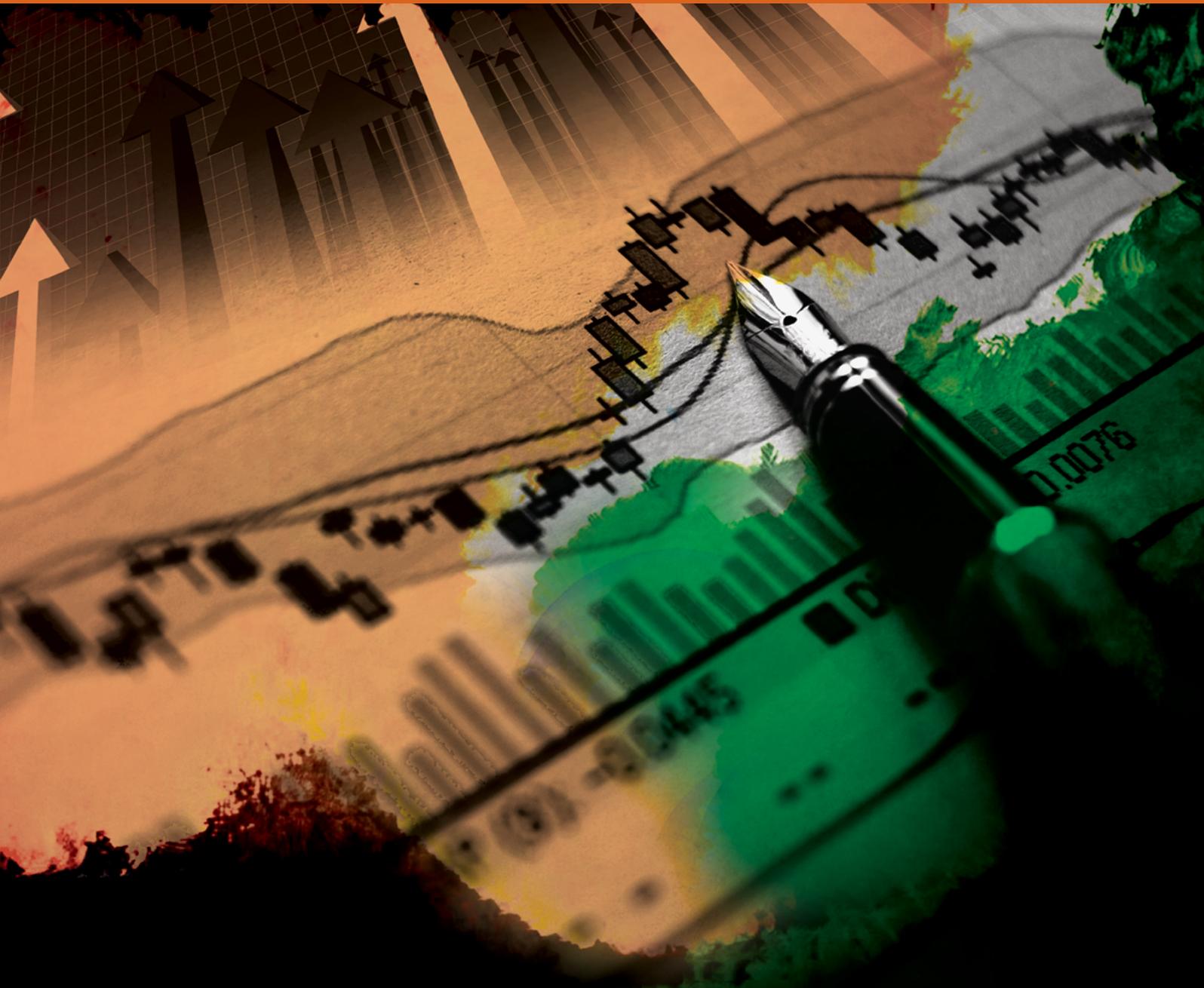


# Policy Report

## The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

Shibashis Chatterjee  
March 2014

# **Policy Report**

## **The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States**

---

**Shibashis Chatterjee**

March 2014

# The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States

## Executive summary

India's Look East Policy (LEP) joins India with its Southeast Asian neighbours on the basis of shared economic and strategic interests. But the policy is also linked with India's domestic considerations as it is an innovative attempt to link India's landlocked and impoverished Northeastern states with the stronger Southeast Asian economies. This brief argues that the economic regeneration of the relatively backward Northeastern states requires a new imagination of extended neighbourhood that will allow economies of scale to be realised and thus help transcend the geographical claustrophobia of this region. Shared linguistic roots, culture, tribal practices, and physical connectivity between the Northeast and a number of Southeast Asian states via Myanmar make it possible to realise this vision.

