



# global POLICY

GP-ORF Series

## Situating India's Northeast in the Bay of Bengal Regional Architecture

Editors

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and  
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WILEY





**SITUATING INDIA'S NORTHEAST  
IN THE BAY OF BENGAL  
REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE**

Edited by  
Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ambar Kumar Ghosh



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**Editing and Production:** Preeti Lourdes John

**Cover Design:** Rahil Miya Shaikh

**Layout:** Simijaison Designs

**ISBN:** 978-93-90494-23-1

**All images from Getty**

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**Citation:** Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ambar Kumar Ghosh, eds., *Situating India's Northeast in the Bay of Bengal Regional Architecture*, (New Delhi: ORF and Global Policy Journal, 2022).

*The editors acknowledge their debt to ORF intern Kaushiki Singh for editorial assistance.*

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>SECTION I: NORTHEAST AS A CONNECTING SPACE .....</b>	<b>9</b>
When Practice Meets Policy: How Border Regions are Localising India's Neighbourhood Policy by <i>Nimmi Kurian</i> .....	10
The Importance of India's Northeast: A Subregional Perspective by <i>C. Joshua Thomas and Haans J. Freddy</i> .....	17
India's Eastward Engagements: From Look East to Act East by <i>Durga Prasad Chhetri</i> .....	25
<b>SECTION II: CONNECTIVITY FOR PROSPERITY.....</b>	<b>31</b>
The Politics of Connectivity in the Northeast: Regional, National and Local Dimensions by <i>Udayan Das</i> .....	32
Exploring the Cultural Proximity Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia: The Manipur Experience by <i>Vijaylakshmi Brara</i> .....	39
The Importance of the Bay of Bengal for India's Northeast Region by <i>Sohini Bose and Pratnashree Basu</i> .....	44
India-Japan Partnership in the Bay of Bengal: Renewed Focus on India's Northeast by <i>Madhuchanda Ghosh</i> .....	51
<b>SECTION III: DEVELOPMENT AGENDA.....</b>	<b>57</b>
The Idea of a Sustained Northeast in India's Transregional Economic Architecture by <i>Rakhee Bhattacharya</i> .....	58
Economic Cooperation via Northeast India: Evolution through Infrastructure and Sustainable Development by <i>Nilanjan Ghosh, Soumya Bhowmick, and Roshan Saha</i> .....	65
Strengthening Connectivity in India's Northeast: The JICA Experience by <i>Saito Mitsunori</i> .....	75
Trade And Developmental Opportunities in India's Northeast: A Tripura-Centric View by <i>Indraneel Bhowmik</i> .....	82
<b>SECTION IV: SECURITY CONUNDRUM.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Three Narratives of Connectivity, Development, and Insurgency in Northeast India: Analysis and Implications by <i>Alex Waterman</i> .....	93
Multilateral Connectivity and Importance of the Northeast in BIMSTEC: A Security Dimension by <i>Pahi Saikia</i> .....	100
India's Northeast: The Challenge of a Volatile Neighbourhood by <i>Subir Bhaumik</i> .....	108
Changing Security Dynamics in Northeast augurs well for BIMSTEC by <i>Niranjan Sahoo</i> .....	116
<b>ABOUT THE EDITORS AND AUTHORS .....</b>	<b>121</b>



# Introduction

The imperatives of development, connectivity, and security are inextricably linked in the modern world. On the one hand, the increasing need for greater industrial growth and socioeconomic development resonates with people's aspirations for a better life. In a globalised world, this means greater regional interactions and interconnectedness through infrastructural, sociocultural, and emerging digital connectivity. On the other hand, the process of building connectivity networks and ensuring the deliverables of development is only feasible when threats of violence, conflicts and insecurity are effectively managed. Therefore, for a geographical and political space to prosper, a secured and well-connected architecture is necessary for developmental priorities to take shape. One such region where concerns of security has vitiated the prospects of connectivity and development is India's Northeast. In the contemporary geopolitical scenario in the Bay of Bengal region, it is becoming increasingly important for India to assume a more vibrant role. This requires engagement at several levels with the neighbourhood and makes connecting with East and Southeast Asian countries crucial. The need to strengthen regional cooperation is now being understood and acknowledged at the political, diplomatic, and socioeconomic levels.

The Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a multilateral institution in South and Southeast Asia, can constructively

contribute to the efforts being made to enhance physical, economic, and people-to-people links. The Bay of Bengal, at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, is India's geostrategic gateway into the wider waters. Given the Indo-Pacific's increasing relevance as a geographical space and geostrategic and economic epicentre, India has a vision for the region. India advocates for a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific with ASEAN centrality (1), based upon respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue, and adhering to international rules and laws (2). The Indo-Pacific is perceived as a natural geographical region that hosts "a vast array of global opportunities and challenges" (3). India has also launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative to focus on seven central pillars conceived around maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building and resource sharing, disaster risk reduction and management, science, technology and academic cooperation, and trade connectivity and maritime transport (4).

In this context, given its locational, historical, and sociocultural uniqueness, India's Northeast region has the potential to be the centre of the country's connectivity outreach and commercial endeavours in the Bay of Bengal region. Such interconnectedness is with India's South Asian neighbours and Southeast and East Asian countries within the larger Indo-Pacific region. As an increasingly significant partner in the region, Japan has a

long experience of investing in connectivity projects, especially in the Northeast.

Against this backdrop, this volume aims to capture the potential of the Northeast region as a crucial connecting space that can enhance India's cross-border diplomatic, infrastructural, and commercial interactions within the Bay of Bengal regional architecture by balancing it with the Northeast's own developmental priorities and security concerns. The volume also intends to explore the extent of Japan's engagement in infrastructural development in this region, given the country's wide experience in the field of connectivity. Japan's lead on this pillar of a free and open Indo-Pacific may prove to be a great fillip for connectivity initiatives in the region in future.

### Importance of the Northeast

India's Northeast is an extremely crucial space with a multidimensional significance. The region consists of eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. It marks the country's easternmost border, and shares 5,812-km of international boundaries with Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The Northeast is landlocked and is connected with the rest of India by the Siliguri Corridor in North Bengal, a narrow strip of land (22 km) that is also called the 'Chicken's Neck', which is flanked by the Nepal and Bangladesh on either side (5).

Another important dimension of the region is its variegated sociocultural diversity. The Northeast's eight states have a complex ethnic diversity and sociocultural ethos, giving this space a unique demographic character. The region is inhabited by several tribal groups with distinctive culture and economic

idiosyncrasies, speaking around 220 languages (6). Such sociocultural attributes are in many ways different from other parts of India. As such, the Northeast has been long isolated as a peripheral unit and India's national political establishment has been accused of marginalising the aspirations, identity, and development of the region. Indeed, the Northeast's geographical location at India's 'periphery', the region's unique sociocultural ethos and demographic composition, and inadequate infrastructure development and economic growth have historically positioned it at the margins of India's mainstream political imagination of growth, development, and welfare. The developmental neglect has further deepened by the festering security concerns emanating from political violence, ethnic conflicts, insurgency movements, and the apprehensions of continuous undocumented cross-border migration. Moreover, being surrounded by international borders adds to the Northeast's security concerns.

During the colonial era, the British intended to secure the region and its culture from intruding 'outsiders', and so "demarcated much of the region as 'backward tracts', 'excluded areas', and 'partially excluded areas'," in which the native people were permitted to manage their own affairs in varying degrees (7). Under the 1873 Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, an 'inner line' was drawn through the Northeast region and outsiders, especially those with commercial interests, were prohibited without a permit (8). This policy found continuity in the post-independence period and the inner line system has been considered instrumental, to some extent, in safeguarding the cultural and demographic sanctity of this diverse and sensitive region. Importantly, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution "mandated the formation of Autonomous District Councils in which,



among others, tribal customary laws were given legitimacy (9).” However, protectionist legislation, difficult terrain, and political apathy towards the Northeast long hindered the prospects of industrialisation, boosting infrastructure and communication networks, generating employment opportunities, and the adequate representation of the people’s socioeconomic aspirations.

