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India woos its Northeast: Development and Diplomacy Factors

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India's President Pranab Mukherjee made a three-day visit to Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in the country's Northeast region. In Arunachal Pradesh he attended the convocation ceremony at the Rajiv Gandhi University, and addressed the Legislative Assembly. He graced the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Nagaland's statehood and inaugurated the 10-day long Hornbill Festival. The visit is significant in three aspects, re-asserting India's sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, reiterating Northeast's centrality to India's 'Look-East' Policy, and giving credence to the idea that development as a way of securitising border areas is a policy that New Delhi is seriously mulling over.

Since he assumed office in July 2012, President Mukherjee has visited the Northeast several times including three trips to Assam, two each to Nagaland and Sikkim, and one each to Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. He is yet to visit Mizoram. On his trips to the Northeast, the President has said, "My frequent visits to this region reflect its strategic importance and the role it can play in the building of a strong and powerful India".²

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² 'North-east can strengthen India: Pranab' (2013, December 2), *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/northeast-can-strengthen-india-pranab/article5411381.ece>. Accessed 03/12/2013.

Arunachal Pradesh: China Factor

In his address to the Arunachal Pradesh Assembly, Mr Mukherjee said, “Arunachal Pradesh is an integral and important part of the North East region of India and a core stakeholder in India’s Look East foreign policy”. Driving home the point of Indian influence and connections of civilisation, he cited ancient Indian texts – the Puranic literature – to emphasise Arunachal’s importance. “It is believed that here, Sage Parashuram washed away his sins, Sage Vyasa meditated, King Bhishmaka founded his kingdom and Lord Krishna married his consort Rukmini. Arunachal is also home to the 400 year old Tawang Monastery and the birth place of the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso”.³

Reacting to the Indian President’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh, China urged India not to aggravate problems on the border shared by the two nations. China’s official news agency, Xinhua, quoted Qin Gang, a spokesperson of the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as saying, “We hope that India will proceed along with China, protecting our broad relationship, and will not take any measures that could complicate the problem, and together we can protect peace and security in the border regions”.⁴ The Xinhua article went on to add that “The so-called “Arunachal Pradesh” was established largely on the three areas of China’s– Tibet – Monyul, Loyul and Lower Tsayul currently under Indian illegal occupation. These three areas, located between the illegal “McMahon Line” and the traditional customary boundary between China and India, have always been Chinese territory. In 1914, the colonialists secretly contrived the illegal “McMahon Line” in an attempt to incorporate into India the above-mentioned three areas of Chinese territory. None of the successive Chinese governments have ever recognized this line”.

This has however been considered a milder response in comparison to China’s reaction to earlier visit by India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the state in 2009. The Chinese government had then said it was “deeply upset” and “strongly dissatisfied” that “an Indian leader went to the disputed area despite our grave concerns.”⁵

Both sides have been working to maintain peace and stability along the border. With several mechanisms – including a border defence cooperation agreement – in place, there is greater confidence that the two countries will find a *modus vivendi* if not a solution to the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh. One media report claiming access to foreign ministry documents on border

³ SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE TO THE MEMBERS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY. The President of India Website. <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/sp291113-1.html>. Accessed 03/12/2013

⁴ ‘China urges India not to complicate border issue’ (2013, November 30), *Xinhuanet*, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-11/30/c_132931034.htm. Accessed 03/12/2013.

⁵ ‘China’s muted response’ (2013, November 29), *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/china-reacts-with-calm-to-pranabs-arunachal-visit/article5405082.ece>. Accessed 03/12/2013.

negotiations, reported that India has signalled its readiness to let its Aksai Chin region remain in Chinese hands in exchange for recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory.⁶

Infrastructure, Security and 'Look-East' Policy

The Northeast has been a latter addition to the ambit of India's 'Look-East' Policy, and the development of the region as an integral part of India's attempts to forge closer ties with Southeast Asia has been stressed in recent times. President Mukherjee has said that Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast constitute "....a core stakeholder in India's Look East foreign policy... The north east of India provides a natural bridge between us and South East Asia. India must find its destiny by linking itself more and more with its Asian partners and the rest of the world".⁷ He added that the Centre and the state governments should together rapidly build infrastructure linkages and connectivity with the rest of India as well as Southeast Asia.