There is a clash of perceptions between how the Indian state conceptualises the LEP and what local stakeholders want from it. Without tapping shared cultural resources and investing in people-to-people contacts, the LEP might thus create considerable wealth and yet bypass the people of the Northeast. The critical test for the success of India's linkage of the LEP with the Northeast lies in New Delhi's ties with Myanmar.

This brief recommends that:

- Myanmar be treated as India's land gateway to Southeast Asia. Balancing China's economic and security interests in Myanmar and beyond thus remains a crucial aspect of the LEP.
- A robust LEP that invests imaginatively in the Northeastern region's physical connectivity, emphasises the virtues of ethnic diversity, and admits a political negotiation of dissent will give India its best chance to stimulate the region's economy.
- A vigorous pursuit of the continental version of the LEP should be undertaken through massive investments in physical infrastructure, improved markets and the creation of new supply chains in the region.

The Look East Policy (LEP) is an attempt by India to reinvent ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours on the basis of shared economic and strategic interests. But the LEP is also inextricably intertwined with India's domestic interests. It is very much an innovative attempt to link India's landlocked and impoverished Northeastern states with the booming Southeast Asian economies. However, the policy remains limited in its impact because its domestic drivers have remained largely untapped.

---

## Northeast India and LEP

India's Northeast and Southeast Asia share a number of historical-cultural attributes. The Ahoms of Assam migrated several centuries ago from the Shan state of Burma and also have close linguistic bonds with Laos and Thailand. The Chins from Myanmar migrated over the past centuries to Manipur and the Meities of Manipur have kinship ties for over 2,000 years with the

Burmans of Myanmar. Similar migration has also occurred into India's Northeast from the Yunnan province of China. Connectivity is not merely about creating physical infrastructure; it is also about connecting people by reviving shared links. Expanding links with Southeast Asia can be facilitated by making the people of the Northeast a stakeholder to this dialogue.

---

<sup>1</sup> India's Northeastern states are comprised of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, popularly referred to as the seven sisters. Though the province of Sikkim is also constitutionally and technically a part of this category, its location and history make it unique among Northeastern states. India's LEP would also benefit Sikkim since it is close to the Siliguri corridor in West Bengal that links mainland India with the Northeast physically. Similarly, the northern part of West Bengal is close to the Northeast and is a vital cog of the LEP.

Another aspect of the problem is that India's Northeast has long remained underdeveloped partly because of the inability of the Indian state to think beyond policy options embedded in local needs. While the need for rapid economic development of the region is unexceptionable, it is equally evident that conventional recipes will not do. Over the decades, the centre has invested enormous sums in this region with little development to show. The argument of economic discrimination does not hold as the central government's per capita expenditure in the Northeast has been one of the highest since independence. A quick glance at a map of India suggests that the whole region has a tenuous physical link with the rest of India through the slim Chicken's Neck corridor of North Bengal.

A large part of the money invested in the region is lost to spillage. The Indian state for a long time paid scant attention to the fact that the region has about 4,500 kilometres of borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The constraints imposed by security concerns, illegal migration and closed economies have blocked the circulation of international capital in the region. The LEP challenges set practices in a number of ways. "The economic integration of the Northeast with South East Asia", according to Das, "will enable her to: (i)... 'liberate' the Northeast from its presently landlocked and peripheral status by way of opening it to the port of Chittagong and connecting it to the proposed Trans-Asian highway passing through such places as Guwahati, Ledo, Jiribam, Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Laos; and (ii) reap the economic and political advantages that will follow on its being linked up with the 'powerhouses' of the South East Asian economies."<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, India has undertaken numerous bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between its Northeast and Southeast Asia. The important on-going and potential infrastructure projects in this regard are the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road, the India-

Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Trans-Asian Highway,<sup>3</sup> India-Myanmar rail linkages, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project (hereafter "Kaladan Project"), the Stilwell road, the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas or oil pipeline, the Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project and the optical fibre network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, which has been operational since 2009.<sup>4</sup>

The Kaladan Project is a major landmark that will connect India's eastern seaport of Kolkata with its landlocked northeastern state of Mizoram by traversing Arakan and Chin States in Burma through a newly constructed river and highway transport system. The project was conceived by the Indian government as a means to develop a trade route between its mainland and the Northeast as a key element of the LEP. The Indian government expects the Kaladan Project to lead to increased economic linkages with Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia. The original plan conceptualised the project as a precursor to establishing a gas pipeline along the same route. It also promises to provide an alternate route for transport of goods to Northeast India.<sup>5</sup> India has made substantial investments in the road infrastructure, for instance, at the second India-Myanmar border trade point at Rih-Zowkhathar in the Mizoram sector by upgrading the Rih-Tidim and Rih-Falam road segments in Myanmar. Apart from developing road links, the Northeast is on the map of the Indian Railways, which is constructing a track from Jiribam in Manipur passing through the border town of Moreh to Hanoi in Vietnam via Myanmar. Through these efforts, the Government of India has demonstrated its keenness to develop the Northeast.<sup>6</sup>

However, such activities have not yet produced the desired results. The economic condition of the region remains by and large unchanged. The reason for this is to be found not so much in the macro blueprint of the LEP, but rather in its problematic implementation. In most states of the region, the local population has not become

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>3</sup> The Trans-Asian Highway is a proposed network of roads extending from Tokyo to the border with Bulgaria, to the west of Turkey, passing through North and South Korea, China and other countries in Southeast, Central and South Asia. The corridor is expected to improve trade links between East Asian countries, India and Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Levesque, North East in India's Look East Policy, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, May 6, 2008, [http://www.ipcs.org/article\\_details.php?articleNo=2558&cID=9](http://www.ipcs.org/article_details.php?articleNo=2558&cID=9) (accessed on February 8, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> "About the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project," <http://www.kaladanmovement.org/index.php/about-the-kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project> (accessed on February 10, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy", p. 4 [http://www.freewebs.com/roberthaokip/articles/India's\\_Look\\_East\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.freewebs.com/roberthaokip/articles/India's_Look_East_Policy.pdf) (accessed on February 12, 2014)

an effective stakeholder in this newly developing infrastructure. Nor is there any qualitative shift in the way the state conceives of development as a whole. The LEP remains as much state-driven as the more insular and differentiated approaches have been in the past. It was believed that trade with the neighbouring countries would resurrect the economies of the north-eastern border states in the region, bringing peace and stability. The policy has, however, achieved very little twenty two years later. The reason is that while successive governments have looked east, the people's responses at the grassroots have been largely overlooked. The LEP is not seen as empowering the Northeast and making its residents stakeholders in the process. In an attempt to push the country towards the east, the Northeast remains just a corridor. As Thongkhohal Haokip puts it, "Before meaningful trading activities can take place the region needs to prepare itself, starting from agriculture, in terms of productivity. Processing industries have to be set up to manufacture quality goods which can be offered in international markets at acceptable prices. The entire infrastructure of roads, railways, communication and air transport will have to be completely revamped... If this cannot be achieved the Look East Policy will not benefit the region and in that case it will only act as a corridor between mainland India and Southeast Asia."<sup>7</sup>

### **The continental versus maritime debate**

How would the Northeast benefit from the LEP? Policy analysts argue that the region has to be physically connected to Southeast Asia so that it transcends the geographic constrictions of being a landlocked periphery of India and benefits from the robust economic growth of Southeast Asian states. But the Northeastern states do not have direct physical access with the more developed Southeast Asian states for the region opens to Myanmar and Southern China. Myanmar, with which India shares a 1,643 km long land border, is the most critical gateway to Southeast Asia. But Myanmar has proved to be an exceedingly difficult foreign policy challenge for India. It was for a long period under military rule and witness to a protracted and violent pro-democracy movement that had isolated it internationally.

