FROM LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST POLICY: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NORTH EAST REGION (NER) AND THE EMERGING CHALLENGES

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Abstract: For the past two years India has been working progressively to not only ‘Look’ at its eastern neighbors but also to ‘Act’ dynamically. As such the Act east set a new imperative from its predecessor, the Look East in promoting India's interests in the realm of strategic, security, economic and cultural spheres in the region and beyond. In this perspective, North East Region provides the crucial meaning to the Act East as it serves the only physical gateway to Southeast Asian states. However, within this context there emerge many challenges that cripple the very progress of the policy in building closer relationships with India's partners. The article examines the progress of India’s Look East to Act East and the role that Northeast can play a significant part in it. The paper shall also look into the challenges and obstacles that emerge in the North East Region that paralyzes the flow of the policy.

Keywords: Look east, Act east, India, Southeast Asia, Northeast Region, Terrorism

1.0 Introduction

The year 1991 proved to be a defining moment in the history of India’s foreign policy formulation, particularly after the Cold War trauma. India saw a major shift in its strategic calculus scenario, particularly with the collapse and disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in one hand and the emergence of globalization on the other. India found itself out of the perceived shadow of the Soviet Union who was no longer available as a political, economic and security anchor (Gaffar, 2016). It created a larger space for India to solely steer and navigate its relations both at home and on the global arena in the new strategic situation of the multi-polar world system. In this stance, India under the leadership of P.V Narshima Rao’ took some visible and tangible policy decisions in the interest of adjusting India’s association to the post-Cold War environment. One of the most pronounced changes in the foreign policy came through the ‘Look East’ policy initiated in 1991 to foster new ties with its immediate neighbors, Southeast Asia (Sundaram, 2013). It showed a new beginning on India’s part in the formulation of new policy in the rapidly changing global situation, particularly after the post- Cold War period. The policy promised a new engagement to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members who have emerged as an important geo-strategic region in the early 1990s with its growing economic power. Since then Lookeast has never looked back, bringing together a large collective weight of global population, youth, economy, military strength and also provides a critical forum for peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia-Pacific and the world (The Hindu, 2014). With the growing space and time, India under the leadership of Narendra Modi in 2016 rechristened the Look East policy to ‘Act East’ policy under the rapidly changing geopolitical realities, defined by the assertive rise of China and the uncertainty future on the international policy front languishing due to financial and debt crisis.

2.0 Look East to Act East Policy: An Overview

The post Cold-War period brought many new challenges to India. The sudden changes in international politics with the demise of the USSR as well as the emergence of globalization obligated India to reach out and engage with new powers and new regions. In addition, India was also grappling with serious economic challenges back at home. This endeavors India to make strategic rapprochement towards Southeast Asia that was enjoying a phenomenal economic success with the emergence of an autonomous regional body, ASEAN (The Hindu, 2016). More so, the
policy overwhelmingly tries to create a place for India against the rising assertive role of China in Southeast Asia. China’s influence in Southeast Asia is based on cultural influence and the dominance of Chinese Diasporas who carries a considerable clout in Southeast Asia, controlling significant sections of the economy and playing a key role in China’s economic engagement with Southeast Asia. Naturally, this enables them to take on a substantial part of the emerging political, economic and security architecture of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, India’s influence in the region was one of the neglected one. India economic policies were insular and protectionist and failed to connect with Southeast Asia as the linkages were either blocked (in the case of Myanmar which closed itself from the outside world) or due to the fact that the regions were on opposing side of the Cold War divide (Naidu, 2004).

The initial articulation of the Look East policy was to explore the potential of India’s trade and economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations, thereby forging a closer economic tie with the ASEAN member states. Consequently, India began as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1992, became a full Dialogue Partner in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996, a Summit Level Partner in 2002, a member of the East Asia Summit in 2005, an ASEAN Business Forum in 2011 and a Strategic Partner of ASEAN in 2012 (Sikri, 2009). As of May 2016, the Foreign Direct Investment or FDI inflows into India from ASEAN was about US$ 49.40 billion, while from India to ASEAN countries was about US$ 38.672 billion (Gaffar, 2016). The total bilateral trade increased more than threefold from US$21 billion in 2005-06 to US$65 billion in 2015-16 (ASSOCHAM, 2016). This rising engagement with the ASEAN nations, be it in political, security or cultural field has given a profound significance to India’s power relations viz-a-viz shifting power dynamics and the global economy. Over the period of time, the scope of the policy expanded to cover discussion on security matters of common concern at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and interaction at East Asia Summit meetings also.

