

An Evaluation of India's Approach towards Northeast India

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Abstract

India's Northeastern region (NER) has been a subject of continuous scholarly discussion because of its low level of development despite huge amount of assistance and grants provided by the central government and its various ministries and departments. The problems of Northeast India are complex and inter-related with each other. Therefore, the Government of India and even the civil society seem to be in a dilemma with what needs to be prioritised in dealing with Northeast India. Is it the development of the region that should come first or, is it the security of the nation that should be the primary concern? So far, the government's approach has indicated that while it wants Northeast India to be closely connected with neighbours in Southeast Asia, it is also afraid of further infiltration of several cross-border problems and trans-national crime into the region from countries like Myanmar and China. The proposed paper will deal with aspects related to government's approach towards Northeast India, especially Look East Policy and BIMSTEC that have been visualised to connect India's Northeastern region with Southeast Asia.

The primary objectives of the paper would be to understand the significance of national security and domestic development in the case of Northeast India and her importance in determining India's foreign policy and implications of India's Look East Policy and BIMSTEC on Northeast India

The proposed paper will be based on consulting available primary and secondary literature and would be analytical in nature.

At the end of the paper, we would be able to understand that India's NER represents an example where domestic policies and development act as one of the important determinants of national security vis-à-vis foreign policy. Specifically, it would help us to understand India's approach towards Northeast India in regard to development and security aspects.

Key words: *Northeast India, Security, Development, Look East Policy*

Introduction

Northeast India occupies a very unique position in India, both in geo-political and geo-strategic terms. It comprises eight states and those are Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Sikkim.

Roughly, the region occupies 7.98% of India's total geographic area and home to around 3.79% of the total population. (MDONER 2008) Assam houses approximately 68% of the total population of Northeastern region (hereafter NER). (MDONER 2008) Though tribal people are majority in states like Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, they form only one fourth of the total population in NER. (North Eastern Council 2011:C2-2-20, NEDFI 2012a) NER is known as a fragmented, disconnected and poor region of India. Its economy is primarily characterised by low per capita income, low capital formation, scanty infrastructure, communication problem, under-utilisation of available resources like minerals, hydro-power potential, forests, etc., and geographical isolation. (North Eastern Council 2011:C2-2-20, NEDFI 2012 a) Surprisingly, it was undivided Assam whose per capita income was even higher than national average during India's independence. (Das 2005, Das and Thomas 2008; RIS 2011) Things changed with time and now when Indian economy is growing at an average of 7.2% per annum, growth in the NER is estimated at only 6.7% p.a. (RIS 2011:19) The primary and tertiary sectors are the main driving forces of the economy of NER and industry's contribution to the region's GDP is highly insignificant. Unfortunately, despite being an agrarian economy and occupying approximately 7% of the country's total geographical land, the region produces only 1.5% of the country's total food grain which makes the region a clear importer of the food grains. (NEDFI 2012b) Industrial development too faces trouble as most of the registered industries of the region are concentrated in Assam. Other states do not have enough industries. However, one positive aspect of NER is its handicraft and handloom industries, which are more evenly distributed around the region and provide employment to a substantial portion of the population besides agriculture. (RIS 2011:23) Another major drawback of NER is its poor infrastructure. For instance, although the first railway system in the NER dated back to as early as 1881 and connected Dibrugarh and Sadiya, at present the railways in the region suffers a number of hitches. The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), the division of Indian Railways, responsible for serving NER, has no headquarters in the region except Assam. (MDONER 2008) Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur and Sikkim have no broad gauge railway network. (MDONER 2008) There are no four-lane or above national highways in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Sikkim (MORTH 2012:9) Power generation capability and per capita power consumption of NER are also lagging behind the national averages. It has a potential to generate 63,257 MW of hydroelectric power; and out of that only 8% has been utilised. (RIS 2011:21) NER's per capita power consumption stands at 110 kWh which is almost one fourth of the national average i.e. 411 kWh. (RIS 2011:21) NER is endowed with a number of significant pristine spots with a potential to transform the region into an international tourist spot.

Unfortunately, lack of infrastructure as well as peace and security is the primary hindrance troubling almost every nook and corner of the region.

Security Aspects of NER

NER represents an area whose geographic advantage is often regarded as a crucial factor inhibiting its security. When an undivided sub-continent was an advantage for NER as it enjoyed access to ports like Chittagong and Kolkata; in modern India, the same geographic position makes it extremely vulnerable. Now NER is linked with rest of India through a narrow Siliguri Corridor, often described as a chicken neck and close neighbours like Bangladesh and Myanmar have become foreign lands for NER. The region shares 96% of its borders with the neighbouring countries including China and Bhutan in the north, Myanmar in the east, Nepal in the west and Bangladesh in the south and west. (MDONER 2008) On the contrary, Northeast India shares only 29 km of border with the rest of India. (MDONER 2008) Most of NER has been experiencing issues like cross-border insurgency, trafficking of narcotics and arms and ammunitions and illegal migration. (MDONER 2008; Barua and Das 2008:327-350) The domestic fragility of NER which was a partial outcome of insurgency and conflicts has been compounded because of evil nexuses with foreign grown clandestine groups. The horizontal spread of conflicting situations across South Asia and Myanmar was bound to have ill-effects on NER. (Das 2003:461-473) The demonstrated example of this cross-border linkage of insurgency and rebellion was the formation of Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front in May 1990 that brought together many of the prominent armed groups from India and Myanmar including Kachin Independence Army (KIA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Issac-Muiva faction (NSCN-IM), United Liberation Front of Asom (UNLF), United National Liberation Front- Manipur (UNLF) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). (Saikia 2009:877-889) The insurgents from India's Northeastern part even used to go to China and Thailand via Myanmar for training and arms supply. (Kumar 2012: 118-127; Upadhyay 2006:4993-4999; Wasbir 2009) Besides, one can find many instances of state-sponsored terrorism and insurgency all over South Asia. Allegations were made against India for providing shelter, financial support and even some arms supplies to the Chakma rebels from Bangladesh. (Bhaumik 1996; Hazarika 2000) Similarly, India also accused Bangladesh for nurturing Northeast Indian insurgents on its soil. (Babu 2005) Apart from Bangladesh, Myanmar poses another threat to the security of NER. Myanmar is one of the members of the infamous Golden Triangle and Myanmar is one of the largest producers of narcotics in the world. (Saikia 2009:877-889; Sinha 2011) Reports show that drug traffickers use Northeast India as a corridor to smuggle cheap drugs such as cough syrups, painkiller tablets (powder of spasmoproxyvon) and non-conventional psychotropic substances. India itself is one of the main sources of ketamine which enjoys high demand for substance among the drug

