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Northeast India in India’s “Act-East” Policy: Exploring Connectivity with Southeast Asia

The location of northeast India makes it a key nodal point for India’s growing ties with Southeast Asia. As India celebrates 25 years of its dialogue partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the northeast of the country has become doubly important in India’s “Act-East” Policy. The ongoing construction of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway will further enhance the importance of northeast India in India’s “Act-East” policy.

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India’s “Look-East” Policy was launched in the early 1990s by the then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. It was upgraded to the “Act-East” Policy following the assumption of office by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014. Under the “Act-East” Policy, India plans to undertake a slew of infrastructure projects in northeast India as well as in neighbouring Myanmar. These projects have the potential to radically transform the economy of northeast India, which acts as New Delhi’s bridgehead to Myanmar and other parts of Southeast Asia.

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Northeast India has historically had close ties with Southeast Asia, especially with Myanmar. Some Naga tribes are scattered across the border in Myanmar. Since the days of yore, informal trade has been going on between India and Myanmar via the northeast states. There are dedicated outposts for border trade between India and Myanmar. Of particular importance, too, is the fact that the Modi government has paid special attention to the development of infrastructure in the northeast. Earlier this year, India's longest bridge – over the Lohit River in the northeast state of Assam – was inaugurated. The 9.15 kilometre-long bridge over a tributary of the Brahmaputra River will go a long way in ameliorating the transportation bottlenecks in this part of the country and provide connectivity to far-flung places in Arunachal Pradesh.

The northeast states can also be a big draw for tourists from Southeast Asia. Many parts of northeast India have substantial populations of Buddhists and Buddhism is the majority religion in parts of Southeast Asia. In addition, the northeast states have tremendous potential for the production of hydro-electricity which could also be exported to the Southeast Asia.

Deepening the Connectivity

India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are celebrating 25 years of the establishment of their dialogue partnership. India's Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar had, while marking 25 years of India-Singapore partnership in July this year, noted that “the expansion of connectivity between India and South East Asia is both a driver and an outcome of these collaborations. Indeed, over the last twenty five years, the inter-penetration and travel between ASEAN and India has been so extensive that most Indians now intuitively think of this region as part of their neighbourhood.”²

There is scope for greater air connectivity between northeast India and Southeast Asia. This would bring in more foreign tourists to northeast India. Already Guwahati has an international airport that services flights to Thailand and Bhutan. In the future, there could

² Ministry of External Affairs, India, Dr S Jaishankar, Speech by Dr S Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary to mark 25 years of India-Singapore Partnership available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28609/Speech+by+Dr+S+Jaishankar+Foreign+Secretary+to+mark+25+years+of+India+Singapore+Partnership+at+Shangri-La+Hotel+Singapore+July+11+2017>, 11 July 2017. Accessed on 3 October 2017.

also be direct air links with Bangladesh, given that country's importance to India. To mark the 20th anniversary of the ASEAN-India dialogue partnership in 2012, an ASEAN-India car rally was organised covering a distance of more than 8,000 kilometres. It started in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and ended in Guwahati in northeast India.

Improving the infrastructure in India's northeast is also important for strategic reasons. In the light of the recent stand-off between India and China over Doklam, the Indian security planners will do well to pay greater attention to the development of infrastructure in northeast India, especially in the border regions of Arunachal Pradesh and in the areas facing countries such as Myanmar and Bangladesh.

India's Central government has already approved an upgrade of the Aizawl-Tuipang section of National Highway (NH 54) in Mizoram, while a border *haat* (market) operates at Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh. It is also worth mentioning here that a road, called the Stilwell Road, which connected Ledo in upper Assam to Kunming in southern China, via Myanmar, was built during the Second World War. Parts of this road are still in use.

The Role of Myanmar

During the Cold War, a wide gulf began developing between India and the ASEAN. However, since its end and the launch of India's "Look-East" Policy, New Delhi's relations with the ASEAN countries have seen an incremental improvement. India became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum and went on to sign a free trade agreement with ASEAN in 2009.

Of particular importance is New Delhi's relationship with Myanmar, India's land bridge to the ASEAN region. New Delhi's ties with Nay Pyi Taw have improved by leaps and bounds, especially after Myanmar turned democratic. The pro-democracy icon in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, has close ties with India – she studied in India for some time when her mother was posted as the Burmese Ambassador in India. Her father, Aung San (who is known as the Father of the Country) had close ties with India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Buddhism spread to Myanmar from India, its place of birth.

Four northeast states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, share more than 1,600-kilometre-long border with Myanmar. In addition, New Delhi has been involved with several infrastructure projects in Myanmar. Among them, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project³ and the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway project deserve special mention. The former will connect the port of Sittwe in Myanmar on the Bay of Bengal with northeast India, while the IMT trilateral highway has the potential to transform India's physical connectivity with Southeast Asia.

In 2010, New Delhi decided to provide grant assistance of US\$60 million (S\$81.6 million) for the construction and revamping of the Rhi-Tiddim road in Myanmar. During the visit of Myanmar President Htin Kyaw to India, an agreement was reached for the construction of 69 bridges in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section of the Trilateral Highway.⁴

Myanmar is rich in oil and natural gas which India's booming economy needs. India has been scouting across the world for oil and gas resources. With Myanmar being India's immediate neighbour, the freight and the security risks usually associated with long-distance transportation could be cut. At the same time, India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited-Videsh and Gas Authority of India Limited have made significant investments in the oil and gas sectors in Myanmar.