China took full advantage of its international isolation and cultivated the military junta to the full. While India had sought to pursue a pragmatic policy vis-à-vis Myanmar, it could neither balance Chinese influence and massive economic investments nor provide the kind of moral and political support that the pro-democratic forces wanted from it. Myanmar became a safe haven for a number of anti-Indian insurgent outfits and, given India's vulnerability in its north-eastern frontier, it could not pursue a tough policy against the junta led government. However, with the return of democracy to Myanmar, no matter how large the shadow of the military over it, India's more restrained policy of non-interference in Myanmar's domestic affairs seemed to be paying dividends.

India's policy towards Myanmar has always been a delicate balance between a refusal to renege on its earlier commitment to democracy and democratic ideals and maintaining good relations with the government of Myanmar. India's foreign policy objectives in Myanmar include: (i) balancing against China's growing economic and strategic footprints in the region; (ii) exploring the possibility of tapping Myanmar's rich hydrocarbon reserves; (iii) convincing the Myanmar government to flush out Indian insurgents from their shelters; and (iv) obtaining guarantees of smooth passage for goods and services moving between India and Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> Reconciliation between Thein Sein's government in Myanmar and Western democracies has augured well for New Delhi's foreign policy towards Myanmar, producing tangible benefits by way of much increased investment in Myanmar's infrastructure. Myanmar's role is pivotal if India's Northeast is to benefit from the LEP. This benefit demands huge investments in Myanmar's infrastructure so that the Northeast can connect physically with the more prosperous markets of Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is important to India not only for much-needed natural gas, precious metals, minerals, and critical physical connectivity with the ASEAN economies, but is also one of the major theatres for its strategic interests vis-à-vis China, which, in the words of one of India's leading defence analysts, "has endeavoured for centuries to bind Burma to itself, mostly in search of a southern route to India and the Indian

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Samir Kumar Das, "India's Look East Policy: Imagining a New Geography of India's Northeast", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 2010, pp. 348-349.

Ocean.”<sup>9</sup> Both India and China have high stakes in Myanmar and their competitive nationalisms have often clashed in this geostrategically vital state. In recent decades, China has had a clear upper hand in this competition, as it has taken full advantage of the international community’s isolation of Myanmar to advance its own strategic interests, investing handsomely in infrastructure and building pipelines connecting southern and western China to the Indian Ocean. Both India and China see Myanmar as vital to their security interests and India’s LEP is a conscious attempt to checkmate China’s quest for regional expansion of its power.

India took time to come to terms with the military. However, New Delhi was astute enough to sort out many of its past differences with the military regime. And with Myanmar’s cautious steps towards democratisation, India’s ties with this vital eastern neighbour have improved steadily. Despite a number of lingering differences on a few issues, India’s relations with Myanmar have improved steadily. The significance of this relationship is not limited to economic benefits flowing to the north-eastern states. As Myanmar’s ties improve with the West, the role of India as a bridge will only expand over time. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the real test for India’s LEP lies in its bilateral relations with Myanmar.

This, however, depends on India’s foreign policy success in Myanmar, something that is never guaranteed given the economic, political and strategic stakes involved. While China has invested in business and infrastructure development in Myanmar in a big way, India’s parallel policy has been sluggish and lacklustre. Peace and stability on the Indian side of the frontier is also a vital pre-condition for this. While the political situation in the Northeast, barring a few isolated pockets, is much improved compared to the past, the costs of peace are exorbitant for all stakeholders in the process. Hence, an alternative version of the LEP has also come up that stresses the maritime connections between India and Southeast Asia.

This model of India’s LEP does not move through

Myanmar. Instead, it seeks to move through Bangladesh and take on a more conventional maritime route via the Bay of Bengal. A noted exponent of this view is Renaud Egretreau, who wants India to move through Bangladesh rather than through Myanmar. In his words, “If we were to take a somewhat provocative view, we would consider the possibility of solving India’s problems with Bangladesh by opening up the Northeast southwards rather than eastwards to Myanmar ... India has to think twice before planning a very close partnership with Burma/Myanmar through the Northeast and, for the time being, it would be more advantageous for the Northeast to remain a territorial boundary and not a gateway to the East.”<sup>10</sup>

