



INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY : NORTH EAST REGION AS A FACTOR

Defence Studies

Dr Navin Varma Dept of Defence Studies, Meerut College, Meerut.

Ashwini Sharma* Research Scholar, Meerut College, Meerut, 250002. *Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

The success of the Look East Policy 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 Look East Policy. Under the new paradigm of Act East Policy (AEP), the present government has amended the peripheral status of North East Region (NER) and given necessary attention and centrality. It also has taken initiatives to exploit the geographical proximity of NER with East and Southeast Asia. There are two major initiatives that complement each other and serve well for Northeastern states, namely; Evolution of Look East Policy (AEP) into AEP and the establishment of Ministry of Development of North East Region. This article examines the mutual dependency of India's AEP and the development of North East Region (NER).

KEYWORDS

Look East Policy, Act East Policy, North East Region, ASEAN

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 evolved eventually as Act East Policy (AEP). Despite planned investments in the past, the overall development in the NER (NER) has continues 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 Northeastern states, namely; Evolution of LEP into Act East Policy and the establishment of Ministry of Development of NER. If not initially, but later on Northeast region figures prominently in India's foreign policy orientation towards the region of Southeast Asia, which forms the crux of India's LEP.

One of the key objectives of India's LEP has been to promote economic development and stabilizing socio-economic security in eight North Eastern States of India through efforts to open links to countries in Southeast Asian mainland countries and to Bangladesh. The North Eastern Council (NEC) determines that one of the strengths of the North Eastern Region (NER) is its proximity to one of the world's fastest-growing economies, the Southeast Asia. The Council emphasised the promotion of Border Trade on a mission mode as part of Government of India's LEP. The region must be assisted to be able to derive full benefit of trade with Southeast Asian countries'. It further insisted that 'the LEP has potential to break isolation and bring prosperity to the region'.

The LEP touted as the harbinger of change and prosperity to the NER of India, for all purpose and intent remains more on papers. The significance of Northeast India as a bridgehead between India and Southeast Asia is being increasingly realized by the policy makers in New Delhi.

Geographical, Historical, Ethnic and Cultural Connection between India's Northeast and Southeast Asia

The NER enjoys close geographical, historical and cultural connection with the Southeast Asia. It is being said that the region of Northeast is tectonically and morphologically part of East Asia, but politically it is part of South Asia. From the geographical perspective, the whole of Northeast region of India forms a contiguous part of the Southeast Asian tectonic physical features. This geographical region would be comprised of the whole of Northeast, Myanmar, Southern China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Eastern Nepal and other Southeast Asian states such as Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and moves further east. The Northeast region is a place where the Indo-Aryan civilizational influences end but the beginning of Southeast Asian culture and ethos. The states of Northeast shares ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties with the neighbouring countries particularly Myanmar and China. There were trade and commercial intercourse between Ava Kingdom

(modern Myanmar) and the Kingdoms of Ahom and Manipur in the past. Cultural connection between India and Southeast Asia dates back 12th century when there witnessed migration of Thai people into the Northeast region of India. A. L. Kroeber, the famous cultural Anthropologist has noted that the entire region across the Bay of Bengal as 'South East Asia ethnic enclaves.' Close cultural and ethnic links served as a strong motivating factor to promote cooperation between India and South East Asia.

LEP – What it Means 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 North East India. All the states of this region are very much keen to explore the advantages that the policy is most likely to bring about. The formulation of the much anticipated LEP was seen by the North East 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 Look East policy given its geographic proximity to the South East Asian region. North East India 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 policy as such has four broad objectives - reform and liberalization, sustained rapid growth, regional economic integration and equitable development. These four objectives are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. It is being presumed that the policy would bring all round development to the prolonged underdevelopment to the region. The North-East offers huge potential for boosting the nation's exports as well as for the development of the region itself. However, owing to the lack of development in the region, the North-East is yet to benefit significantly out of this policy.

Potentialities of LEP for the Economic Development of NER

The North East region is unique in terms of the economic opportunities it offers. Given its strategic location, the region can be developed as a base for India's growing economic links not only with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but also with neighbouring countries, viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Without any doubt, the Look East policy has tremendous potential for the lasting economic development of the Northeast region. Entire Northeast would benefit once there emerge integration between the Indian economy and the

fastest growing economies of Southeast Asia. The proper implementation of the policy will ensure that the Northeast region emerge as a strategic base for domestic and foreign investors to tap the potential of contiguous markets of China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and others. This way, Northeast states has the potential of becoming the hub of the country's expanding economic and trade engagement with ASEAN countries.

LEP and NER

The success of the LEP 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 largely 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 Look East policy 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.

To ensure that the LEP usher development in the landlocked region of Northeast 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 Northeast India with Southeast Asia. This will facilitate easy movement of goods, services and tourists from across the borders.

CONCLUSION

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 new paradigm of AEP, the present NDA government will need to change the peripheral status of North East by giving it necessary attention and centrality. Unlike in the past, the present government will need to take an initiative to exploit the geographical proximity of India's North East with East and Southeast Asia. Special thrust towards the region must be accorded under the AEP which sounds much better.

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