

North East Indian states and its connectivity with neighbor countries: An Analysis of Transport activity

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Abstract

North East States are categorized as Special Category States and are granted central assistance on liberal terms. Establishment of North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971, earmarking (since 1998-99) of at least 10% of Plan Budgets of Non Exempted Central Ministries/Departments for expenditure in North East Region, Connectivity is the most effective and essential form of linkage across the international borders. Before considering country-specific external linkages, it is important that the complementary internal transport infrastructure develops as adequate integration to market places and centers of production alone will ensure equitable spread of benefits accruing from such investments. Due to the history of close cultural, commercial and economic linkages. The Look East Policy envisages increasing commercial interchanges between NER, our international neighborhood and beyond to South East Asia. At present, however, India's international transport linkages with the East are highly underdeveloped, as are its linkages with Bangladesh. India could not leverage the shared colonial experience, cultural affinities and an incredible historical baggage to build relations with Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Certain key initiatives of the government, such as the 'Look East Policy' and the North East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy (NEIIPP), 2007, and the NER Vision 2020 released in 2008, are efforts in the right direction but these will have to be shored up by concerted efforts. Despite Plan investments in the past, infrastructure development in the North East has been poor, which has also been noted by the NER Vision document as the single biggest constraint to accelerated growth. The region is characterised by grossly underdeveloped transport linkages that have sequestered and isolated the region not only from the rest of the country and the world, but also within itself. NTDPC is placing a special focus on transportation in the North East in view of its unique problems of isolation from the rest of the country, which arose as a consequence of the Partition in 1947.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NER

The world is looking to engage with the emerging economic hotspot, the East, and it is in North East India that South-East Asia begins. Most urgent and strategic interventions are required for the NER to play the arrowhead role for India. Transport infrastructure will be vital to strengthen integration within the region, and with the rest of the country, and also for India's increased integration with the South East in the future. Improving transport connectivity shall have to be the foremost priority for social and economic mobility and market integration. Whereas inter-regional, intra-regional and regional connectivity to mainland India is necessary, critical to improving connectivity are issues of diplomacy and an improvement in border infrastructure and trade facilitation with neighboring countries.

THE LOOK EAST POLICY

The broad strategy should be to promote ties of the NER with its immediate neighbours in the short term, while looking beyond its borders to tap into the benefits of India's burgeoning trade with the ASEAN bloc in the longer run. Myanmar, now a member of ASEAN, has become a crucial link between India and ASEAN countries. Political leaders from Bangladesh, USA, South Korea and Britain have already made their forays into Myanmar. India, despite having a geographic advantage, has been rather languid in its approach and certain initiatives have only begun to show recently. The North East, specifically Manipur, and the border town of

Moreh in particular, can be the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, and transmission lines crisscrossing the region. Moreh has traditionally been the trading hub with Myanmar and presents vast potential to become a major export centre from India for the South-East Asian region. Another big project already under way is designed to turn the Kaladan River into a shipping route, linking Mizoram to Myanmar's port of Sittwe, which India is helping develop.

OVERARCHING TRANSPORTATION ISSUES FOR THE NER

Most of the area in the region is hilly and undulating with low population densities except the plains of Assam, parts of Tripura and valley areas of Manipur. Rail connectivity in such terrain is not only time-consuming but would need huge investments. It is road connectivity which would play a dominant role in fulfilling the transportation needs of the public. Air and inland water transport will play a role for a limited segment of people and goods. Before analysing the four transportation sectors, some common issues cutting across different sectors are discussed here.

MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORT PLANNING

Regional solutions for intra-regional movement of goods and passengers, connectivity with the rest of India and international connectivity have to be planned in an integrated manner. At present, there is hardly any inter-sectoral planning amongst the four transport infrastructure sectors—road, civil aviation, rail and inland waterways. Even at the beginning of the 12th Plan, such an approach has not been undertaken.

CROSSING THE BRAHMAPUTRA

The 890-km length of Brahmaputra from Dhubri to Sadia has at present only three bridges across it to connect areas on its either side. Two more are under construction. The three existing ones are the Saraighat road-cum-rail bridge at Guwahati; the Tezpur-Kolia Bormora Setu, connecting Sonitpur with Nagaon district; and the Jogighopa-Naranarayana rail-cum-road Setu. The two bridges under construction are the Bogibeel rail-cum-road bridge; and

MAJOR PROJECTS/SCHEMES UNDERWAY

The political leadership and public have long recognised an increasing need to build adequate and quality roads connecting the NER internally and to mainland India. However, the overall road density of the region still remains below national average.

