

ISAS Brief

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“Acting- East” via the Northeast

India’s Northeastern region could act as its bridgehead to Southeast Asia and beyond. However, for New Delhi to reap the full advantages of the Northeast’s geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, it must do more to improve the infrastructure in this region and put the projects it is executing in neighbouring Myanmar on the fast-track. Bangladesh could also be an important part of this initiative.

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Northeast India occupies a pivotal position in New Delhi’s “Act-East Policy” due to its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia. Four states in this part of India—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share borders with Myanmar.² In addition, some tribes from this region, such as the Nagas, are also found in Myanmar. The lack of access to the sea has been one of the most important factors as to why the Northeast has lagged behind when it comes to development levels as compared to many other parts of the country. Hence, overland connectivity with the rest of the country and with Myanmar is critically important to shore up development levels in this part of India.

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² Ministry of External Affairs, India-Myanmar relations available at https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelations/Myanmar_Feb_2016.pdf accessed on March 20, 2017

In the past, there used to be a road called the Stilwell Road which ran from Ledo in Upper Assam to Kunming in South China via Myanmar and while there have been some calls for the reopening of this road, there are valid security concerns regarding the risk factors before any decision can be taken on this issue. Guwahati's international airport is already connected to Thailand and Bhutan and in the future it could be connected to other airports in Southeast Asia and beyond. Increased connectivity with Southeast Asia will also help bring in more tourists to this part of India, which is well-known for its scenic beauty. The trial run of a bus service between Imphal in India's Manipur province and Mandalay in Myanmar was undertaken in December 2015.³

What Is The “Act-East Policy?”

The “Act-East Policy” aims at reinvigorating India's age-old ties with countries in Southeast India and East Asia, which it had lost out on in the aftermath of its independence due to its policy of non-alignment and closeness to the erstwhile Soviet Union. The “Act-East Policy” in its earlier avatar was known as the “Look-East Policy” until the moniker was changed after the Modi government came to power in May 2014. It was enunciated in the wake of India's economic liberalization and its severe balance of payments crisis in the early 1990's. Since then, successive governments have pushed forward the “Look-East Policy”. There is a maritime element to the “Act-East Policy” as well. During PM Modi's visit to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in March 2015, he outlined the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)⁴

There have been some signal achievements of the “Act-East Policy”. One of the key projects that has been undertaken is the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project which will connect Moreh in India's Manipur province to Mae Sot in Thailand. New Delhi has also been involved in many infrastructure development projects in Myanmar like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project which will allow goods to be transported from Kolkata to Myanmar's

³ The Hindu, “Imphal-Myanmar bus service launched”, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/imphalmyanmar-bus-service-launched/article7965462.ece> accessed on March 10, 2017

⁴ The Hindu, “Mr. Modi's Ocean View”, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/mr-modis-ocean-view/article7000182.ece> accessed on March 23, 2017

Sittwe port and thereafter to India's remote Mizoram province by the river route(through the Kaladan river) and a stretch of road.

New Delhi has embarked on the “Act-East Policy” for a host of reasons.

Firstly, India has limited options on its western and northern flanks and hence it is natural for it to look towards the East, where it has more chances of developing close ties with its neighbours. Historically, Indian influence and customs had spread to both Southeast Asia and East Asia.

Secondly, both Southeast Asia and East Asia are regions which have been economically successful and for the Indian economy to do well, close ties with these regions are important. It is worth noting here that ASEAN is now New Delhi’s fourth-largest trading partner after China, the European Union and the United States. ⁵

The “Act-East Policy” has gained more traction under the Modi administration. His first overseas destination, after taking over office (beyond the Indian subcontinent) was Japan, thus showing the importance accorded by the Modi administration to India’s ties with East Asia. Besides, he has already visited South Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar (for the East Asia Summit), Vietnam, Thailand, Laos (for the East Asia Summit)and Singapore in this part of the world.

Can the Northeast Be India’s Bridgehead to Southeast Asia?

Before this can happen, there are quite a few challenges to be tackled. There are still rumblings of insurgency in some parts of this region, which acts as a huge impediment. The quality of infrastructure in this part of the country leaves a lot to be desired. Northeast India also suffers from floods, landslides and many other natural calamities every year and hence building and maintaining infrastructure in this part of the country can be a difficult ask. Border trade is still

⁵ East Asia Forum, “India looks east to ASEAN with Delhi Dialogue” available at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/03/04/india-looks-east-to-asean-with-delhi-dialogue/> accessed on March 10, 2017

miniscule and there is a lot of illegal trade that goes on in the border areas. In addition, there are genuine concerns about the inflow of drugs and weapons from Myanmar to the Northeast.

Conclusion

While it is worth noting that the Indian government has been quite proactive in reaching out to countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia, there still remains a substantial number of challenges to India's desire to seek a bigger foothold in these regions. The IMT (India-Myanmar-Thailand) trilateral highway project is now running late by almost three years (from its scheduled opening in 2016) and in the Kaladan project, the road link has not been completed ⁶

Bangladesh also needs to be made an integral part of the “Act-East Policy” given its geographical proximity to the Northeastern part of India. The two countries could work together towards riverine transportation corridors, which will allow for easier and quicker trade between Bangladesh and India’s Northeast.

New Delhi must try to seize the first-mover advantage when it comes to its ties with countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia as part of its “Act-East” push. In addition, the implementation of key projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project needs to be speeded up. If New Delhi is to take advantage of its Northeastern region's geographical contiguity with Southeast Asia, greater stress on improving the infrastructure in this region is *sine qua non*.

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⁶ The Hindu Businessline, “Connectivity with Myanmar — the wait gets longer”, available at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/connectivity-with-myanmar-the-wait-gets-longer/article9022490.ece> accessed on March 5, 2017