



India's Transition from 'Look East to Act East' Policy: Economic Diplomacy Push Versus Power Competition in Asia

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India's North Eastern Region: A Geographical Perspective

Northeast India (officially known as North Eastern Region, [NER]), is easternmost region of country representing both a geographic and political administrative divisions. It comprises eight states – Arunachal Pradesh (the largest in terms of the area at 83743 sq. kms), Assam (78438 sq. kms) ,Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim (the smallest with a land area of 7096 sq. kms) and Tripura, sharing international border of c. 5,182 kilometres (about 99 percent of its total geographical boundary) with several neighbouring countries –with Tibet Autonomous Region, China in the north, with Myanmar in the east, with Bangladesh in the south-west, with Nepal in the west, and with Bhutan in the north-west. The region also comprises a cumulative land mass measuring 262,000 sq. kms, covering an area of 7.8 per cent of total national territory as one of the largest salients (panhandles) in the world.

Indian states of North Eastern Region are officially recognised under the North Eastern Council (NEC), constituted in the year 1971, as acting agency for development of the north eastern states. Long after induction of NEC, Sikkim formed part of the North Eastern Region as the eighth state in 2002 [1][2].

India's Look-East Policy, 1992 onwards (and now referred to as Act –East Policy, 2014 onwards) infrastructure projects conjoin Northeast India to China and The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), a ten member economic, political and strategic grouping. Indian government has in its pursuit of regional cooperation looked upon the Northeast India as a gateway to ASEAN and country's geo-strategic asset.

Biodiversity Profile of the Region

The immense variety of the climatic, edaphic and altitudinal variations in this region pave the way for a great range of ecological habitats for the region. Basically, the region represents sub-tropical belt that extends from the foothill of Himalaya in the west to southeast China in the east. Besides, the Himalayan temperate and sub-alpine zone extends from Northern Pakistan and adjacent Afghanistan through Northeast India. Thus, this region is the geographic gateway for much of India's variety of the living organisms, and constituting rich variation in the flora and fauna and as a consequence the region identified as Indo-Burma hotspot that is one of the 35 Global biodiversity hotspots recognized [3]. The eight states of Northeast India abode several endemic flora and fauna. Besides, the region has wide range of physiographic, cultural and economic diversity with certain inter and intra-state peculiarities. The region show wide topographical variations that vary from the flood plains of Assam to highest mountain peaks of Khanchanzonga (8586 m) in Sikkim. The region is characterized by



highest rainfall areas like Cherrapunji (which has recently shifted to Mawsynram about 50 km apart from Cherrapunji) in Meghalaya. The states like Mizoram has highest percentage of forest cover with a characteristic of steep slopes.

Conservation along the Bio-hotspots

Northeast India is biodiversity rich zone occurs in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspots. The region is experiencing high degree of anthropogenic pressure mainly because of age old shifting agriculture practice for livelihood of growing tribal population. In this system of agriculture, the piece of land is slashed and burned and the cultivated for one or two years then left abandoned for long time to restore the fertility. In the meantime farmers move to other places for the continuation of the same practice. This practice is detrimental for the health of forest and the environment of the region. Recently, Government of Mizoram has launched a New Land Use Policy (NLUP) for farmers to replace the age old shifting cultivation. In this policy, the Government provides monetary financial support for the farmers to time for the in situ conservation of biodiversity through protected area networks. Through protected area network, the country has 96 national parks, 603 wildlife sanctuaries including 18 biosphere reserves which cover about 4.8% of the geographical area of the country. Establishing protected area network is ongoing process and thus more area will be covered in the future. The region also has a protected area networks (i.e., biosphere reserves, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and tiger reserves, having small size and are under the pressure because of the use and abuse of resources by the neighbouring human settlements. Another important conservation strategy by the community in India is sacred groves, protected to worship for their ancestral spirit and deities. Thus systematic biodiversity conservation efforts would be required to conserve the biodiversity, with special attention in tropical regions. These efforts would require a critical monitoring and base line information in quantitative terms at each level of biodiversity organization, i.e., from gene to species and from regional to the global scales. A proper assessment in form of concise numerical information showing intra-ecosystem and inter-ecosystem diversity will provide a base for modelling projected biodiversity change and strategies for its conservation [4].

