

Act East Policy and Connectivity in North East India

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ABSTRACT: *The Act East Policy of the Indian Government, presumably an upgradation of the Look East Policy, initiated in not so distant past, expects an all-round economic development of North- East Region (NER) through concluding diplomatic ties with South-East Asia. The policy, according to the Indian Government, urges its policy makers to look into new prospects and opening new doorways of opportunity into the closet of ASEAN countries. But how does it do so? Among all the other ways, one obvious way is to instigate a process of developing transport and communication system; hoped to connect India with the countries of South-East Asia through constructing an intricate network of roadways, railways, airways and waterways, along with opening many new transit points or repairing the existing ones which would likely to expedite not only trade and commerce but also strengthen diplomatic ties. The current paper therefore, studies various proposed and on-going transportation projects initiated in correspondence with ASEAN countries by India. This paper further examines the current status of diverse geographical routes, their specific challenges and advantages associated with it.*

KEYWORDS: *Act East Policy, Highways, Railways, North East India.*

Date of Submission: 01-10-2019

Date of acceptance: 16-10-2019

I. BACKGROUND

A government initiates its policies with a view to improve its contemporary or pre-existing socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in the country or at any particular region within the country. The policies, the government hopes, would act like a catalyst, removing barricades from its road towards development. Such a policy was developed in not so distant past, to be precise in 1991, by the government headed by then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. The name of the policy was “Look East Policy”, though promulgated in 1991, was mentioned for the first time in an annual report of the Ministry of External Affairs, 1995-96. So, the question is why then and not before? In other words, what circumstances led the policy makers to formulate a policy to look East?

To answer the question, we must delve into domestic as well as international developments of the late 80s and early 90s, for both these factors contributed to the culmination of a policy that henceforth, began to be rigorously followed by successive governments, and also became the hallmark of India’s relation with ASEAN countries. Internationally, India was set back by two events. India relied much on West Asia for oil and trade but the Gulf War of 1990-91, changed the scenario. Monetarily, India lost to West Asian countries like Iraq and Kuwait, a remittance of \$205 million from Indian employed in those countries, in addition to \$500 million from Iraq at the start of the crisis and further about \$112 million in trade with above mentioned countries. Trade and commerce were further hampered by Soviet Union’s dissolution in 26 December 1991, with the end of Cold War. Soviet Union had been a leading market for consumer goods from India. It had also been a supplier of arms and ammunitions, and petroleum to India. Duly noted Soviet Union had also being an unaccountable diplomatic ally who constantly supported India’s ventures, both domestic and foreign. Furthermore, India’s lucrative trade with East European countries had a major fall back with the collapse of the Communist regime.

On the other hand, India domestically, was plagued by political instability. The government dissolved frequently from 1989 to 1991. Political stability could only be reinstalled from June 1991 under the Prime Ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Again, there was a ‘China factor’; India had already fought a war with China in 1962 over the dispute of territories. India, therefore, had some sort of insecurities towards China’s presence in the South-east, particularly Myanmar. Moreover, China had already kick-started its economic reform twelve years ahead of India. India certainly, did not want to lag behind to a neighbouring country like China making its debut as a world economic powerhouse.

The Look East Policy is, more or less, an export led growth strategy. India’s North East Region (NER) in the Look East Policy plays a crucial strategic role for it acts as a liaison connecting South-east Asia with a network of roadways, railways and airways. The policy makers were also aware of the NER’s low economic growth in comparison to other parts of India. The government, therefore, distressed by international affairs in

West Asia and Soviet Union, and likewise realizing the growing ‘China factor’ in South-east Asia, formulated a policy that it hopes would strike two targets collectively – first, expansion of India’s diplomatic ties with ASEAN countries and second, economic development of NER.

II. TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION

Cliché would be to say transport and communication are the arteries and veins of a country. Proper transportation enables to connect remote place to cosmopolitan cities. It not only boosts trade but also fosters movement of people to industrial sectors, thereby creating employment opportunities.

1) Roadways: India’s policy makers keeping in view of NER’s close proximity to Myanmar, which can be regarded as a gateway to South-east Asia, decided to connect Myanmar with a web of roadway networks.

Some of these roads are proposed while others are under the process of construction and upgradation. The name of some of these projects are - India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, a 3200 km long road connecting India with Vietnam. The road, known as the East-West Economic Corridor is currently under upgradation. Next, we have Zokhawthar-Mandalay road which is planned to connect Mizoram with Myanmar, creating an alternative route to enter Myanmar. Then, we have an existing road connection, Imphal with Mandalay, known as Imphal-Moreh-Mandalay Highway. This road is also under upgradation. There is also the megalodon project of Asian Highway 1, an initiative that requires the participation of almost all the countries of Asia. The Asian Highway 1 runs 20,557 km and aims to connect Asian countries with a web of road networks. From Tokyo, Japan it travels through East Asia, entering into South-east, then making its way to South Asia, travelling to the west, finally connecting with European route E80. The Indian government have also over the years, paid much attention to the development of road infrastructure in NER. Because connectivity with railways is much difficult in the hilly areas, roadways are the only option of interlinking the hinterlands of NER.

Table 1: State wise distribution of Road length in NER.

