrust that is shared on the western front. Thus, India has been active in such groupings as the ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, etc. In its focus on the AEP, India's northeast can act as a catalyst for improved relations with India's eastern neighbours.

The northeast of India shares more international borders than it shares national boundary. Situated as it is between China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, it has an international border of close to 4,500 km, and holds the promise of acting as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia. Its history vindicates such a role as its people have traded and travelled across the Southeast Asian region and Yunnan for years through the ancient Silk Road, trading in Himalayan salts, spices, handicrafts, food items, silk and other goods.<sup>iii</sup>

It is with a view of building a win-win synergy and chemistry between India and its eastern neighbours for economic vibrancy, innovation and enterprise<sup>iv</sup> that the

Government of India and the Ministry of External Affairs have proposed the three 'Cs' idea, which would form the foundation of this policy and are interlinked to each other.

The first 'C' is Commerce. Trade and economic development is one of the more prominent advantages of the AEP for the northeast, as well as India. It will be an important factor in promoting economic ties between the northeast and its neighbours, with a view to ending the economic separation of the region from the rest of India. It should also help in promoting intra-trade economic linkages. It would help in reducing informal trade and bring it into the ambit of formal trade, generating revenue for the states of the northeast. The assumption is that since the people of India's northeast share close ties with the Southeast Asian nations and also China, strengthening relations with them will assist in the development of the region as well. The challenge before the state and central governments is that they would have to actively work to dispel the fear of the people that the northeast would simply remain as a bridge and there would be no economic benefits for the people. Emphasis has to be laid on developing industries and services that would utilise the already present resources of the region. For example, stress can be laid on developing service industries in the region that would also help in generating employment opportunities for the English speaking youth of the region. The northeast is largely an agriculture based economic sphere and while there are local industries to add value to these produce, they are not functioning at optimal levels. The state governments have to step in to ensure that local industries function effectively and, importantly, the differences between various tribes of the region does not affect economic development. The Vision Document 2020<sup>v</sup> on the Northeast as developed by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), Government of India, states that the immediate priority is to build the required infrastructure right up to the border areas, establishing connectivity and communication links in the cross-border points through which trade and economic exchanges with the countries neighbouring the North-eastern Region take place. The economic success of the policy would depend on the development of infrastructure that is at present lacking in the region. This requires a redefining of the policy to resolve outstanding issues of trade, transit and investment with the countries neighbouring the region. The policy has to also acknowledge and help in building the local ways of doing trade; this would help dispel the fear of the local communities that they are being overlooked or displaced.

This development in economic activities would be related to the second 'C' of the policy that is connectivity. The flow of commerce needs connectivity, which means infrastructure development in terms of road, rail and air. The vision document recommends that both the state and central governments have to promote investments in projects not just in the northeast, but also in infrastructure projects in the partner countries, especially Myanmar, particularly in respect of ports such as Sittwe and international highways to connect the North Eastern Region to ASEAN. Such investment might also be encouraged in areas where infrastructure is required for transit between the region and the rest of India, as also for trade with the neighbourhood and beyond.<sup>vi</sup> It is the submission of the author that roads would play a critical role in the hilly terrain of the region and a robust network needs to be developed and maintained. This would include improving the existing road network of the states and expanding the state highway network. This road network would be beneficial not only for the movement of goods and services, but also from the perspective of security, as it would allow faster deployment of the security apparatus if so needed. The development of relations would also further enhance security by allowing more cooperation between the security forces of India and other nations. Presently, the Indian armed forces work in close collaboration with the armed forces of its neighbours in counter insurgency efforts. Improved relations could enhance this relationship further.

The linkages would also be useful in terms of social development, bringing health services to remote areas, allowing children to travel to gain education; it would allow more tourists to visit the region, thereby developing employment opportunities, etc. It would need investments by the Indian railways in rebuilding and/or strengthening old rail bridges that are structurally weak now due to wastage over the years. The infrastructure development would not only help build linkages with the neighbouring States, but also improve links with the rest of India. However, in developing the connectivity linkages, the states and the central governments have to recognise the present challenges of porous borders and border management, especially with regard to cross border migration, terrorism, drugs and arms supply and other forms of non-conventional security threats.

This, in turn, would have a domino effect on the third 'C' of the policy, the culture of the region. Connectivity is not limited to just the physical movement of goods, but also alludes to the movement of people, ideas and knowledge. The movement of people would dispel the fear of the 'other'. It would reduce the misconceptions and mistrust and help in removing the 'us' vs. 'them' ideas. Such contacts could be through professional bodies, academic institutions, students exchange programmes, traders' chambers and associations, industrialists' groups, artists, sportsmen, etc. The exchange of books, publications and newspapers and television programmes would also fall in the ambit of people-to-people contacts because of their impact on opinion-making and improving relations.

### **Conclusion**

The momentum that has been generated by the AEP and the emphasis of the current government on the need to focus on improving and/or strengthening its relations with India's neighbours come at an opportune moment for India's northeast region. It has been the complain of the states of the region that due to their low representation in the central Parliament, their voices are, at times, overlooked; the focus allows the north-eastern states to bring their agenda of development to the forefront. This is also an important requirement. To allay the fear of the people of the northeast that they will remain merely as a bridge in the implementation of the policy and will not get any tangible gains, both the state and central governments have to work together. The governments of the states have to bring forward the roles that they would like to play in helping to implement this policy.

This is necessary, as there are a few policy challenges that need to be identified by the states, and solutions suggested. The first and foremost is the capacity of the states of the region to implement the policy. In the economic aspect, the capacity of the states to contribute in the areas of trade, products and services needs to be identified. The second major challenge before the state and central governments is militancy. Almost all states of the region suffer from violent armed insurgency and the state governments are weak in their ability to provide security. It is a dilemma between whether the focus should be on security situation, which would encourage economic development, or on economic development as a tool that would aid efforts to counter the insurgency.

Investors, especially private and foreign investors, would be adverse to invest in an unstable and risk prone environment despite the gains. In such a situation, it is important to question how the state structures would implement the AEP and the areas in which the centre can provide assistance. Thus, the governments at both ends have to find a path through which security is not compromised, but the economic situation improves, further allowing for conditions that would counter the insurgency. The governments can continue to hold talks with the groups while also asking the few industries that have a presence in the region to encourage others to invest.

The borders of the northeast need to be viewed as assets and not constraints. The AEP is India's attempt to strengthen Asian regionalism. It is a long term policy to open India's economy for investments and trade through regional trade and integration.

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<sup>i</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Opening Statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar," <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24230/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>, (accessed on 29 November 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> Jabin T Jacob, "Guns, Blankets and Bird Flu," SPIRIT Occasional Papers, No. 6, Sciences Po (Bordeaux), October 2010, p. 02.

<sup>iii</sup> Namrata Goswami, "Act East Policy: Northeast India as a Strategic Catalyst," *CLAWES Journal*, summer 2015, p 70.

<sup>iv</sup> Manish Chand, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Act East: India's ASEAN Journey," In Focus Article, <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?24216/Act+East+Indias+ASEAN+Journey>, (accessed on 29 November 2015).

<sup>v</sup> The document can be viewed at <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/vision-document>.

<sup>vi</sup> Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India, "Vision Document 2020," p. 09, [http://mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo2\\_content/ner\\_vision/Vision\\_2020.pdf](http://mdoner.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo2_content/ner_vision/Vision_2020.pdf), (accessed on 29 November 2015).