



# Look East Policy and its implication on Northeast India

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## **About the Author:**

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## **Abstract:**

The development of Northeast India is important for two reasons; first, to alleviate the general economic and social condition of the people. Second, to tackle insurgency by improving self employment avenues and governance, which can have a bearing on India's superpower aspirations. To resolve such complex problems of Northeast India, we may begin to reflect upon the possibilities of Act East policy impinging upon this stated objective and how we can further improve peace, people and prosperity in the region.

**Keywords:** Act east policy, Manipur, Northeast India, Korean, Internal Security, Peace.

## **Introduction:**

The Look East policy launched and initiated by Narashimha Rao in 1992 has been given a fundamental shift from Look East to Act East by Narendra Modi, at the ASEAN-India Summit held in Myanmar in 2014, capturing the urgency of the issue at hand. The corridors of power at the centre has its own interest that includes developing Northeast India, but primarily its driving force is the hunger for geostrategic foothold in East and Southeast Asia at a time of China's increasing presence there and the string of pearls. The Act East policy now focuses not only on ASEAN countries, but East Asian countries and expanded its scope towards economic, strategic and security dimensions. The question that we try to address here is how can Northeast India fit into this policy? Yogendra Yadav, a Political

Scientist observed that "South East Asia begins from India's northeast", this statement captures the potential in building relations with East and South east Asia which can strengthen India's foreign policy.

### **Similarities of culture:**

South East Asia begins from India's northeast because the northeastern ethnic tribes trace their ancient migratory routes towards the east, which results in similarity of race, language, food habits and culture. For instance, K-pop culture, Korean or Filipino or Thai movies are normal household entertainment list in northeast, which is their ability to project soft power in terms of cultural influence. While being careful with the trade imbalance, this simple phenomena renders us a very important message, i.e. if there is an underlying cultural bond, race included, then the economic, political, educational or strategic engagements become easier, which India can exploit to develop northeast and further cement its ties with Asian countries.

It is a puzzling phenomenon that a landlocked region, strangled by Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China still continue to be the least connected region both within and without. This is a pure recipe for economic failure because the region is not able to trade efficiently by working on their comparative advantages. Likewise, analysts warn that China's muscle flexing in South China sea could end up making a "Great wall of self isolation", that the world engage lesser with China economically and politically, which would disadvantage China in the long run. Similarly, United States and the West claim that it has successfully punished Russia for its annexation of Crimea by isolating it diplomatically and economically, as Russia was shown the exit from G8 (Group of Eight). At a moment in History when the world equates isolation with punishment, it is incomprehensible that northeast region continue to be economically and politically least integrated among themselves and with its neighbouring countries.

### **The complexities within:**

Given the historical baggage of northeast, plagued by backwardness, poor connectivity, insurgency, bandh culture and ethnic tensions, the remnants of which is still boiling and unresolved, there is a pre-eminent question about the region's future especially of the younger generation. Though the old glasses are stained with blood and confusion. In order to reap the fruits of Act East policy, it is imminent to shed historical prejudices that have proved too costly into a zero sum game and pick fresh perspectives, one that harmonizes the psychology and sentiments of the people.

Often times, regional stakeholders play the second fiddle of the damage control strategy of the centre that orchestrates various groups to pit against each other. Reminiscing the old "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King Jr. that talked about hope for a brighter tomorrow, the younger generation today aspire to dream of a land where the past may not be forgotten but reconciled and when social tensions occur, as are bound to happen in any society, that our leaders would prudently

resolve tensions and disputes amicably and justly. For this purpose the North Eastern Council that is sanctioned by a parliamentary Act called the North Eastern Council Act 1971, should be put to better use.

### **The constraints from outside:**

The northeastern states are allowed very limited interaction with their neighbouring countries citing internal and national security as the sacred veil that must be honored, but who defines the parameters of national interest? When Suhasini Haider, Diplomatic Editor of *The Hindu* was asked if the topic regarding cross border engagement ended with internal security, she replied, a lot of the center's responses are 'excuses' to deflect the question. The argument that, increasing interaction with neighboring countries would only give space for insurgents and drug peddlars to breathe is only partially true. Why can't infrastructures be improved and legal consignments exchanged? With regard to Bangladesh, the illegal migration into the northeast has been causing social upheavals in Assam, Tripura and that has since been percolating slowly into other northeastern states. But better relations and engagement with Myanmar must be worked out and given official push. There are wide avenues in education, health care, tourism, forest and agricultural products that can be harnessed and that can improve people to people relation, which will eventually give better leverage in the conduct of India's foreign policy.

