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India's Northeast: A Rugged Link to ASEAN

By Nazia Hussain

Synopsis

India's Northeastern region bordering Myanmar plays a critical role in the 'Act East' Policy and serves as a potential link to ASEAN.

Commentary

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's 'neighbourhood first' and 'Act East' policies got a fresh boost with the recently concluded four-day visit to India by Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The two leaders gave out enough indications they were pursuing a development partnership that would take bilateral ties to a higher level.

Prime Minister Modi said India's financial commitment of US\$1.75 billion is 'people centric', meaning the development projects were aimed at the welfare of the people of Myanmar. In fact, Northeast India, sharing a 1,640 km-long land border with Myanmar, holds the key in this development partnership. This makes it imperative to take a close look at this far-eastern Indian frontier and the linkages that can be established through Myanmar to ASEAN.

Revitalising the 'Act East' Policy

It has been two years since India announced the transformation of its moribund two-decade-old 'Look East' Policy into what is now called the 'Act East' Policy (AEP). Incidentally, New Delhi made the new nomenclature, AEP, public during the East Asia Summit held in Myanmar in November 2014.

It is now clear that the AEP holds a prime place in India's new proactive policy,

because it not only looks at boosting commerce, connectivity and cultural ties with ASEAN, but is also looking beyond to South Korea, Australia, Japan, and Mongolia. High-level visits by Indian leaders to these nations since 2014 have shown that it would no more be just lip service.

In consolidating its ties with ASEAN and beyond, India's Northeast, known for its rugged landscape and constant turmoil from home-grown ethnic insurgencies, is critical because of the geographic contiguity it provides to India and Myanmar. This region of eight provinces with a population of 40 million shares a total of over 5,400 km of borders with five neighbours -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal -- while it is connected with mainland India only by the narrow 22 km Siliguri corridor in the state of West Bengal called the 'Chicken's Neck'.

Building Bridges

New Delhi recognises that increased commerce and improved connectivity with ASEAN can alter the currently stagnant economy in India's Northeast. On the eve of his departure to Laos to attend the 14th India-ASEAN Summit, Prime Minister Modi said, "ASEAN is a key partner for our Act East Policy, which is vital for the economic development of our northeastern region".

In fact, the Indian Government appears to be going ahead with a new geo-political thinking that looks at the space occupied by the Northeast to be theoretically spreading far beyond the international borders. The fact that the Northeast borders Myanmar, the only ASEAN nation to share a land boundary with India, is a testimony to the region's importance and critical value in India's foreign policy priorities. The geographical reality is Northeast India is the bridge between two sub-regions of Asia-South Asia and Southeast Asia.

So far, only a few ideas have moved from the drawing board to the ground and these are the transnational road and rail connectivity projects. Some of the flagship projects under the AEP include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, a 1,360 km highway joining Moreh in Manipur (India) to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar; Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility, connecting Indian ports on the eastern seaboard and Sittwe Port in Myanmar and then through riverine transport and by road to Mizoram (India), thus providing an alternate route for transport of goods to Northeast India; another rail link from Jiribam in Manipur to Hanoi in Vietnam passing through Myanmar, and revitalising the Stilwell Road, linking Assam with China's Yunnan province.

These infrastructure projects built as a result of the AEP have raised hopes in Northeast India of a better future. Questions, however, are being raised as to how New Delhi would involve the local governments in the northeastern states in taking advantage of the connectivity projects. The people and the governments in Northeast India are major stakeholders in the entire idea of connectivity leading to enhanced commerce.

With dozens of insurgent groups operating in Manipur, one would also expect security to become a crucial part of the AEP because the newly named Asian Highway 1 that connects India to Myanmar via Manipur passes through stretches

that are controlled by the rebels. India's engagement with ASEAN now covers issues like security and counter-terrorism, besides defence cooperation.

Road Ahead with ASEAN

The ties with Myanmar will be very critical for India if it is to consolidate relations and expand trade and connectivity with the rest of ASEAN. Myanmar's president U Htin Kyaw chose India as the destination of his first state visit after the National League for Democracy (NLD) took over in March. However, it is also a fact that Aung San Suu Kyi made China her first port of call as State Counsellor and Foreign Minister.

Four Memorandums of Understanding were signed between India and Myanmar during President Kyaw's visit—two of them concerning the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, one on renewable energy and the other on traditional medicine. In order to give the final push in the Trilateral Highway project, India is constructing as many as 69 bridges in Manipur.

The volume of trade between India and Myanmar is far from encouraging. India's total investment in Myanmar, for instance, was a little more than US\$224 million during the 2015-2016 fiscal year—significantly lower than the investments of other countries in the neighbourhood like China. Significantly, no new Indian investments were made during the first four months of the 2016-2017 fiscal year. According to Myanmar's Ministry of Commerce, total trade volume between the two nations touched \$1.17 billion while the Myanmar-China trade stands at \$10.9 billion.

Landlocked Northeast India, with rising unemployment, continued ethnic aspirations, and insurgencies that are still potent despite a number of peace agreements, needs a development corridor. The road and railway link through Myanmar to ASEAN could well provide that corridor and be the turning point. The AEP provides the scope to alter things. In this potential game changer, India's Northeast could play the role of a catalyst, something the people and the local governments hope for. Whether this awareness leads to the creation of an entrepreneurial class which can usher in progress in one of South Asia's hottest insurgency theatres remain to be seen.

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