Hence, under the rapidly changing geo-political realities, defined by the increasingly assertive role of China and partly due to the languishing economic crisis, India imparted greater vigor to engage with the Southeast Asian nations through its rechristened dynamic and action oriented ‘Act East’ policy. India’s conceivably felt that its initiative of economic engagement with the ASEAN members has become a multi-faceted encompassing security, strategic, political, counter-terrorism and defense collaboration. Therefore, under ‘Act East’ India aims to extend its relations with its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region to the Far East, thereby significantly expanding its geographical coverage beyond ASEAN alone, to include other countries like Japan, Australia, Pacific Island nations, South Korea, and Mongolia. The policy was formally enunciated in 2014 at the 12th ASEAN- India Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar (Chand, 2014). India’s top leaders, including the Prime Minister, President, and Vice-President has constantly made a visit to most of the ASEAN nations reinvigorating the importance of their relations under this new policy.

3.0 Locating North East Region in the Look-East- Act-East policy

North East Region (NER) is the easternmost part of India comprising of seven states i.e Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. A small narrow stretch of land or the Siliguri Corridor connects the region to the rest of India. The region shares more than ninety percent of its entire border with China (southern Tibet) in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the southwest, and Bhutan to the northwest. This proves that why the region is strategically important as it gives an idea of how the region can represent as the basic linkages for India to maintain its relationship with its neighbors including Southeast Asia.

Topographically speaking, India shares its connectivity with Southeast Asia from three sides-Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Southern Indian tip of the Indian Ocean and from North East side (Sharma, Rather & Singh, 2016). However, from the three connectivity options, North East region provides the only physical connection between India and Southeast Asia, the other two being water bodies. As such there emerged a considerable optimism in the inclusion of the North East Region while formulating the Look East policy in 1991. However, in the initial phase, NER was never a part of this dynamic initiative since the thrust was not given to the geographical proximity between its North Eastern region and Southeast Asia. The policy was largely consecrated to bring a qualitative and structural change in India’s foreign policies in the rapidly changing global environment of the post-Cold War period.

It was in the second phase of Look East policy that North East region got recognition for availing the fruitful prospects through the policy. The reason is for simple objectives. First, as Myanmar was admitted into ASEAN as a full member in 1997, Northeast region assumed importance in its Look East policy since India’s four states- Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh borders Myanmar and gives a connectivity options with Southeast Asia via Myanmar, second, the growing realization on the part of Indian policy makers that development
of physical connectivity with ASEAN nations is a prerequisite to fully harness the opportunities provided by the Look East policy, third, the security situation in the NER with the presence of dozens armed militants infused by isolation and under development situation became a hot boiling issue for which the government needed an option and lastly, the close cultural and ethnic similarities of NER with the Southeast Asian countries is seen as an advantage for India. Diverse tribes such as Mizos, Nagas, Tangkhul, Meities and Paites living in the border regions of NER enjoys close familial, community-related, linguistic, religious and cultural ties with ethnic tribes from Myanmar and Thailand (Bhatia, 2016). As such these socio-cultural similarities were acknowledged to provide an additional potent to the policy.

With the inclusion of NER in the Look East policy, it was dubbed as a new paradigm in India’s larger interest, particularly focusing on its engagement with the Southeast Asian nations and also bringing a potential transformation in addressing the domestic problems of the North East Region. According to the North-East Region Vision Document 2020, the North East Region has a vital role to play in relation to Look East policy. It calls for NER as a partner whose involvement can strengthen the historical linkages that once the region shares with its neighboring countries including Southeast Asia. In the word of Dr. Mannohan Singh... the Northeastern region is the land of the rising sun for India. The time has come for the sun to shine on it and shine brightly. This Vision 2020 defines the path to that bright future and therefore an all-round development of the north eastern states was the topmost priority of the government and announced its decision to link all state capitals in the region by rail lines.

### 4.0 Prospects of the North East Region under Look East-Act East Policy

One of the important visions that came through the Look East Policy was its aim to integrate the North East Region into the larger economic enclave of Southeast Asia. In its second phase of the policy, North East Region gained importance as a corridor of opportunity and India embarked on an effort to improve the region within itself, with the mainland India and Southeast Asia. India began to explore its potential in economic cooperation and integration with Southeast Asian countries. Since then India has cemented its relations with ASEAN in terms of trade and commerce and taking part in every annual summit with ASEAN, including the signing of ASEAN-India Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2003 which laid the foundations for ASEAN-India Free Trade Areas and the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (TIG) in 2009 which came into force in 2010 paved the way for the creation of one of the world’s largest Free Trade Areas (Deigracia & Bhattacharjee, 2016).

