



LOOK EAST POLICY AND NORTHEAST INDIA

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Look East Policy (LEP) was initiated by India in 1991, which marked a strategic shift in its policy towards the SE Asia where India sought to create and expand regional markets for trade, investments and industrial development.ⁱ It also began strategic and military co-operation with nations concerned by the expansion of China's economic and strategic influence in the region. Thus it is a policy that has focused on forging close economic and strategic co-operation with nations of SE Asia. However when the LEP was modified in 2003, the Northeast has been included as an important component of the policy which envisages the region not as periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space.ⁱⁱ This generated lot of excitement in the region, hoping for economic growth and improved connectivity between remote Northeastern India and outside world.

Look East Policy vis-a-vis NE India

North East India suffered a massive dislocation in its connectivity at the time of Independence as Bangladesh, then East Pakistan was carved out, leaving only Siliguri corridor for the link with rest of the world as International boundary was also virtually closed. Thus NE India also forming an important cornerstone of LEP could be a game changer in bringing peace and prosperity to NE India. As the Northeast India is a natural bridge between India and South East Asia, economic integration with the SE Asia region is expected to open up new opportunities for the region. US Consul General in Kolkata Helen LaFave during her visit to North East India on 29 October 2014 told reporters – “ One of the areas of interest in particular

is how Northeast India integrates with South East Asia through the (India's) 'Look East Policy'. "Northeast region of India must have good connectivity with the neighbouring countries and other southeast Asian nations to boost trade and business besides to improve people to people contacts."ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus the region should have the following facilities so as to take advantage of emerging opportunities:-

- (a) A world class infrastructure to cater to requirements of an Integrated economic hub linking two dynamic regions.
- (b) Roads / Highways, major means of transportation be capable of sustaining passenger traffic and moving vast traffic of goods.
- (c) Encourage the Northeast to develop industries suitable to the area which is bestowed with plenty of natural resources such as minerals and agro based industries.
- (d) To facilitate trade and connectivity both within the country and SE Asian region, a network of communication links of highways, railways, water transport and telecommunication systems.

Present State

However North East India is still mired in extreme poverty, backwardness as most of the region have poor state of connectivity. Infact the current state of its roads can barely sustain the passenger traffic, leave alone heavy goods traffic? The airports are hardly world class and the rail network largely remains as it was during the British rule. The uncomfortable fact is the dismal state of infrastructure in the Northeast where basic infrastructure even basic facilities like cold storage facilities are lacking.

Presently the region has no real industry to talk of and also by itself the region is not a producer of mass consumer goods or finished products so that it can take advantage of emerging opportunities. Therefore there is hardly anything that Northeast India can offer to SE Asia as on date.

Coupled with the prevailing weak economic base, it is no position to take advantage the opportunities opened up through Look East Policy. Thus it is evident that not much has changed in the region beyond the tokenism of exchange of delegation visits, an odd trade fair, a flight to Myanmar or just a promise of railway connectivity or a bus service between Mandalay and Imphal that shows no sign of coming into being.

Status of Initiatives and Ongoing Projects

There is no question on the intent as government have made conscious efforts to integrate economic interest of Northeast with Look East Policy as evident in Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONEAR) and North Eastern Council(NEC) NER vision 2020 document in July 2008^{iv} and Indo-Myanmar Trade Agreement, inked on 21 Jan 1994,^v which specify major initiatives and projects to be undertaken for inclusion of North East India. However there is a wide gap when it comes in terms of execution. Although there has been expansion of trade with Myanmar and other SE Asian countries, the volume of trade at border points have been insignificant comparatively.

India is engaged in several projects in Myanmar emphasising on enhancing connectivity and improving infrastructure in the region. India built 165 km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road connecting Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa, which was inaugurated by, then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in Feb 2001.^{vi} However, most of the other important potential infrastructure projects like India-Myanmar- Thailand tri-lateral highway, Trans Asia Highway, Trans Asia Railway linking Jiribam in Manipur to Hanoi in Vietnam, the Stillwell Road, Myanmar-Bangladesh-India oil and gas pipelines etc are still languishing.

However, the reconstruction of Sittwe port and specially Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project once complete is likely to transform trade and commerce in either side of the border. Indian investments in Myanmar are planned into key sectors like Telecom, Energy, Education, IT etc with the optical fibre network between NE India and SE Asia has already been operationalised in 2009. ONGC, GAIL, Reliance and ESSAR are participants in energy sector.^{vii} NHPC signed an agreement for development of Tamanthi and Shwezaye hydro projects but stands scrapped due to local pressure of displacement and rehabilitation and environmental issues.

What needs to be done?

As successive Governments looked east, the Northeast has been overlooked indulging in mere lip service. In order to address this problem, conceptualisation of a roadmap in terms of specific projects, which would benefit the region, must be undertaken. Development of transportation and communication links in the NE should be taken as a strategic issue and accordingly greater emphasis and nonlapsable funds should be allocated. Time bound completion of projects and engagement of foreign expertise should be explored.

The thrust must be given in the sectors where the Northeast India can build a niche for itself like agriculture, tourism including medical tourism etc. The Centre thus should have an integrated approach and provide the required policy push in capacity building, health, education, human resources which will be required to equip the people with required skills to take part as a stakeholder. It would in the long run provide an opportunity to generate its own economy for its own sustenance.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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ⁱ Min of External affairs website www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-ASEAN_Relations_Look_East_Policy

ⁱⁱ Rajiv Sikri, Former Ambassador in his lecture "Northeast India and India's Look East Policy" at CENISEAS Forum accessed at www.ceniseas.org/newasia/sikrilecture.doc

ⁱⁱⁱ US to encourage businessmen to invest in North East : US Envoy; India.com 29 Oct 2014 at <http://www.india.com/news/india/us-to-encourage-businessmen-to-invest-in-northeast-envoy-182452/>

^{iv} Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Vision Document 2020, NIC ,New Delhi 110001 ,doner.gov.in/content/vision-document

^v Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region website www.mdoner.gov.in

^{vi} External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh inaugurates Indo-Myanmar Friendship road, accessed at www.mea.gov.in/articles-in-indian-media.htm

^{vii} Look East' policy: India underperforming its role in Myanmar by Subir Bhaumik articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com

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