The northeast today is not the same as it was in the initial period of India's independence. After 1947, northeast India was confused about its political identity. On the one hand is India with a different culture, language, religion, history and race, the northeastern elites resorted to a politics of differentiation for decades. With the passage of time and India's soft and hard power projections in northeast, it was able to create a new elite who became politicians, parliamentarians, businessmen, bureaucrats and other professionals who have substantially integrated financially, mentally and politically with the mainland. And so the threat of separation does not loom so large as it was in the past. Hence, policy makers should take into account this factual reality and accordingly speed up its development and integration process which is another method of subsiding insurgency.

Despite the absence of any chequered past, like partition or the intractable Kashmir problem, Northeast – Myanmar juxtaposes like India-Pakistan; we remain a seemingly conflicted zone with the least minimum interaction. So, as long as we continue to view State or neighbourly relations through the prism of New Delhi un-tempered by federal considerations, such as the need for economic and social interactions, the northeastern economy will continue to lag behind.

### **Importance of an informed Citizenry:**

In a democratic polity, leaders are bound by the ballot; this is to say that it is a two-way traffic between leaders and citizens. At times, great leaders set agendas and drive the citizens forward; at other times leaders take cue from the electorate. And so, we need to nurture a democratic society

where the citizens are aware of their rights and duties. So that eventually, the people start questioning, unfair process, siphoning of funds, job bribes, corruption, mis-governance, and the process of purging or at least as a watchdog of public institutions that acts as a preventive and a vigilant mechanism.

### **The role of media:**

Daily national papers cover reports from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh and somehow merges the psychology of the nation, creating what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community”. However, significant events of the Northeast are greatly underreported and unaddressed in the national papers. Therefore, to overcome this problem, a reliable news outlet that specializes on northeast region can bridge the news deficit in reaching the mainstream.

More important than bridging news deficits is the responsibility of local medias in speaking truth and avoiding propaganda, it is often the case that regional media report along communal lines, thereby fanning ethnic tensions, when it should be neutral and putting across differing perspectives accurately without prejudice. The media can enhance the peace process in northeast by sticking to its core principles of journalism, namely truth, objectivity, impartiality and public accountability.

Some writers find it problematic clubbing the northeast as a single entity and therefore stress on linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences. However, drawing on the larger context of India, we come face to face with the truth that northeast region confronts similar problems, ethnicity, terrain, culture and geography, binding us in the same rhythmic throb of corruption, deplorable roads, poor connectivity, defunct primary schools and health centers, winds of insurgency, rural poverty, want of opportunities at home, children dropping out of schools and the excessive dependence on primary activities, an indicator of an undeveloped economy. It is here that the media-house can initiate and mobilize public opinion in mounting pressures on the political or administrative leadership.

### **Conclusion:**

It is unfortunate that the 1668 Westphalian treaty which started the carving out of national boundaries debilitated our sights, such that political scenes in New Delhi appear closer than the happenings in the immediate neighbourhood such as Myanmar crisis. This idea of nation state is so entrenched and powerful today that almost every international conflict begins at the border, that it potentially blinded our sight towards geographically contingent neighbors. Once we bypass the rigid dichotomy of nation-state, looking eastward at least in the context of Myanmar, the landlocked region would transform itself into a geostrategic forte.

It is worth recalling a Manipuri folklore that talks about peace and prosperity, once the "eastern gates are opened". The folklore sings an instinctual truth for the fact that ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is one of the fastest growing regional economies in the world, so is South Korea, Japan and China with its robust economy, and if India could emphasize on developing

infrastructure and skills of the northeastern people, it could result in a win-win situation for the region and for India's aspirations to take its rightful place in the comity of nations.

When there is peace among the various ethnic communities; governance and developmental works will be more efficient. When governance and development becomes more equitable and sustainable, insurgency trend will decline. The fundamental point is that: peace process, development and good governance should be pressed on simultaneously, that development should not wait for peace to come first, nor should peace wait for development to be achieved first. And this is the way to move ahead in building infrastructures such as the trans Asian highway 1 that passes through Manipur to Myanmar, or the four lane highway construction in Kohima-Dimapur or the railway line connecting every northeastern states.

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