In all, most of the India-ASEAN trade relations mainly centers on the sea routes along the coastal belts of India. As such the amount of interaction between the nations was at minimal. Indeed, there was a lack of realization on the Indian part to emphasize the importance of NER as a physical route despite the region’s proximity to Southeast Asia. There could be many answers to this juggling question as to why NER was not taken into consideration in enhancing its relations with Southeast Asia at first instance. It is true that NER turns out simply being a transmission belt connecting India and ASEAN, where Myanmar (who shares 1640km long border) provides a key link in establishing a chain of connectivity with the rest of Southeast Asia. However, prior to 1997 when Myanmar became a fully ASEAN member, it closed its interaction to the outside world. The military Coup of 1962 under Ne Win\(^3\) sought to disengage its interaction from the rest of the world, including the near neighbors. As such India failed to establish a direct connection between India and Southeast Asia.

Therefore, it was the strategic consideration in realizing the importance of Myanmar in enhancing India-Southeast Asia connection that strategy was made to bring the NER and Myanmar at the core of its policy planning (Deigracia & Bhattacharjee, 2016). In this regard, India and Myanmar signed the Border Trade Agreement in 1994 and eliminated the bottleneck of connectivity issue. The agreement provided for the opening of check posts along the India-Myanmar border at Moreh in Manipur (India) and Tamu in Sagaing (Myanmar) and Champai in Mizoram (India) and Rhi in Chin (Myanmar). With the opening of the border posts, India-Myanmar registered a progressive flow in the formal trade and secured a connectivity relation thus obtaining its strategy of bringing NER and Myanmar into its Look East policy. Furthermore, with this opening, four other check posts (Pangsau, Paletwa, Lunguwas-Yanyong, and Pangnyo) were also opened along the India-Myanmar border (Deigracia & Bhattacharjee, 2016).

After Myanmar became a full ASEAN member in 1997 further steps were taken to use the possible strategy to map the North Eastern Region (NER) into connectivity and development projects. In this regard, various projects were drawn up by India and ASEAN to integrate the region and make it a powerful economic block to reckon with. These projects include:

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\( ^3 \) Ne Win (1988-2011), a former army general who ruled Myanmar from 1988 to 2011, was the military ruler of Myanmar. His rule was characterized by isolationism and harsh repression of ethnic and political minorities.
4.1 The Trilateral Highway Proposal: The Trilateral Highway proposal to link NER (India), Myanmar and Thailand is a part of the larger Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), an international organisation comprising of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal to enhance technological and economic cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian countries along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. The project is proposed to pass through Moreh in Manipur, Bagan in Myanmar and Mae Sot in Thailand (Deigracia & Bhattacharjee, 2016). The under construction project is expected to boost the trade and economic relationship between India and ASEAN as well as the ASEAN- India Free Trade Area. India on its part has helped Myanmar in building 160km of the Tamu- Kalewa- Kalemyo sector of the proposed link to establish its core interest in this project (Srikanth, 2016).

4.2 BCIM Economic Corridor: The proposed Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor is a cooperation amongst four nations that helps to connect South Asia with South East and East Asia by establishing multi-modal connectivity, harnessing the economic opportunity, promoting trade and investment and enhancing people-to-people contacts (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The proposed economic corridor would run from Kolkata (India) to Kunming (China) via Bangladesh, Northeast India, and Myanmar. The corridor touches Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh, Silchar, Imphal, and Moreh in the Northeast India and Mandalay as well as Northern provinces of Myanmar (Srikanth, 2016).
Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project: The project proposed in 2008 aims to combine the land, river and sea route to link Kolkata, Northeast Region, and Myanmar. The project aims to connect Kolkata with Sittwe sea port in Myanmar by sea route; it will then link Sittwe sea port to Paletwa in Myanmar via Kaladan river route and then from Paletwa on to Mizoram by road transport. India has taken the responsibility of building a national highway linking Mizoram with Paletwa.

Figure 3-Map Showing The Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project

Source: https://www.google.co.in/search?q=Kaladan+Multimodal+transport+project&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiRrNDlINrSAhUkR48KHSVtB_MQ_AUICCgB&biw=1344&bih=562#imgrc=1QrdBkWTBEF13M

Asian Highway Network I and II: The Asian Highway I and II is an ambitious cooperative project among countries in Asia and Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), to improve the highway systems in Asia.

The Asian Highway I is the longest of the Asian Highway Network that seeks to link Japan in the Far East to Europe passing through China, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. This route takes the trilateral highway while passing through Thailand, Myanmar, and India.

The Asian Highway II is another planned highway connecting Iran with Indonesia via Iraq, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. In NER the network is connected to the state of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Meghalaya.