While calling for speeding up efforts to harness the business and trade potential of the Northeast, he spoke of the challenge for the state and the central governments to complete and commission all the hydroelectric projects which could bring huge economic benefits to the region. A sense of urgency to develop hydroelectric projects, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh is also a sign of an attempt by India to appropriate the right of first-use in respect of the rivers that traverse across the disputed China-India border.

As such, the development of infrastructure to bolster the security of India's Northeast region as well as matching the development initiatives in Arunachal Pradesh with China's developments efforts in Tibet on the other side has been an ongoing effort. According to an Indian analyst, the 1,447 extremely backward villages situated along the state's border with China, Myanmar and Bhutan compare poorly with the rapid pace of development in Tibet on the other side of the Sino-Indian border.⁸ During Dr Manmohan Singh's visit in 2009, a number of development projects were announced, and these include a 1,840 kilometre Trans-Arunachal Pradesh two-lane highway from Tawang to Mahadevpur; water supply projects for Itanagar and Naharlagun, and a daily helicopter services between Guwahati in Assam and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from India's concerns related to Beijing's strategy in the border region, New Delhi needs to pay

⁶ 'India 'ready to let China keep Aksai Chin' if neighbour country drops claim to Arunachal Pradesh' (2013, November 28), *Mail Online India*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2515187/India-ready-let-China-Aksai-Chin-neighbour-country-drops-claim-Arunachal-Pradesh.html>. Accessed 03/12/2013.

⁷ SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE TO THE MEMBERS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY. The President of India Website. <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/sp291113-1.html>. Accessed 03/12/2013

⁸ M. Amarjeet Singh, 'Dr. Manmohan Singh's Message on Arunachal Pradesh'. *IDSA Comment*. March 2008. http://www.idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/DrManmohanSinghsMessageonArunachalPradesh_MASingh_040308. Accessed 03/12/2013.

attention to the possible discontent among the local populations, who have access to kinsmen on the other side of the border, and tend to compare the infrastructures on both sides.

In a bid to win over the people of the region and allay security concerns of the people, President Mukherjee quoted former President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who had said, while inaugurating the state of Nagaland, that the government must capture the hearts and minds of the people. In Nagaland, Mr Mukherjee called upon the people to “work towards establishing and maintaining a peaceful environment”, appealing to them to put behind them the dark days of violence and conflict.

While President Mukherjee’s high profile visit signals an increased and sustained interest in the region by New Delhi, it is also seen, somewhat sceptically, as a reinforcement of the rhetoric that has increasingly come to dominate New Delhi’s policy towards the Northeast, in fact as yet another lip service. Besides the intention to develop the said infrastructure, there are local concerns which need the attention of the centre. In Arunachal Pradesh, the opposition People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) submitted a memorandum, urging the centre to arrange for an early deportation of illegal Chakma and Hajong settlers from the state. And in Nagaland, Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio made mention of the unfulfilled promises of the 16-point agreement,⁹ the basis on which the state was formed in 1960.¹⁰ Given the closer scrutiny that the region has received over the years due to its geo-strategic significance, New Delhi will have to do more on the ground to show its seriousness about the development plans.

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⁹ The 16 Point Agreement between the Government of India and the Naga People’s Convention. UN Peacemaker website, http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN_600726_The%20sixteen%20point%20Agreement_0.pdf. Accessed 03/12/2013.

¹⁰ ‘North-east can strengthen India: Pranab’ (2013, December 2), *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/northeast-can-strengthen-india-pranab/article5411381.ece>. Accessed 03/12/2013.