Subtropical Climatic Conditions

Northeast India has a subtropical climate influenced by its relief and influences from the southwest and northeast monsoons. The Himalayas to the north, the Meghalaya plateau to the south and the hills of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur to the east influences the climate. Since monsoon winds originating from the Bay of Bengal move northeast, these mountains force the moist winds upwards, causing them to



cool adiabatically and condense into clouds, releasing heavy precipitation on these slopes. It is the rainiest region in the country, with many places receiving an average annual precipitation of 2,000 mm (79 in), which is mostly concentrated in summer during the monsoon season. Cherrapunji, located on the Meghalaya plateau is one of the rainiest places in the world with an annual precipitation of 11,777 mm (463.7 in). Temperatures are moderate in the Brahmaputra and Barak valley river plains which decrease with altitude in the hilly areas. At the highest altitudes, there is permanent snow cover [5]. Temperatures vary by altitude with the warmest places being in the Brahmaputra and Barak River plains and the coldest at the highest altitudes. It is also influenced by proximity to the sea with the valleys and western areas being close to the sea, which moderates temperatures. Generally, temperatures in the hilly and mountainous areas are generally lower than the plains which lie at a lower altitude. Summer temperatures tend to be more uniform than winter temperatures due to high cloud cover and humidity.

North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Document: A Precursor

The North Eastern Region (NER) Vision 2020 Document, one of the key development documents prepared by the Indian government, was brought out by the North Eastern Council (NEC) and accepted and signed by all the Members of the Council in the 56th Plenary of the NEC on 13th May 2008 at Agartala, Tripura. It was later unveiled by the Government in July, 2008 at New Delhi. Subsequently, seventeen thematic groups incorporating sector experts were constituted by this Ministry to develop specific action plans to operationalize the Vision 2020 Document. These Groups identified broad intervention areas and mechanisms for development of the North Eastern Region during a meeting held in Shillong on 3-4 December, 2008. Action areas suggested by the thematic groups were referred for implementation by the concerned Ministries. Following this, the Ministry has been urging concerned Central Ministries/Departments to formulate relevant socio-economic programmes and projects in the region [6].

Ministries were also invited to spell out their development plans, achievements and ongoing activities in the North Eastern Region during routine meetings of the North Eastern Council and other review meetings. Although detailed quantification of progress made in respect of implementation of NER Vision 2020 is not possible, major infrastructure projects in roads, railways, airways and power have been implemented and telecom connectivity has also improved considerably. The 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17) Document of Planning Commission has observed that larger plan investment and focus on infrastructure development has resulted in average growth of gross domestic product in NE States at 9.8 per cent which was higher than the national average of 8 per cent during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012) period.



Further to the Vision 2020, there have been subsequent reviews and follow through monitoring and evaluation with the latest being a report themed – North Eastern Council Regional Plan (2017-18 to 2019-20) [7] and a comprehensive view of the past years outcomes and issues to be addressed can best be read in conjunction with the Vision 2020.

The region however needs to leverage India's position as a fast-growing emerging economy and market, with overall infrastructure development. NEER also has a Low Population Density (119 per sq.km (UP 828, Punjab 554, Bihar 1102), needs to create more employment opportunities, avoid high operational costs, subsistence farming and course correct missing links to organized groups and strategies to achieve economies of scale through collective production and marketing. The region can also take appropriate steps to correct its ecological fragility caused by persistent environmental degradation - destruction of tropical rainforest, dying of wetlands, shrinkage of biodiversity cover, soil erosion and air and water pollution. Adequate central government financial assistance, more private sector investments, public private partnership projects, viability gap funding and collaboration between the region and the central government are some of the key steps that can take the development of the region to a great extent, by far [8].