Figure 4: Map Showing The Asian Highway I
Figure 5: Map Showing Asian Highway II

Source: https://www.google.co.in/search?q=Asian+highway+1+picture&tbm=isch&imgil=EK60_7YUEdECIM%253A%253B%253BTzZIuSeurViMeM%253Bhttps%25252F%25252Fwww.quora.com%25252FHas-there-been-any-overlanding-done-on-the-Asian-Highway-1&source=iu&pf=m&fir=EK60_7YUEdECIM%253A%252CTzZIuSeurViMeM%252C_&usg=__g6Zd0-u4KioExogOnFVsPxtYY%3D&biw=1344&bih=562&ved=0ahUKEwinvc-UldrSAhVIqo8KHcLSCAsOyjICMg&ci=kRHKOewJMjUvgTipaNY#imgdii=JCCWOdjcCWtirM:&imgref=EK60_7YUEdECIM:

4.5 Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS): The proposed corridor involves India and Myanmar (MIEC) at one level and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)- a development project implemented in 1992 by the World Development Bank and consists of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and China on the other level. Once completed, the road will provide a connecting link between the MIEC and GMS thereby helping to grow its trade relations and build a stronger relationship between the people in the region.

4.6 Trans Asian Railway Network Proposal: The project aims to build and connect Northeast India railway with the rail network in Myanmar and thereby link with the ambitious 80,900kms Trans Asian Railway network that connects Thailand to Bulgaria. Under this initiative, there is a proposal to build railway links to Tripura, Manipur, and Mizoram linking them with Myanmar.

Figure 6: Map Showing The Trans Asian Railway Network Proposal
From the above-mentioned connectivity projects, it appears that the potential of Northeast Region using the Northeast Region as a transmission belt is huge and desirable in India’s connection with the Southeast Asian countries.

5.0 Assumptions and Reality

All the above-mentioned development and connectivity project initiatives to link India and ASEAN via NER remain just a mere assumption at ground level. Nothing much has been achieved or realized as far as these connectivity and development projects are concerned. Some of these projects are still at the infant stage of planning and for some only the ground work has been completed. In all, there lie more challenges and obstacles ahead in the successful implementation of these projects in the North Eastern Region.

5.1 Security Issue: The security issue in the North East Region is as important as it was before. Perhaps it is the only region in India, where the security issue dominates the economy. In 2007 according to Mani Shankar Aiyer, the then DONER minister said that… ‘there could be no better security guarantee for India than if the Northeastern Region were to prosper and shine much more than its immediate neighborhood across the border. The NER presents one of the complex security discourses in the Indian history interwoven by ethnicity, language and territorial organization of different ethnic groups. Indeed the region has been a theatre of the intractable uprising. Voicing their protest against the colonial domination of India over what they define as historically independent region, there emerged many armed militant groups who have managed to survive the onslaughts of the Indian state and has inspired to the regular popping of new outfits contributing to the cycle of chaos and violence in the region (Routray, 2012). The strategic landscape of the region where only ten percent stretch of the international border is manned by an Indian state creates a context in which multiplicity of uprising achieves political salience since political boundaries do not coincide with the social boundaries. National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), United Liberation Front (ULF) of Manipur has been in existence for decades and continues to be a source of persistent challenges to the Indian state with new methods and tactics.

The security forces and the counter terror tactics in the North East Region have remained pitted against these challenges posed by the armed groups. AS such the idea of bringing the NER at the core of Look East policy based on developing the region has been marred by the security issue. As of now the security issue still present a key bottleneck in the projects. Almost most of the development and connectivity corridors prospered as a part of sub-regional initiatives passes through the volatile and militancy prone areas (Srikanth, 2016). The areas remain heavily under the influence of the ULFA, NSCN, ULF militants who seek compensations, taxes, and percentage to avail the green light for the projects. Apart from it, some of the armed groups also have a legitimate control of the trade routes and pursue both legal and illegal businesses.

5.2 Issue of Governance: The government proposal in the past and at present in its nation-building and integration scheme has aggravated a complex situation in the North East Region. The NER comprising of seven states inhibits peoples who vary in language, race, tribe, caste, religion, and regional heritage. Therefore the idea to integrate and club the region together in order to underpin the idea of India as a prosperous and functioning democracy has brought conflicts and violence in the region. For example the Naga rebellions of 1950, the oldest uprising was fought on the objective of securing a separate sovereign state of Nagaland. Then there are other rebellions from Manipur, Assam, Tripura that too witnessed some sort of rebellion uprising to press their demands ranging from secessionist to independence.