On the diplomatic front, then-United States (US) President Barack Obama had, during his visit to India in November 2010, chided India for "not doing enough" to promote democracy in Myanmar.⁵ However, India has had its own reasons for dealing with the military junta in Myanmar. India had initially extended strong support to the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar after the annulment of the 1990 election results by the junta. However, as Myanmar inched closer to China, India decided to change tack. It was India's then-External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh's landmark visit to Myanmar in 2001 that helped to break the ice,

³ Lian Bawi Thang, Ting Oo, Alec Blyth Scott, *The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project*, available at https://in.boell.org/sites/default/files/india-myanmar_relations_looking_from_the_border.pdf, 28-29 September 2015. Accessed on 28 September 2017.

⁴ *The Hindu* (2016), India, Myanmar to build bridges, sign pact for 69, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pm-holds-talks-with-myanmarese-president/article9045541.ece>, 29 August 2016. Accessed on 1 September 2017.

⁵ Barack Obama (2010), Remarks by the President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, India available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/remarks-president-joint-session-indian-parliament-new-delhi-india>, 8 November 2010. Accessed on 29 August 2017.

while India's then-Foreign Secretary J N Dixit's visit to Yangon in March 1993, in fact, helped to set the ball rolling. Singh's visit was the first to Myanmar by an Indian external affairs minister in 20 years.

Myanmar also has a lot to gain from better and closer ties with India. New Delhi is already involved in a host of infrastructure and energy projects in Myanmar. Besides, it has provided 32 Myanmar cities with high speed data link while Indian firms are involved in the development of Myanmar's railway network, including the supply of railway coaches and locomotives.

However, New Delhi could indeed do much more for Myanmar. First, it should announce additional lines of credit to Myanmar, taking into consideration the areas that need immediate attention. In a sense, Myanmar is as important for India's national security as Afghanistan – as in the case of Kabul, India should also be prepared to extend much developmental aid to Myanmar.

Second, India can provide additional technical assistance and manpower, especially in the field of information technology (IT), India's key strength. Already, an India-Myanmar Centre for Enhancement of IT Skills is in operation in Myanmar.

Third, India would do well to further relax visa rules for Myanmar nationals (particularly those visiting India for religious purposes) and announce special scholarships for Myanmar students to come and study at Indian institutions.

Fourth, India could announce unilateral concessions to allow selected Myanmar products to enter the Indian market with little or no tariff. As the bigger partner, India is expected to be prepared to give some unilateral concessions to Myanmar.

Finally, the Indian private sector should also be tapped on a bigger scale, especially in the infrastructure sector, where the entry of the private sector is intended to speed up the implementation of certain key projects. In some other areas, India will have to move cautiously. While India and Myanmar have agreed to cooperate in the implementation of the Tamanthi and Shwezaye power projects on the Chindwin river basin in Myanmar, New Delhi

should learn from the experiences of other countries and avoid going ahead with the same without taking the Myanmar public into confidence. The Myanmar government had suspended the construction of the Chinese-built US\$3.6 billion (S\$4.89 billion) Myitsone hydroelectric project on the Irrawaddy River, which would have mostly supplied electricity to China. There was a massive public outcry against the project, which forced the Myanmar government to retract its decision. India would do well not to err in its self-interest.

Conclusion

In his speech at the India-ASEAN Summit in Vientiane in September 2016, Modi noted that “enhancing connectivity in all its dimensions – physical, digital, economic, institutional and cultural – is at the heart of India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN. And, readiness to link our economic success, and share development experiences with ASEAN nations, especially the CLMV countries [Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam], drives our engagement.”⁶

Countries like Japan have also expressed interest in the development of India’s northeast. The joint statement issued during the visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India in September this year noted that “the two Prime Ministers welcomed the India-Japan cooperation on development of India’s North Eastern Region (NER) as a concrete symbol of developing synergies between India’s Act East policy and Japan’s Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy. In this context, they noted with satisfaction the setting up of the India-Japan Act East Forum. They appreciated the cooperation between Japan and North Eastern Region of India, ranging from key infrastructure such as road connectivity, electricity, water supply and sewage, to social and environmental sustainability such as afforestation and community empowerment, as well as people-to-people exchanges, including the “IRIS Program” (named after the Japanese Iris flower), inviting youth from the NER to Japan.”⁷

⁶ Prime Minister Modi’s speech at 14th ASEAN-India Summit, <http://www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-at-the-14th-asean-india-summit-in-vientiane-laos-522427>, 8 September 2016. Accessed on 4 October 2017.

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India, 14 September 2017. Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Japan+to+India+September+14+2017>. Accessed on 2 October 2017.

Northeast India is crucial for the success of India's "Act-East" Policy. However, the infrastructure development in northeast India itself has to be speeded up so that the region can take full advantage of the "Act-East" Policy. For this, all the northeast states should act in a coherent, well-planned manner. This will involve all the state governments in the region acting in concert with the Centre. Only then, will northeast India fully benefit from New Delhi's "Act-East" Policy.

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