Key Drivers of Development in the Region

Keeping in view the development goals of the Northeastern states of India, policy documents and a new approach toward its sustainable development initiatives, the following key drivers of the region's growth as identified can, among others, be the following:

1. Tourism and Allied Sectors

The North East region is strategically located to attract tourists from ASEAN countries and beyond. The region has a long international border of ~5436 kms³ and shares borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. Each of the eight states in the region offer distinct cultural and natural attractions. The natural beauty of the place, rivers and mountains, Buddhist monasteries, pilgrimage sites, serene natural environment, exotic flora and fauna, unique tribal culture, folk dance and music in the North Eastern region together offer an opportunity for development of tourism in the region. With three UNESCO world heritage sites located in this region and North East Tourism Circuit being developed under the Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD scheme, North East India provides a huge opportunity to attract tourists from other states in India and abroad. However, to promote tourism in the region, it is imperative to



develop basic infrastructure that provides safe and convenient travelling options for tourist flow.

Heritage tourism along the waterways between the NER and Bangladesh can attract millions of tourists from the region and abroad. Cruise tourism is another opportunity that can be pursued given the region's natural assets, particularly lakes, rivers and spring falls. Fresh investments however are warranted to convert river terminals along the river Brahmaputra into full-fledged river ports. However, to promote safe navigation using electronic charts, night navigation aids and Differential Global Positioning Systems (DGPS) stations along the rivers are needed and needs to be maintained well. A major task is to develop IWT terminals with appropriate cargo handling equipment and to establish Road-Rail link including a roll-on roll-off (RO-RO) facility. Jogighopa in Assam is being developed as multimodal IWT terminal. Promoting the use of waterways can lead to greater economic activities along the river banks by communities, which in turn will have a positive impact on the local economy and livelihoods.

NER states may consider setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZ) for timber, food processing, etc. Building smart cities in Moreh and Dawki will enhance economic activities in the region. Industries with potential to serve neighbouring markets and ASEAN need to be identified and promoted in NER, and harmonisation of customs procedures and other trade facilitation measures would help facilitate Northeast's trade. At the same time, the North East Council (NEC) must be revamped to undertake the connectivity-led activities for which NEC can provide the leadership [9].

North Eastern States have many more other attributes (such as organic products, sustainable farming, forest products, bamboo cultivation, rubber, oil and gas reserves et. al.) and availability of nature based raw material, which can well be identified and undertaken with a view to linking these with the markets and promote both within the country, ASEAN and around the world. Given the improved infrastructure and connectivity projects in the region, local products, raw material and finished products can potentially establish the region as a regional and global hub for such products. Indian government has been, following its – Act East Policy, 2014 onwards- has been keen to develop the region as a strategic one and has been coordinating with the central ministries and NEC along with business chambers and trade and industry associations both at the national, regional and local levels.

2. Healthcare Industry

In the North Eastern States, healthcare is developed primarily in the urban areas. With rough and difficult hilly terrains, it is often difficult for rural people to reach the tertiary health care facilities. To improve last mile connectivity and extend healthcare facilities at affordable costs, infrastructure development needs to be further



strengthened and speeded up. Further, North East has the potential to be developed into a hub for medical treatment and medical tourism, attracting visitors from South and South East Asia.

However, further improvement in infrastructure is desired for the development of the North East region as it plays an important role in the geopolitical scenario of India in developing trade with neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, and other ASEAN countries and establishes India as a regional leader in terms of trade influence.

In case of Bangladesh alone, which shares land border with Agartala, capital of Tripura, can be a potent market for healthcare industry? It is estimated that about 700,000 people from Bangladesh go abroad for their medical treatment every year spending c. USD 4 billion due to lack of confidence on the local physicians and poor diagnosis system [10]. People suffering from critical illnesses generally travel to India, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand depending on referrals, paying capacity and presence of their family and friends in these places. India attracts a large number of patients numbered 425,000 (out of an estimated total 700,000) and if Agartala can set up quality medical care centres, specialized hospitals and medical tourism options, it can not only attract a sizeable number of patients from the Bangladesh, earn revenues but also brand it as a medicare hotspot in the region which may further attract many more patients from ASEAN countries, going forward. This may well be done by the public sector and also in a public-private model system of administration.