India: 2011 - 12	Road Lengths (km)							
	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura
National Highways	1,992	2,836	959	810	927	494	62	400
State Highways	--	3,134	668	1,134	259**	404**	186	689
Major District Roads	12,169	4,413	964	1,219	--	2,387	1,720	90
Rural Roads*	5,455	1,88,850	6,305	1,569	1,972	22,095	2,326	16,415
Urban Roads*	33	6,664	210	110	325	98	162	280
Project Roads*	1,088	8,493	--	940	35	269	5	1,346

Sources: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, CMIE States of India

**2007-08 data

* 2010-11 data

2) Railways: While roadways are under upgradation, much of the railways are proposed to link India with Myanmar and beyond. These are India-Myanmar-Thailand-Laos railway, India-Myanmar-Thailand-Cambodia railway, India-Myanmar-Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam railway, India-Myanmar-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore railway, Tinsukia-Myitkyina railway, Imphal-Kalaymyo railway, Aizawl-Wuntho railway, Aizawl-Kalaymyo railway and Aizawl-Kyauktaw-Sittwe railway.

Table 2: Ongoing Railway Projects in NER.

Name of the project	Length in kms	Anticipated cost (□ in crore)	Expenditure upto 31.3.2011 (□ in crore)
Agartala - Sabroom	110	1,141.75	227.98
Teteliya - Byrnihat	21.50	384.04	81.04
Bhairabi - Sairang	51.38	619.34	20.68
Dimapur - Kohima	88	850.00	12.64
Dudhnoi - Mendipathar	19.75	120.00	56.07
Harmuti - Naharlagun	20	254.29	167.29
Jiribam - Tupul - Imphal	125	3,058.85	505.70
New Maynaguri -Jogighopa	260	1,497.74	748.85

Sivok - Rangpo	44.4	1,339.50	121.42
Byrnihat - Shillong	108.4	4,083.02	0.81
Murkongselek - Pasighat	30.62	30.62	165.82

Sources: <http://www.indianrailways.gov.in>

3) Airways: NER's airway service is also under upgradation. So far, there is one international airport at Guwahati, Assam, called Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport. The airport is planned to be upgraded by Airports Authority of India (AAI) which would connect NER with South-east Asia. Moreover, there are also domestic airports in Assam, namely at Tezpur, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and North Lakhimpur. More recently, the Pakyong Airport in Sikkim was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018. In Mizoram, there is an airport at Lengpui. Nagaland has one airport at Dimapur. Umroi Airport in Shillong is operational whereas the Baljek Airport is under construction in Meghalaya. Manipur is likewise domestically connected with an airport at Imphal. In Arunachal Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had recently inaugurated the Tezu Airport in February, 2019.

III. ADVANTAGES

- 1) Better transport facilities would tend to expedite the process of trade, along with import and export of goods.
- 2) Migration of skilled workers from remote hinterland to industrial sectors. NER has an average literacy rate of 78.6% which makes us to believe that existence of uneducated and inefficient labour is not a case in NER.
- 3) Tourism sector will get a major boost in NER of India.
- 4) It will bolster private investment.

IV. CHALLENGES

- 1) Insurgency plays a prime role in delaying the infrastructure projects since better connectivity with enhanced security, will terminate their separatist ambitions.
- 2) Land Acquisition from tribal people is a major challenge to infrastructure since the majority of the tribes are of view that the influx of outsiders will affect their culture.
- 3) Drug Trafficking through the border states like Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, is giving a resistance to the development of NER.
- 4) Illegal Immigration is still a hindrance to the region.

V. CONCLUSION

The importance of the Look East Policy finds expression in the fact that since its inauguration back in 1991, the policy became a torch-bearer of India's outlook to its neighbours in the South-east Asia, as well as East Asia. The policy got successive impetus from Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and more recently by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee once said in his speech "India and ASEAN: Shared Perspectives" at Kuala Lumpur:

"Over the last few years, we in India have consciously focused on rejuvenation of our ties with the countries of ASEAN. This came to be known as our 'Look East Policy'. But even as we looked east, ASEAN moved west. The admission of new countries brought ASEAN literally to India's doors. From a maritime neighbour, ASEAN became our close neighbour with a land border of nearly 1,600 kms. This has added a new dimension to India-ASEAN relations."

The policy serves with many advantages to India, foremost being mutual economic co-operation with ASEAN, with NER as a liaison. It, therefore, provides NER with much advantages for all-round economic growth. NER is rich in agricultural produce and with better connectivity, export of such goods can be made to South-east Asia. Apart from agricultural produce, NER could also supply Rubber and Bamboo. But the challenges could not also be undermined. The region has witnessed the menace of drug trafficking through the border states. So, as the roads are getting better, security should also be implemented so that unauthorized and illegal drug trafficking can be checked and halted. If not dealt properly, it might hamper the growth and development process of the region. In any ways, enthusiasm have surcharged the atmosphere of NER, for the region more recently did witness signs of development. No doubt, much has to be completed with the initiatives, we could only hope for a better future.

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Sauradeep Nath " Act East Policy and Connectivity in North East India" International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI), vol. 08, no. 10, 2019, pp. 18-21