The central Government has also failed to understand the politico-administrative arrangement of the region. In the name of law and judiciary, the government has created multiple power centers instead of bringing in a genuine process of democratization or autonomy in the region. The introduction of AFSPA which was passed in 1958, a short-term measure to allow deployment of the army to counter an armed separatist movement has been in place till date. It has escalated the genuine problem to the military level, thereby making the situation more complex and dynamic. The AFSPA brought regular human rights violations, including rape, and tortured. In its report, Human Rights Watch Report (August 2008), it says that the Act violates provisions of international human rights law, including the right to life, the right to be protected from arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to be free from
torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. It also denies the victims of the abuses the right to a remedy (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

5.3 The development Conjecture: The pattern of developmental assumptions is visible in the North East Region than another part of India. Although it is commendable to complement the governments endeavor to facilitate development and business in the region, however, it has failed to exercise any such in reality. The assumption that NER is indispensable for the Look East policy has remained faulty. Even after more than ten years, the region has remained under economic backwardness and still ponders for development and economic projects. In most cases the government has been responding to the initiative, however, at the local level, there is mismanagement of the funds and the sponsored schemes practically on the account of political grounds. As such this brings us to question the very objective of Look East policy that proposed to bring development and connectivity projects.

5.4 Greater India- China Rivalry: For long India and China had shared the relation of what Nehru termed ‘Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai.’ Both the countries traded goods, exchanged visits, borrowed ideas and respected each other. However, after 1960’s the relations froze and took a new turn that took a lot of efforts to restore some degree of good relations. Today, India and China look each other as a competitor neighbor advocating new strategic direction to counter one’s rise. In this presence, the objective of proposed development and connectivity projects for trade and development promises looks bleak. Both the nations have therefore kept an alternative while implementing its projects. For instance, the policy to rechristen the Look East into Act East is mired by the growing role of China in the Asia-Pacific regions with its soft power backed by development and economic incentives like One Belt One Road, Asian Development Bank etc. In addition, many Indian policymakers assert that the rise in armed militants in the NER is made possible by the continuous support that China is providing to the militants. As such, it is the projection of greater rivalry between India and China that objectifies the Look East policy-Act East policy than the development and connectivity initiatives.

6.0 Conclusion

The Look-East- Act-East policy- formulated to connect with the Southeast Asian nations proves to be an indispensable proposal to India in the period of foreign exchange crisis of the early 1990s, expanding, protecting and strengthening its interests in the globalized world and particularly in Southeast Asia. After more than twenty years of its first inception, today the policy stands as one of the best-conceived policy by the Indian government. The policy apparently pursued as an economic centric endeavor with the vision to integrate India’s crippling economy with the expanding economies of Southeast Asia has expanded in the areas encompassing security, strategic, political, counter-terrorism and defense collaboration. It has enlarged its relation not only to the ASEAN but to the Far East countries, including Japan, Australia, and South Korea. This illustrates the growth that the policy has achieved in its endeavor and also in establishing as an alternative power to China in Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific.

The essence of incorporating NER in the second phase of its policy by bringing development and connectivity projects is also a significant step to the conflict-ridden region. It was projected that the initiative might contribute and address its major problems of underdevelopment. However, as said than done NER present to be an impediment in India Act East policy. The initiative to include NER in the larger Act East policy seems logical and necessary for the development of the region. However, the questions of visibility of these projects depend on several internal and external factors.

As such, in the essence of Look East-act east policy, bringing NER was one of its ultimate aims. In this regard, the policy needs to be hastened in such a way that the economic prosperity of the region becomes noticeable. There should be a proper monitoring mechanism to tackle the challenges, including the social, cultural and political problems. The policy should be practical in addressing the real stake of the people of the region in availing all the proposed benefits. With the possession of such consideration, the policy can meet its potentials and strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia and also bring prosperity to the North East Region.

7.0 References

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1 P.V. Narshima Rao was elected as the 9th Prime Minister of India. Under his ascendency he led important administration, overseeing a major economic transformation thereby liberalizing the Indian economy.
2 The North-East Region Vision Document 2020, unveiled in 2008 by the Government of India, is a visionary document to bring the North Eastern Region to the position of national economic eminence so that development and growth springs and spreads out to the grassroots. The document also ensure that the Region plays the arrowhead role in the vanguard of the Look East Policy.
3 After Myanmar (then Burma) got its independence in 1948 and became democratic socialist country, it failed to restore law and order situation in a Burmese society characterized by ever-increasing political turmoil. Therefore, in 1962 General Ne Win seized power in military-staged coup d’etat.