3. Higher Education and Skilling Sector

Over the years, Indian economy has seen a shift of focus from agro-based livelihood to services sector, with the latter contributing the highest to the gross national product (GDP). The North East region is no exception to this national level trend. With the exception of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, services sector has seen a growth in the region. Government through its policy and schemes like North East BPO Promotions scheme has given impetus to growth of the services sector which taps into the highly literate and English speaking youth population of the region. There is also a significant demand for higher education in the region which needs to be given proper infrastructure for fulfilling their aspirations.

Overall, there is a tremendous potential for developing the various services sectors in the region by creating possible linkages among the various stakeholders in the ecosystem. In the following sections we focus on each of these sectors in detail covering aspects like key issues, measures to address it and how north east can be developed as part of market linkage development with focus on neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal.



However, due to lack of development in the region in the past combined with a shift in focus from traditional sectors such as agriculture and industrial manufacturing, it is imperative that focus be placed on imparting higher education and skill development of youth to integrate them in the changing landscape of the employment scenario dominated by technological innovation.

4. Infrastructure and Improved Connectivity

Capitals of North-eastern states are gradually getting connected by rail with the rest of India. Agartala and Silchar now have broad-gauge railway lines, connecting common people with the rest of India. Indian Railways has already started train services between Dharmanagar, Agartala and Sabroom in Tripura. The railway link to Sabroom is also a vital link for the development of the state of Tripura, and linking it with Chittagong Port will open up new vistas for the entire region. The railway line will reach Imphal and can be extended to Moreh and then to Tamu and Kalay in Myanmar [11].

Government of Assam has also mooted a proposal to reopen pre-partition railway links with Bangladesh. The Chittagong to Makum, Cox Bazar to Ledo and Golakganj to Moirabari link can be a substantive development once undertaken. The Rail-cum-Road Bridge at Bogibeel is a breakthrough, connecting North Bank of Brahmaputra with South Bank at Dibrugarh in upper Assam. Electrification of railway tracks and introduction of high-speed trains can be next steps forward. Pakyong airport in Sikkim and Tezu airport in Arunachal Pradesh, both inaugurated last year are yet to be fully utilised due to technical constraints. What next is Imphal, Guwahati and Bagdogra airports should be expanded to accommodate international flights. Other NER airports such as Agartala, Aizawl, Shillong also need capacity addition and more domestic and international flights. The ongoing expansion of Guwahati or the Imphal airports may take time to complete.

Railway connectivity with Bangladesh can be a game changer. Agartala, now, has direct rail, road and air connectivity with the rest of India, and Bangladesh has been providing transit to all modes of transportation barring the railways. Once Agartala and Akhaura railway lines get completed, the journey time between Agartala and Kolkata will substantially. Akhaura being located on Dhaka-Chittagong rail route, NER can operationalize Chittagong as the region's main port as earlier. India and Bangladesh currently have four operational rail links between West Bengal and western Bangladesh-Petrapole-Benapole, Gede-Darshana, Radhikapur-Biral and Singhabad-Rohanpur, of which Radhikapur-Biral and Singhabad-Rohanpur are also notified for use of Nepalese transit traffic.



However, on international projects, the road connecting Samdrup Jongkhar (Bhutan) and Guwahati can be taken up for upgradation. The Trilateral Highway (TH) between India, Myanmar and Thailand is coming up. As of now, the Kalewa-Yargi section in Myanmar (126 km) is under construction and can likely be completed by 2021. However, the TH can be made operational subject to three countries implementing a Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) or Cross-Border Transport Agreement (CBTA).