### The Northeast as a Connecting Space

Given the geographical and cultural proximity with India’s eastern neighbours in the Bay of Bengal region, the Northeast states have served as a conduit for mainland India’s interaction with these countries. Not only is the Northeast important for India’s cross-border connectivity, but cross-border interactions are crucial as Indian mainland’s connectivity with some states in the Northeast can be strengthened through cooperation with neighbours such as Bangladesh (10). For instance, Manipur and Assam have acted as a connecting bridge between India and Southeast Asia. India has a long history with Southeast Asia that goes back to the third century. History is testimony to the fact that “Indian ideas, artistic styles, and modes of political organisation” have over the centuries assimilated with the local culture of Southeast Asian countries. (11). In the post-colonial period, India’s diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries manifested this closeness, with the latter supporting India’s proposed five principles of peaceful co-existence in the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia (1955) (12). In the subsequent years during the Cold War, India’s “engagement with the Southeast Asian countries was gradually replaced by periods of isolation as the clash of ideologies and superpower dynamics kept the geographically contiguous

regions on opposite sides of the Cold War divide (13).” It is only after the Cold War, in a changed geopolitical context and in a period of accelerating globalisation, that India’s ties with Southeast Asia were rekindled and found its vivid manifestation in India’s Look East policy. This endeavour placed the Northeast at the centre of India’s regional connectivity. India’s prioritisation of its ties with Southeast and East Asia was further consolidated through the Act East policy (14). This renewed policy is touted as “country’s key outreach programmes for enhancing its interaction with the littoral states of the Bay region and the wider Indo-Pacific (15).” The Act East policy aims to foster deeper regional interactions with Southeast Asia in the three crucial domains—commerce, culture, and connectivity (16).

The Indian government’s priority has been to re-establish links with Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand through infrastructural, economic, and people-to-people connectivity, with the Northeast as the connecting bridge. In this regard, the government has launched the ‘Look East, Link West’ policy to connect India with global value chains across the Indo-Pacific region. India’s Vision 2020 initiative has focused on three key projects in the Northeast—the Kaladan Multimodal project; building India-Myanmar rail links; and the Trilateral Highway project between India, Thailand, and Myanmar. India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy also aims to strengthen regional interaction with the country’s eastern neighbours, for which the Northeast’s role is extremely crucial. Projects to enhance India’s connectivity in the region are already underway. For instance, “road connectivity has taken place with Myanmar (from Moreh on the Manipur border to Tamu, lying right across in Myanmar, to Kalewa, 160 km south), as well as trade points are established, by creating integrated checkposts

(ICPs) at Moreh-Tamu and at Zowkhathar, on the Mizoram border with Myanmar, and Rhi on the other side.” India-Bangladesh cross-border connectivity initiatives includes railway connectivity across inter-country nodes as well as important waterway routes that is used by both countries. There are also ICPs on land borders between the two countries and Bangladesh permits its Mongla and Chattogram (earlier called Chittagong) ports to be utilised for sending Indian goods to the Northeast region (17). Several other major projects to strengthen regional connectivity have the Northeast at the core, including the Bangladesh-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (18), the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement, joint energy projects, and a pipeline for hydrocarbon supply from West Bengal to Bangladesh. The North Eastern Council, the nodal agency for the region's economic and social development, is also funding several infrastructural projects, including airports, roads, and railway networks (19).