Egretreau’s argument hinges on the political uncertainties in Myanmar and India’s longstanding difficulties in the adjoining Northeastern states. There is a lingering unease that investments in infrastructure will strengthen insurgencies and breed more corruption rather than ushering in economic development of the region through improved connectivity with the neighbouring Southeast Asian states. This, moreover, is not merely the view of a handful of scholars and policy intellectuals. India’s LEP might bypass the Northeast and connect with Vietnam across the Bay of Bengal and through Thailand. Vietnam has traditionally been one of India’s closest strategic partners and the relationship has been raised to a higher level of late. Powerful institutional mechanisms of foreign office consultation and strategic dialogue between the two countries are under way, accompanied by regular visits between the two countries’ defence personnel. Naval cooperation is on the rise and the Indian Navy has been supplying critical spare parts to Hanoi for its Russian origin vessels. India’s foray into the South China Sea has given a fresh thrust to its engagement with Vietnam as part of its LEP and further encourages a focus on this route. The importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in this maritime version of the LEP can hardly be underestimated. As Indian President Pranab Mukherjee has commented, “These islands have the potential to be a springboard for India’s engagement with South East Asia and

---

<sup>9</sup> Jaswant Singh, “The Lynchpin of Asia in Great Game”, Project Syndicate, March 26, 2012 accessed from <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-lynchpin-of-asia> (accessed on March 1, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Renaud Egretreau, *Instability at the Gate: India’s Troubled Northeast and its External Connections*, CSH Occasional Paper No. 16, 2006, Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi, pp. 160-161, quoted in *ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> “Andaman and Nicobar can be springboard for India’s Look East policy: Pranab”, Zee News, January 11, 2014, [http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/andaman-and-nicobar-can-be-springboard-for-india-s-look-east-policy-pranab\\_903374.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/andaman-and-nicobar-can-be-springboard-for-india-s-look-east-policy-pranab_903374.html) (accessed on February 11, 2014).

the Indo-Pacific region. They can be developed as a significant trading, shipping and tourist hub.”<sup>11</sup> This vision is attractive because it involves less investment and fewer hazards, but it will completely bypass the Northeast.

However, the idea of moving through Bangladesh is naïve since Dhaka remains politically volatile and India’s ties with its eastern neighbour are fraught. The two states are unable to agree on a number of issues. Bangladesh has remained steadfastly opposed to allowing India transit for a gas pipeline from Myanmar through its territory. The issue of transit remains hostage to progress being made on river water sharing that remains disputed, despite agreements being signed by both states. The Government of West Bengal, led by the mercurial and charismatic Mamata Banerjee, has prevented the national coalition government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh from ratifying agreements signed between the two sovereign states, which included historic accords on the land boundary, exchange of territorial enclaves, and the Teesta River sharing treaty. The structural shift in Indian politics towards coalition governments and strong federalisation have tied the hands of the Union Government considerably in taking bold decisions vis-à-vis India’s neighbours. Hence, the policy rationale of this alternative LEP is weak. If India successfully invests in the depth and scope of its ties with Myanmar, the prospective benefits for India generally and for the people of the Northeast specifically would be huge. This would have the crucial added benefit of integrating the Northeast with the rest of India and bringing Myanmar into a mutually beneficial economic relationship as well.

### **The state/people dichotomy**

There is a built-in tension in India’s LEP. The first is the official and statist position that has remained the dominant discourse. The other is the people-centric alternative that sometimes surfaces to remind us of the inadequacy of the official discourse in the context of the Northeast. The official discourse is based on the need for facilitating human movements between South and Southeast Asia, using LEP to earn high

dividends in a liberal economy, and satisfying India’s interests in a vital strategic theatre. The official policy, nevertheless, invokes the commonalities and continuities of “cultural heritage” as an integral part of trade, tourism and cultural exchanges in Southeast Asia. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his statement on “North East 2020” puts it:

“Full advantage may be taken of the Look East policy of the Government of India. ASEAN markets provide big opportunities for NER [i.e. North Eastern Region], particularly in areas such as promotion of horticulture, floriculture and medicinal herbs. Affinity in the cultural background will make our products acceptable and saleable once the connectivity is improved.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a remarkably functionalist view of the role of the Northeast in India’s LEP, which uses cultural connections for economic benefits and urges that the region be developed accordingly. Apparently, the Northeast’s value lies in its capacity to serve expanding foreign markets in these countries. “Cultural affinities,” argues Das, “are seen only as a means to an end and add to the ‘acceptability’ and ‘saleability’ of [the] Northeast’s products.”<sup>13</sup>