Connectivity through waterways over the decade has witnessed substantial development and up-gradation with cargo transportation through National Waterway (NW) 2 rising export to Bangladesh using IWT going up. Dhubri (in Assam) is since well connected with Narayanganj (in Bangladesh) through IWT and there have been regular sailing of cargo vessels through the corridor. Neighbouring Bhutan has since been using this IWT route for trade with Bangladesh. Improvements are underway in both Bangladesh and India to improve several IWT terminals, including Ashuganj river terminal, a strategic location in Bangladesh. [12]

Push for Economic Cooperation Or Unleashing Regional Geo-political Competition:

Northeast is a constantly evolving region and being at the cusp of a trillion US dollar business opportunity within its potential economic growth fold. Region's economic linkages have varied potential to be accelerated by a number of measures across different areas, of which trade logistics, e-commerce supply chains, transportation and border infrastructure deserve better attention, more particularly, given the region's value chain potential with Bangladesh, ASEAN and rest of the country in areas such as agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, processed food, engineering, automobiles, garments, pharmaceuticals, remain to be unlocked.

Indian government, following its economic reforms initiated in 1991, also decided to pursue a new approach- Look East Policy- to engage with its ten south-east Asian neighbours in The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build up more deepened economic and regional cooperation, resulting in a mutually reinforcing ties in the region. This engagement of economic cooperation, broadly, was seen as trade and commerce interlocking with the regional nations in south east Asia in years that followed post 1991, resulting in India's economic growth measured vide its gross domestic product (GDP) which reached up to 9.5 per cent. In 2014, however, it was recognized by India that ASEAN region, besides being a robust economic cooperation, trade and commerce block, is essentially a strategic region and hence has a larger role to play in the global geo-politics [13]. Given this realization and fast emerging regional developments, India decided to pursue- Act East Policy- combining both trade and



commerce and geo-politics relevance of the region and Northeastern region thus over the years, came to be identified as a gateway to ASEAN and began to attract attention. The importance of the engagement between India and ASEAN can be seen through their trade and commerce which in the fiscal year stood at USD 842 million, the largest portion of this trade coming from Singapore valued at USD 2.7 billion the same year [14].

There are also extensive opportunities in trade with live-stock, horticulture, fishery, agro-processing sectors or natural resource areas. Value chains across the region may eventually go up once supporting supply chains are in place. In order to promote trade, all airports and land ports in the region need to have cold-chains. NER states shall encourage the start-ups which are exporting processed food, organic fruits and vegetable, high-end fashion products through borders. New value chain opportunities in view of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or India-Bangladesh Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IBCEPA) are also expected to emerge.

NER, therefore, must modernise cross-border supply chains to unlock value and create business opportunities. This can be undertaken jointly by the states in the region and the central government. First, the rise of synchronised commerce needs integrated supply chains. The expansion of e-commerce supply chains and start-ups pave the way for further visibility globally. Second, NER states may undertake drastic reforms in labour and land regulations. Third, with disappearing border barriers, expansion of existing units (benefit of scale economy) makes sense when RCEP and/or IBCBTA come in effect.

Northeast India over the last decade has definitely bettered with inter and intra-country rail, road and air connectivity. The region is well connected with the neighbouring countries by land and air with seamless connections being provided enhancing the overall access to the region. Guwahati is now directly connected by air with most of major Indian cities and Dhaka, Paro and Bangkok for passenger and Hong Kong for freight. Air service between Imphal and Mandalay is needed to support the growing health and wellness tourism in NER. Maiden flights from Imphal to Mandalay and Agartala to Dhaka are likely to start soon. International flights from Bagdogra can certainly boost tourism in North Bengal, Sikkim and Bhutan, and, at the same time, we liberalise restrictions of foreigners entering Sikkim.

Post-Covid Order and focus on a Self-Reliant India

Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) is the vision of the Prime Minister of India of making India a self-reliant nation, reducing nation's dependence on import of material with efforts to fix the supply chain as one of the key lessons from Covid-19. The first



mention of this came in the form of the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' or 'Self-Reliant India Mission' during the announcement of the corona virus pandemic related economic package announcement made by the Indian government on 12 May 2020. India announced a cumulative financial package of USD 270 billion dollars accounting for 10 per cent of its annual gross domestic product (GDP), the 5th largest economic package in wake of Covid-19 internationally.