### About the Volume

However, despite multiple initiatives, many challenges continue to inhibit the process of developing the Northeast as a hub of regional connectivity. It is extremely crucial that the Northeast is not treated merely as a transit point for human and commercial traffic for India's regional connectivity initiatives. The region must be perceived as a distinctive space with its unique socioeconomic priorities, cultural insecurities, developmental aspirations, and identarian demands. This compendium takes a holistic view of the Northeast's potential as a crucial connecting space for India's cross-border interactions in the Bay of Bengal regional architecture. It

delves into three crucial aspects—connectivity potential, developmental needs, and the security conundrum—with a focus on the unique nature of the demographic and cultural design of the region.

The 15 essays in this volume provide important perspectives on what impede India's regional developmental and connectivity initiatives in the Northeast within the Bay of Bengal region, and how these challenges can be overcome amid persisting security concerns. The first section introduces the nature of the Northeast as a connecting space with its unique history and character, such that it can provide an impetus to India's transnational regional interactions with East and Southeast Asia. Nimmi Kurian delves into how the nature of the Northeast's border region is localising India's policy of regional interactions with the neighbouring countries. C. Joshua Thomas and Haans J. Freddy highlight the importance of the Northeast as a connecting space to further India's subregional interactions within the Bay of Bengal region. In his article, Durga Prasad Chettri explores India's transnational engagements with the East with the Northeast in focus, and its evolution from Look East to Act East.

The second section explores the potential of India's physical and maritime connectivity within the Bay of Bengal regional framework with the Northeast as the linking bridge. Udayan Das delves on what explains the continued preponderance of the security imaginations of the Northeast that obfuscates the imaginations of connectivity and development in the region. Vijaylakshmi Brara touches on the importance of the unique cultural proximity between Manipur and the Southeast Asian countries, and how

this can help Indian regional connectivity initiatives. In their essay, Sohini Bose and Pratinashree Basu discuss the potential of inland waterways and maritime connectivity routes that run through and are near the Bay of Bengal region to excavate the prospects of India's maritime connectivity in the region. Finally, Madhuchanda Ghosh delineates the importance and the potential areas of India-Japan partnership in the Bay of Bengal with a special focus on India's Northeast.

The third section focuses on developmental aspects in the Northeast and beyond, including India's potential for enhancing regional trade and commercial endeavours in Southeast Asia. In her article, Rakhee Bhattacharya explores the idea of the Northeast using centralising trans-regionality as grounding term in India's ongoing transnational economic architecture while congregating the people's interests in focus. Nilanjan Ghosh, Soumya Bhowmick, and Roshan Saha focus on the trade links between the Northeast and BIMSTEC, while also delineating the importance of economic corridors to strengthen the agglomerative forces and ancillary industries that are imperative for the region's development into an economic core. Saito Mitsunori examines Japan's cooperative role in the Northeast through the Japan International Cooperation Agency. The last article in the section by Indraneel Bhowmick evaluates the trade and developmental opportunities in the Northeast,

with Tripura in focus.

The last section assesses the Northeast's long-standing security conundrum that has enfeebled the prospects of connectivity and development in the region. Alex Waterman provides an important analytical framework with the three narratives of connectivity, development, and insurgency in the Northeast, and delves into its implications. Pahi Saikia highlights the prospects of multilateral connectivity and the centrality of the Northeast in the context of BIMSTEC, with the region's security dimension as the focus. In his article, Subir Bhawmick discusses the security challenges in the Northeast that emanate from a volatile eastern neighbourhood. Finally, Niranjana Sahoo explores the security challenges that have historically persisted in India's Northeast and argues that the relative improvement in the region's security situation makes it conducive to promote India's regional connectivity and development endeavours.

Given the wide range of insightful contributions contained within this compendium, it is our hope it will encourage an enriching interaction among academics, policymakers and experts on the Northeast and its potential to turn into a hub for India's regional connectivity in the Bay of Bengal.