Jairam Ramesh, noted economist and a Minister in Manmohan Singh’s Cabinet, argues that the Northeast requires political integration with the rest of the country and economic integration with the Southeast Asian states.<sup>14</sup> But the share of benefits for the region from such integration will depend on how much of the trade traffic will move through land routes via Northeast India. The Northeast remains a conveyor belt in this imagination, carrying goods both ways and dressing up smartly to perform this exchange. It is a fact that India is pursuing closer trade and economic ties with its eastern neighbours, and there are possibilities for the entire Northeast to seize its place as India’s eastern entrepôt. But these benefits are decided by the Indian state and there is apparently little that the local imagination contributes in this exercise.

Not surprisingly, these initiatives have not yet changed the fate of the Northeast. Most of India’s trade expansion with Southeast Asia has taken

---

<sup>12</sup> Manmohan Singh, “Northeast 2020”, *Yojana*, vol. 49, no. 12 (December 2005), pp. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Samir Kumar Das, “India’s Look East Policy: Imagining a New Geography of India’s Northeast”, *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 2010, pp. 351-352.

<sup>14</sup> Jairam Ramesh, 2005. “Northeast India in a New Asia,” *Seminar*, 550, June 2005, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20jairam%20ramesh.htm> (accessed on February 3, 2014).

place through seaports. Thus, the Northeast has once again been marginalised. Attempts to increase road and rail linkages in the Northeast remain a prisoner of fears of insurgency, terrorism and Chinese expansion. Thus, despite the potential, the trade through the Manipur-Myanmar route has remained small and insignificant, with little impact on the regional economy. Trade with Tibet and Yunnan provinces of China has not taken off yet, though India and China have agreed to initiate border trade through the Himalayan pass at Nathu La between Tibet and Sikkim. Trade routes between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet are still closed in the absence of a border agreement and links to Yunnan through Manipur, Mizoram or via Myanmar are yet to materialise.

Not surprisingly, these initiatives have not yet changed the fate of the Northeast. Most of India's trade expansion with Southeast Asia has taken place through seaports. Thus, the Northeast has once again been marginalised. Attempts to increase road and rail linkages in the Northeast remain a prisoner of fears of insurgency, terrorism and Chinese expansion. Thus, despite the potential, the trade through the Manipur-Myanmar route has remained small and insignificant, with little impact on the regional economy. Trade with Tibet and Yunnan provinces of China has not taken off yet, though India and China have agreed to initiate border trade through the Himalayan pass at Nathu La between Tibet and Sikkim. Trade routes between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet are still closed in the absence of a border agreement and links to Yunnan through Manipur, Mizoram or via Myanmar are yet to materialise.

Sanjib Baruah points out that, historically, India's Northeast was placed along the Silk Road, which was in use as late as the nineteenth century. Along with trade in silk and other commodities, this route also facilitated the spread of Buddhism from India across Asia. Assamese towns such as Hajo and Sualkuchi were important pilgrimage centres for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists as well as being trading centres. Thus, Baruah says, "Northeast India's place in trade along the southern Silk Road serves as a reminder that

the region's recent history as a remote, under-developed and troubled hinterland is neither inevitable nor unchangeable."<sup>15</sup> Scholars who are critical of New Delhi's geopolitically-driven LEP have initiated serious discussions regarding the opportunities and risks for the region from different kinds of trans-national and sub-regional cooperation being forged at a time when Indian policy is looking east. A common conclusion of these deliberations is that a successful LEP needs a bold continental thrust if it is to be of any benefit to the people of the Northeast.

### **The road ahead**

This analysis drives home the point that India's LEP has come a long way since its inception in 1991. The policy was conceived with three specific objectives. In the first phase, it was designed to end India's self-imposed economic isolation and integrate with the developing economies of Southeast Asia. Close economic relations with Southeast Asia, it was believed, would open avenues for greater economic linkages throughout East Asia. While India has been cautious in the pace and extent of its economic integration, the LEP has undoubtedly connected it to the economies of Southeast Asia and helped increase the total volume of trade with Southeast Asia manifold in really quick time.<sup>16</sup> However, the LEP was not merely a tool of economic diplomacy. It was very much a strategic move, well calculated to serve India's geopolitical interests and afforded it much needed space in defence and security cooperation. In the second phase, the LEP assumed an increasingly strategic thrust, with India becoming keenly aware of the need to balance against intrusive Chinese designs in the region. In the last two decades, India has pursued the LEP to advance these two goals with a reasonable degree of success. However, the LEP is also meant to rejuvenate the moribund economies of India's Northeast, which has long languished as a periphery. It is meant to create new economic opportunities by invoking the idea of an extended Northeast that would help this landlocked region escape the twin