abusers in East and Southeast Asia. (International Narcotics Control Board 2010:80-92; Narcotics Control Bureau 2011:1-22) Manipur also produces opium in illegal way. (Narcotics Control Bureau 2011:1-22) The money obtained by illicit drug trade is generally used for proliferation of small arms in the region. (Upadhyay 2006:4993-4999) Arms are brought to Northeast India via Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh by using both the ocean and land routes. (Upadhyay 2006:4993-4999; Sinha 2011) Lintner (2003: 357-376) reported about Khaing Raza, a drug lord from Myanmar, who used to arrange arms shipments from Phuket to various destinations in Bangladesh and Myanmar and from thereon to Northeast India. Several such incidents can be found from various sources testifying close nexuses between drug and arms lords of different countries and usage of NER as a transit point.

India's Approach to NER:

The developmental and security aspects of NER clarify why the region holds an important position in India's foreign policy. India wants to transform the region from a burden to a gift of nature by encouraging infrastructural development, connectivity, peace and security. At the official level, the Northeast perspective of India's Look East Policy was first mooted in a meeting between the then Foreign Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee and the Chief Ministers of NER in October 2007. (MDONER 2011a) Not only Look East Policy, but also within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for multi-sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), NER holds an important position. Northeast India's geographic position is such that it shares borders with four of the six BIMSTEC neighbours of India barring Sri Lanka and Thailand and this suggests the significance of Northeast India in BIMSTEC and also the vice-versa. Four issues need to be prioritised so that Northeast India can participate and contribute as a regional/sub-regional hub within BIMSTEC, an inter-regional mechanism connecting South and Southeast Asia and those issues are as follows; connectivity and infrastructure for facilitation of trade, trade and investment protocols, identification of the discrepancies in the optimisation and operationalization of the existing assets and facilities and soft aspects such as tourism and people-to-people interactions through sports, culture, academic exchanges, medical research etc. (MDONER 2011a) These issues are important to transform NER from a land-locked region to a land-linked region so that it can earn benefits from integration with other regions of East and Southeast Asia. At the domestic level, Government of India is trying to connect NER with rest of India by various transportation projects like Special Accelerated Road Development Programme in the NER (SARDP-NER), the East-West Corridor, National Highway Development Programme Phase III, Arunachal Pradesh Package for Roads and Highways, three greenfield airports in Gangtok, Itanagar and Tawang and extension and upgradation of railway networks in the region. On the other hand, Trans-Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway, India-

Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multimodal Transit and Transport Project, Imphal-Mandalay bus service, Mekong India Economic Corridor are some of the projects being visualised at the regional and international level to connect the region with other parts of Asia, particularly Myanmar and Thailand. BIMSTEC, initiated in 1997 as a blending outcome of India's Look East and Thailand's Look West Policies, can play an important role as it also groups Myanmar and Thailand and its primary objective is to promote and strengthen cooperation between the members. The early implementation of the BIMSTEC Framework Agreement for Free Trade Area would help the region to integrate with countries like Myanmar and Thailand that have expressed interests in establishing direct trade, investment and connectivity linkages with NER. The founder of the Manipur Chamber of Foreign Trade and Industry, Mr. Lanjingba Khundongba expected that Moreh, the border town in Manipur having common land border with Myanmar, should be a part of the global economy for its survival. (Denyer 2013) Thailand has already expressed its interests in investments and trade with Northeast India in order to exploit the opportunities of geographic closeness between them and Northeast's association with nature. Transformation of Northeast India as a zone of convergence between India and Thailand is expected to give an answer to the backwardness and underdevelopment of the NER. (Shekhar 2008; Chakraborty 2009)

Conclusion

Discussions on NER draws attention to an old but important question; what should come first to ensure peace in the region. Is it insurgency that should be addressed first or is it issues of under-development that should be prioritised first. (MDONER 2008:289-294) However, it should be remembered that security and development are both two important determinants of peace and together they can bring prosperity to a region. NER's geographic location, connexion with the neighbouring countries, domestic turmoil and insufficient development have all made it into a volatile region. If its internal problems along with infrastructural and economic deficiencies can be settled down, then more attempts can be taken to improve its connectivity with the neighbouring countries as well as other developed economies of East and Southeast Asia which would be ultimately benefit the region. Besides economic (especially infrastructural) development, soft aspects too need to be emphasised. The policy makers also need to popularise initiatives like BIMSTEC as local people including the businessmen, traders and civil society representatives hardly know about it, as evidenced from this researcher's field study to Moreh, Manipur. And, lastly, NER needs to be equipped as a true gateway for India, not as a mere transit point for goods from mainland India, Southeast Asia and China. It is important that NER becomes politically stable, economically sound,

technologically progressive, rich in human resources, and it should have the capability to adjust to the changes happening in the world. (Upadhyay 2009)

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