As part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat package, numerous government decisions have taken place such as changing the definition of MSMEs, boosting scope for private participation in numerous sectors, increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) in the defence sector; and the vision has found support in many sectors including medicine and solar manufacturers sectors. The growth of India's personal protective equipment (PPE) sector from zero before March, 2020 to 1,50,000 pieces a day by the beginning of May, 2020 is considered as a fine example of a self-reliant India. The PPE industry in India has since become a US\$980 million industry in two months, the second largest after China [15].

Atmanirbhar Bharat is aimed at interlocking 'Make in India' movement using new taglines such as 'Vocal for Local' to make India self reliant domestically while strengthening the global supply chain for a more secure and sustainable world [16]. Indian government has been looking into various policy options to leverage the NER as one of the key regions in the country to advance its- self reliance- initiative. There are unique and differentiated attributes in the region such as availability of natural products and forest based material that can with market linkage, branding, cold chain facilities and transportation connectivity position the region as an export hub to ASEAN and beyond besides capturing a vast Indian domestic markets. This in turn can serve local people with local employment opportunities, resultant income that can be used for viability-gap funding and foreign revenues.

Multilateral View on Long term potential for the Northeast Region

A World Bank reports (December, 2019) on the theme- Playing to Strengths: A Policy Framework for Mainstreaming Northeast India - has projected strong long-term potential for India's Northeast, with a little handholding from the central government and viability-gap funding. The bank has also suggested creating a 'Brand North East' for the promotion of products from the region [17].

The report has also identified four "high-impact" value chains that can create job opportunities for women and generate higher returns. These are — food and beverages, spices, bamboo and medical tourism. The region lagged the rest of the



country in terms of average per-capita income, even as it is home to youthful and literate workforce and has a favourable climatic zone which supports higher productivity.

The report aims at creating more employment opportunities, particularly for women who comprise a higher percentage of the labour force in the region. Diverse climate and topography is favourable for growth of a variety of horticultural products and organic farming which is in high demand worldwide with rising number of well informed and health- and environment-conscious consumers. Policy intervention can help the northeast region play to its own strengths to better leverage growth opportunities offered by global trends, and that improving productivity and growing urbanisation could also help accelerate growth and reduce poverty.

The World Bank report also mentioned value-chain initiatives in the past had tended to focus largely on the supply side, resulting in stagnation of return. The economists involved in the study have, instead, considered how the increasingly conscious consumers were shifting the pattern of demand and recognised the importance of reorienting the supply base accordingly.

Peace is important for development, but it is believed that the northeast region which had remained isolated from the rest of India after partition has long-term economic prospect. With India's Act East policy and thrust on road connectivity within the region and with neighbors, the Northeast India may be able to leverage its strengths.

Conclusion

One of the most diverse geographic and socio-economic regions of India, the NER has a significant strategic national and regional importance, especially with each state sharing an international border with at least one of the five eastern neighbours.

The states in the region must pursue their own independent approach toward their local development while tapering off their significant financial dependence from the Central Government for financial assistance, especially through Plan assistance, which continues to be given on a 90:10 basis (90 per cent is central assistance with States themselves raising 10 per cent of the budget). Due to the region's strategic location and abundance of natural, forest and customary resources, NER can well develop its cohesive and coordinated development plan attracting investments and addressing viability gap funding for a long term potential business model. This can mutually be supplemented for the region to be adequately supported (technically and financially) by the national government both as a strategic national asset and also as a pivot to unique and differentiated regional economic model.



With Indian government's – Act East Policy- in place and the engagement with ASEAN as a cornerstone to India's foreign policy, the Northeastern states can potentially play an ever increasingly important role as the physical and cultural bridge between India and East Asian countries while helping the region develop and prosper to the full capacity for its people, going forward.

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