SPECIAL ACCELERATED ROAD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR NORTH EAST (SARDP-NE)

This programme envisages providing road connectivity to all the district headquarters in the NER by minimum two-lane highway standards apart from providing road connectivity to backward and remote areas, areas of strategic importance and neighbouring countries. The programme is planned in two phases, including the Arunachal Package covering about 10,141 km. This is by far the most ambitious road development programme for the NER. NHAI, state PWDs and the Border Roads Organization (BRO) are the implementing agencies. The objectives are as follows: • Upgrade National Highways connecting state capitals to two/four-lane • To provide connectivity of all 88 district headquarter towns of the NER by at least two-lane road • Provide road connectivity to backward and remote areas of the NER • Improve roads of strategic importance in the border area • Improve connectivity to neighboring countries.

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- Improve connectivity to neighbouring countries.

EAST WEST CORRIDOR

Apart from SARDP-NE, the NHAI is implementing the four-laning of 672 km of the East West Corridor from Srirampur (Assam/West Bengal border) to Silchar in Assam, and the two-laning with paved shoulders from Jowai to Rattacherra (104 km) in Meghalaya under NHDP-III. The corridor is estimated to be completed by December 2014.

State Connectivity

Upgradation of Standards for State Highway and District Headquarter Link Roads The standard of roads being built to link the district headquarters under the SARDP-NE should be gradually raised so that the container load can be carried in the plains districts of Assam and also to important transit points like Dimapur in Nagaland and Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh. For these main state highways, standards similar to National Highways should be prescribed, viz. the formation width of 12 mt with carriageway of 10 mt. and radius of curvature of 12 mt to facilitate movement of large containers.

BANGLADESH

The transport links with Bangladesh that were broken as a result of the Partition and then completely severed after the 1965 Indo-Pak War have been discussed in detail. The resultant damage to the economy of the NER is also well understood. Sincere efforts are needed by both nations to reconstruct and further develop their connectivity links and strengthen bilateral ties. There is a growing realisation that increased economic partnership will bring substantial benefits. While India's foreign policy has seen certain developments to this end during the last couple of years, the traction needs to be sustained and focused on-ground implementation.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS : Following high-level interactions between the Prime Ministers of the two countries, there has been an agreement on several important transportation and trade milestones. • India to gain access to Chittagong and Mongla Ports in Bangladesh • Agartala-Akhaura Railway line, which will provide rail connectivity between Tripura and Bangladesh • Development of border haats on the IndoBangladesh border which will promote trade and connectivity • Bridge over river Feni between India and Bangladesh at Sabroom, Tripura. It is recommended that this should be a rail-cum-road bridge to link the under-construction Agartala-Sabroom railway line to Chittagong • Development of Sabroom-Ramgarh and Dhemagiri-Tegamukh border points which will provide new connectivity between Bangladesh, Tripura and Mizoram. It may be stated here that Mizoram, prior to Independence, had exchange of commodities through the Dhemagiri-Tegamukh route via the Karnaphuli river. Presently, Mizoram has no connectivity to Bangladesh. • Reviving the Kulaura-Mahisashan rail link

MYANMAR

There has been a series of high-level visits between India and Myanmar in 2010, 2011 and 2012. With the advent of democracy in Myanmar, relations are on an upswing. The main gateway between Myanmar and India is at Moreh (Manipur)-Tamu (Myanmar). Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share a 1600 km border with Myanmar along with strong cultural and ethnic links. Due to difficult terrain and insurgency on both sides, transportation linkages have not adequately developed. India has built the Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa (TKK) Friendship Road in Myanmar. Apart from Moreh, the only other connecting links are at Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh and Zawkhathar in Mizoram. Recently, it has been decided to develop Pangsau Pass as a first formal border haat between India and Myanmar on the lines of the Indo-Bangladesh border haat on the Meghalaya border. At Zawkhathar, India has a well-developed LCS but hardly any trade takes place as links between Zawkhathar and Rih and beyond in Myanmar are very poor. India is now developing the Rih-Tiddim Road with grant assistance to Myanmar.

BHUTAN

India partners closely with Bhutan in its development as much as it does to be its biggest trade partner. A free trade regime (under the India-Bhutan Trade and Commerce Agreement) exists between India and Bhutan which is reflective of the strong bilateral ties that concede to mutually beneficial economic linkages between the two countries. Currently, the major items of exports from Bhutan to India are electricity (from Tala, Chukha and the Kurichhu hydroelectric project), base metals and articles, minerals, vegetable fat and oils, alcoholic beverages, chemicals, cement, timber and wood products, cardamom, fruit products, potatoes, oranges and apples, raw silk, plastic and rubber products. Major exports from India to Bhutan are petroleum products, mineral products, base metals and articles, machinery, automobiles & spares, vegetable, nuts, spices, processed food and animal products, chemicals, wood, plastic and rubber.

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