

ISAS Brief

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The Launch of the Guwahati-Singapore Direct Flight: Enhancing Connectivity with Northeast India

The start of regular commercial flights between Guwahati in Northeast India and Singapore from September 2018 heralds a new era in this region's growing connectivity with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-member countries. This is likely to lead to increased movement of people between the ASEAN region and Northeast India, thereby providing a fillip to New Delhi's 'Act-East' policy.

Rupakjyoti Borah¹

The inauguration of the maiden direct flight between Guwahati and Singapore by Bhutanese Airline, Druk Air, marks a new chapter in Northeast India's growing connectivity with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-member countries. While the maiden flight was successfully completed on 1 September 2018, regular flights will start from 29 September 2018. The launch of the Guwahati-Singapore route (the flight starts in Paro in Bhutan) was announced at the opening of the Royal Bhutanese Consulate General in Guwahati in February this year. This event was attended by the Chief Minister of Assam, Sarbananda Sonowal, and the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay.

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This push towards increasing connectivity with Northeast India is in keeping with India's 'Act-East' policy. After the Narendra Modi government came to power in India in May 2014, the 'Look-East' policy was renamed the 'Act-East' policy.² While inaugurating India's third Indian Agriculture Research Institute at Gogamukh in Upper Assam in May last year, Prime Minister Modi stated, "Northeast was known as NE, but from now on it will be known as new economy, new energy, new empowerment – in a way it will become a new engine for India's growth."³

The start of this new route was in keeping with the Air Services Agreement signed between India and Bhutan in July 2005. It also marks the Golden Jubilee of diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan which were established in 1968 with the appointment of a resident representative from India in Bhutan. It is noteworthy that Bhutan was the first country which Modi visited after taking office in May 2014.

What's in it for Northeast India?

The new flight will provide direct connectivity for travellers from Assam and the other Northeastern states to Singapore. This will be a boon for people from the Northeast, who, till now, had to travel via other airports in the county to travel to Singapore and other destinations in Southeast Asia. It is also hoped that it will facilitate increased tourist footfalls in Assam and the other states in Northeast India, given their pristine beauty and the Buddhist heritage in some parts of the Northeast.

The Northeastern states are also beginning to make efforts to attract foreign investment as seen in the maiden Global Investors' Summit in Guwahati, Assam, in February this year. In the same month, the Assam government signed an agreement with the National Building Construction Corporation to construct a 65-storey Twin Tower Trade Centre in Guwahati, which is aiming to be a hub of India's engagement efforts with the ASEAN-member countries. Sonowal has also called upon the ASEAN-member countries to set up consulates

² This marked a new-found vigour added to the earlier 'Look-East' policy with the change in government.

³ "Northeast should be the 'New Engine' for India's growth: Narendra Modi in Assam", *Hindustan Times*, 26 May 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/northeast-should-be-the-new-engine-for-india-s-growth-narendra-modi-in-assam/story-iT7zgfARNbT0zGhRLvGYoL.html>. Accessed on 10 September 2018.

in Guwahati. On 8 August 2018, two land border crossings were also opened in Manipur and Mizoram to allow for overland travel between India and Myanmar.

What's in it for Bhutan?

Bhutan hopes to increase tourist numbers into the country. In addition, it hopes to draw in more tourists from the Northeastern states of India.

India is one of the fastest growing aviation markets in the world. New Delhi has a Regional Connectivity Scheme, also known as UDAN (*Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik*) [Let the common citizen of the country fly], which was first announced last year. The Assam government has been trying, in its own way, to foster increased connectivity with the ASEAN-member states and will provide ₹100 crore per annum (\$19 million) for three years to help start international flights to the ASEAN region. In addition to Singapore, Guwahati is likely to have direct connectivity with other international destinations in the neighbourhood though there is no indication yet on the exact timing of that happening.

In order to keep up with the anticipated increase in the number of travellers, the Guwahati airport is being upgraded and the new terminal building (which is expected to be completed by 2021) will be spread across 90,000 square metres and will have world-class features, which will include 20 aircraft parking bays, 64 check-in counters, eight immigration counters, eight customs counters and six arrival carousels.⁴

Speaking at the foundation laying ceremony of Guwahati's new integrated international terminal, Sonowal noted that it would lead to the emergence of Guwahati as the gateway to Southeast Asia, "We have 800 million people in and around us in Southeast Asia. This is a great market".⁵

⁴ "UDAN scheme: Airports in small cities to go international; Guwahati to be connected to South East Asia", Business Today, 9 March 2018. <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/udan-scheme-airports-international-guwahati-south-east-asia/story/272277.html>. Accessed on 10 September 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

Challenges

However, the biggest challenge for the airline will be to ensure that the flights are full capacity. Otherwise, the flights may not continue for long. In addition, there has to be a concerted push by all the Northeastern states to promote tourism in this region so as to draw tourists from the ASEAN-member countries. The hospitality industry in the region also needs a shake-up in order to cater to the needs of an international clientele. It is worth mentioning here that Singapore has already signed a memorandum of understanding to set up a skills development centre in Guwahati.

Be that as it may, what is certain is that, with this direct flight between Guwahati and Singapore, a new era has dawned in terms of aerial connectivity between Northeast India and the ASEAN-member countries, especially with Singapore. Hopefully, this will spur greater trade and closer people-to-people ties between Northeast India and the Southeast Asian region.

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