



CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES OF NORTH EASTERN REGION OF INDIA AND ITS ACT EAST POLICY

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ABSTRACT

India embarked with its Look East Policy (LEP), that later evolved as Act East Policy (AEP) with multifaceted strategic ambition. It had two major perspectives, namely Security and Economy. India also sees its North Eastern Region (NER) as its Gateway to East Asia and strives to leverage the maximum. India hence initiated series of measures that promote Culture, Connectivity and Commerce in NER which in turn draws similar ties from its eastern neighbours. This article analyses the role and potential of India's NER in achieving the objectives of AEP with special reference to connectivity.

KEYWORDS : North East Region, Connectivity, NER, LEP, AEP

INTRODUCTION

The North East Region (NER) has for many decades been largely ignored and overlooked. The region despite being underdeveloped was not given the priority in the launch of the historic Look East policy (LEP), that eventually evolved as Act East Policy (AEP). Despite planned investments in the past, the overall development in the NER continued to remain poor, which has also been noted by the NER Vision document as the single biggest constraint to accelerated growth. The region is characterized by grossly underdeveloped transport linkages that have sequestered and isolated the region not only from the rest of the country and the world, but also within itself.

There are two major initiatives that complement each other and serve well for NER, namely; Evolution of Look East Policy into AEP and the establishment of Ministry of Development of North East Region. NER figures prominently in India's foreign policy orientation towards the region of Southeast Asia which forms the crux of India's Look East Policy. The geo-strategic and geo-economic importance of NER in India's AEP can never be underestimated.

IMPORTANCE OF AEP FOR NER

The 'Look East' policy as enunciated by the Government of India in the immediate years after the Cold War end and the dawn of globalisation makes a lot of sense for the North East region. The LEP has generated considerable optimism in the states of NER. All NER states are very keen to explore the advantages the policy and the policy was seen by the NER to open a lot of opportunities for breaking free from the shackles of isolation and progressing by linking with the prosperous Southeast Asian economies. The potential benefits from closer connectivity between India and Southeast Asia to India's North East are no doubt large. As the interaction with South East Asia enhances, it is but inevitable that its NER would be drawn into the overall LEP given its geographic proximity to the South East Asian region. NER serves as a gateway to South East Asia, as the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland share a 1643 km of land border with Myanmar. The policy no doubt aroused expectations among the states of the North East to bring about a significant change in the socio-economic and security scenario in the region. Nevertheless, the policy would open up great scope for heightened trade relations and free markets with South East Asia. This will in turn 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

The AEP, which is the natural evolution of LEP, has the potential to bring a change in the region if it is backed by suitable measures. Effort must be taken on a priority basis to develop infrastructure right up to the border area, provide better connectivity and communication facility to the cross-border points through which trade and economic exchanges can be done with the neighbouring

countries of Southeast Asia. The most important step to bring about changes in NER would be to create road connectivity through Myanmar into South East Asia.

ROLE OF NER IN THE SUCCESS OF AEP

The geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and South-East Asia is all clear. By simply saying Northeast as a gateway will not bring any change in the region. This must be supported by proper action. In the recent past owing to its geo-strategic location, the region of Northeast has figured prominently in India's policy towards East Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. The role that NER could play in India's relations with the regional groupings has also been looked into. NER has been viewed as strategically important with regard to India's LEP. Development of North East is extremely essential to serve India's objective either as a developed region or as a thriving corridor. By establishing and enhancing people to people connect, cross border trade, cultural exchanges and communication, NER will undoubtedly play a major and critical role in achieving the objectives of AEP.

BORDER TRADE IN NER

Despite the fact that, India has in recent time's strengthened trade exchanges with the neighbouring countries, in particular to booming trade with ASEAN, under the so called AEP, the NER has been largely left out of the equation. The overall position of trade, industry, border trade in the state is not so encouraging at the present context owing to several reasons such as lack of proper connectivity, absence of infrastructural facilities, limited trading basket, restricted trading season and smuggling. At present, the basic infrastructure facilities required for the development border trade like good road, transportation, warehousing, telecommunication, power, post and telegraph, services like banking, export-import credit, issuance of certificate of origin, financing, civic facilities training institutions are not forthcoming. These are the need of the hour and without this border trade cannot be developed in the right direction. Besides, India will need to enter into an economic dialogue with the bordering countries for smooth trade.

CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN NORTH EAST INDIA AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Enhanced connectivity between ner and South East Asia will benefit India as a whole and in particular to the underdeveloped NER. The possible outcomes of such connectivity are as follows:

- Local communities living both side of the border will receive increased infrastructure development - roads, waterways, electricity, communication etc, it will then integrate them together for economic and cultural gains.
- Great boost for border trades which will become useful outlets for Indian manufactured goods.
- Employment opportunities - better livelihood and wean away

- the youths of North East India from militancy.
- All weather links to Kunming via Stilwell road, Mandalay-Yangon via Moreh, and to Sittwe via Zochachhuah by road and Kaladan riverways - NE
 - India will be no more landlocked thereby setting it free from isolation and boost to interconnectivity.
 - North East India will move closer to mainland India with alternative links, and emotionally unite with their cousins in Southeast Asia through trades and interconnectivity.
 - Willing cooperation and integration of the communities on both side of the border for common mutual interests – Lisu (Yobin), Naga, Kuki-Chin, Mizo/Zomi, Meitei and others.
 - By declaring AEP, the present government seems to have shown keen interest in strengthening and broadening the present level of engagement with the East Asia in general and ASEAN in particular. It reflects the need to act seriously towards the East Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular. Under the AEP, the present government sought to give NER, the long overdue primary attention as a Gateway to ASEAN and East Asia.

From the above suggested measures and analysis, it can be observed that the success of India's policy toward the South East Asian region would depend on the nature of development and security scenario in the NER, as the region would play an important role as a gateway to the region of South East Asia. The political, economic, social and security development in the NER have wider and decisive repercussion for India's relations with countries of Southeast Asia.

The success of the AEP can be considered if and only if development of the North-East takes place. Seemingly, the prospects for development in the region are linked with the LEP. It is essential not only for generating employment opportunities but also containing the problem of militancy. The people of the region large perceive that given the geographical contiguity, cultural ties, and proximity to the countries in Southeast Asia, the policy should have helped to break the economic isolation of the NER states. However, even though the LEP has been in existence for more than two decades, its benefits to the NER have been negligible. That doesn't mean the policy is irrelevant.

CONCLUSION

To ensure that the LEP usher development in the landlocked NER would require massive increases in investment and opening up the region for trade with neighbours and beyond. Much of the increase in investment will have to be made by the private sector. Similarly, opening up the region for trade with neighbours requires a paradigm shift in the relationship with these countries. It requires increases in investment and trade with neighbours, creation of enabling conditions which, among other things, entail, improvement in the governance, diplomatic initiatives, creation of market oriented policies and institutions and, most of all, creation of state of the art infrastructure - particularly for internal transportation and connectivity and border trade.

The India, Myanmar and Thailand Trilateral Highway which has been undertaken as part of the Asian Highway project can be a game changer for the NER as it will provide direct road connectivity to the markets of South East Asia. Above all, what holds the key is the early implementation of all the ongoing projects to connect NER with Southeast Asia. This will facilitate easy movement of goods, services and tourists from across the borders, which in turn will ensure achievement of core objectives of AEP.

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