---

<sup>15</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> After India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, its trade with ASEAN increased relative to its trade with the rest of the world. Between 1993 and 2003, ASEAN-India bilateral trade grew at an annual rate of 11.2%, from US\$ 2.9 billion in 1993 to US\$ 12.1 billion in 2003. In 2008, the total volume of ASEAN-India trade was US\$ 47.5 billion. This grew significantly by to US\$74.9 billion in 2011, surpassing the target of US\$70 billion for 2012 despite the global slowdown. At the 10th ASEAN-India Summit in November 2012, leaders pledged to increase the target of ASEAN-India trade to US\$100 billion by 2015. Figures are taken from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/asean-india-dialogue-relations> (accessed on February 27, 2014).

fatalities of geography and history. This analysis shows that, despite good intentions, India faces stiff challenges in realising this goal.

The problem is that the policy falls upon the Northeast from above rather than arising from within the region. The present construction of the LEP reinforces the mainstream-periphery dichotomy within India. While the Northeast stands to benefit if the LEP assumes a robust continental thrust, the potential gains of the policy thrust will not be achieved unless the local people are turned into effective stakeholders in this gigantic project. The real challenge before a successful third phase of the LEP is to improve India's ties with Myanmar so that India can access the more productive economies of Southeast Asia through it. But this connectivity needs to be achieved by involving the people of the Northeast and on terms that bring long-lasting benefits to it. A more risk-taking geographical imagination is needed to achieve this. Without softening territorial borders in the real sense and using cultural ties to foster genuine people-to-people relations across the extended Northeast, independent of the exigencies of great power politics, the promise of an economic turnaround of this region through the Look East initiative is not likely to come about.

On a more concrete note, the Government of India needs to do several things to recharge and re-deploy its LEP with an eye to reaping benefits for the Northeast.

First, it needs to freely talk to and patiently hear the voices of the ordinary people of the Northeast, no matter what these views are. Without articulating a new geography of extended neighbourhood, there is little hope that the economic benefits accruing out of LEP will reach the people of the Northeast.

Second, India needs to link up more effectively with the supply chain economies of Southeast Asia

that are looking for new markets since the global recession has set in. A growth triangle connecting south-western China, India's Northeast and Southeast Asia promises immense economic benefits to all stakeholders if political differences are carefully negotiated.

Third, there is an immediate need to complete some of the infrastructural projects that link India with Southeast Asia through Myanmar. Without good roads, there cannot be any economic development of the region.

Fourth, India needs to consolidate its diplomatic gains in Myanmar and improve ties at all levels. Myanmar and India share deep cultural, religious and historical bonds. Without being overtly drawn into a messy competition with the Chinese, India needs to play its cards well, as Myanmar is vital to India's wider economic and geo-strategic interests.

However, relations with Myanmar will fundamentally improve only if India's own emotional integration with the Northeast is strengthened. This requires investing in the idea of a new cartography of extended neighbourhood without compromising India's national security in a region of high strategic vulnerability. It is evident that this new geography requires the province of West Bengal to be factored in far more centrally to India's LEP. This would add to the economic momentum of the region and also keep the maritime dimension of the LEP alive.

Even if India's ties with Bangladesh do not show marked improvement in the short run, and India is denied transit rights through Bangladesh, a successful and game changing LEP requires joining the whole of eastern India with Southeast Asia through the Northeast. More jobs and economic security will change the face of India's Northeast. Without an imaginative LEP that invests equally in physical and commercial connectivity, this is not going to materialize.



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,  
Nanyang Technological University

Blk S4, Level B4, Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
TEL 65 6790 6982 | FAX 65 6793 2991 | EMAIL [wwwrsis@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:wwwrsis@ntu.edu.sg) | WEBSITE [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)