– *Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and  
Ambar Kumar Ghosh*

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SECTION I  
**Northeast as a  
Connecting Space**

# WHEN PRACTICE MEETS POLICY

## How Border Regions are Localising India's Neighbourhood Policy

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NIMMI KURIAN

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Northeast India has been finding a prominent place in India's foreign policy imagination, gaining increasing recognition in discourses on prosperity and growth. It is a feel-good narrative that projects a straightforward neoliberal vision of borders as bridges. The institutional landscape of India's diplomacy in subregional Asia has been transforming in interesting ways to acquire a level of diversity and complexity. Recent decades have seen a deepening of this idea by positioning the Northeast as a gateway to the wider Asian neighbourhood through initiatives such as the Neighbourhood First policy, the Act East policy, the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Mekong Ganga Economic Cooperation, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement.

But at the heart of this cosmopolitan narrative of transforming subregional economic geographies stands an odd paradox. Despite the liberal economic narrative of projecting Northeast India as a gateway, the subnational

policy actor has virtually remained in the shadows in India's neighbourhood policy. This incongruity can be traced to the overriding focus on the role of the federal government in setting the pace and scale of India's engagement with the region. The centralising impulse has gone on to produce a set of hierarchies that have problematic implications for federal-local dynamics. For instance, it is New Delhi that has regularly hosted BIMSTEC's working groups on subregional governance issues such as disaster management, customs cooperation, and the regulation of passenger and cargo vehicular traffic (1). A focus on only the formal, national scale is clearly inadequate to understand the drivers of cross-border functional and institutional interdependence (2). By privileging top-down, formal, state-led, inter-governmental processes, Indian diplomacy has ended up overlooking a range of practices at the border regions that are fundamentally reshaping India's engagement with its neighbourhood from below.

In this context, this essay will engage with the puzzle as to why official narratives that project Northeast India as a gateway to the

region fail to pay adequate attention to how border regions are reworking the notion of the neighbourhood from below. Having the federal government determine the extent of India's engagement with the region risks a misalignment of interests between the Centre and the border states on the key questions of benefit sharing, risk allocation and trade-offs. This essay argues that recognising the Northeast as a federal frontier can open possibilities to rescale India's foreign policy and make it more responsive to both domestic and subregional developmental priorities. Inverting the policy gaze also has the potential to incorporate a rich—and hitherto untapped—corpus of domain and field knowledge that national-level policymakers have no means of acquiring on their own.

### Localising the Neighbourhood Policy

Mainstream research and policy need to take sharper notice of a growing, often subterranean, engagement by India's border states with the neighbourhood. There are three reasons why it should begin to do so. First, there is growing evidence that border regions are beginning to effectively engage the federal government to deepen subregional integration processes. Second, on occasion, they bypass the federal level and directly forge cross-border issue-based linkages. Third, a longer-term effect of these processes will be the capacity to socialise national policymakers into seeking subregional problem-solving models as the preferred norm than the exception.

There is growing evidence that bottom-up market-driven processes of economic integration are resulting in the rise of a new set of border stakeholders with strong incentives in subregional integration. For instance,

states in the Northeast have shown a growing capacity to lobby the Centre for the resumption of border trade points with neighbouring countries (3). A strong impetus for the agreement between India and Bangladesh in 2019 to commence trade on the Brahmaputra was provided by Assam's interest in tapping increased river trade opportunities within the region. Similarly, India and Bhutan's decision to add seven additional border points in 2021 is an acknowledgement of long-standing demands by local stakeholders on both sides of the border. Collective lobbying efforts by traders and export associations in Assam and Bhutan had, for instance, successfully led to Jogighopa in Assam being declared as a port of call in 2020 (4). These instances also reveal the critical bridging role that the border actor can play in facilitating coordination among federal, state, and regional agencies. This can be seen in the lead Assam took in holding stakeholder meetings between ministries and regulatory bodies with Bangladesh. Assam also hosted the first-ever international Northeast Buyer Seller Meet in March 2021, bringing together entrepreneurs from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal in meetings organised by the States Division of India's Ministry of External Affairs in association with the Indian Chamber of Commerce. Such measures can go a long way to reorient India's neighbourhood policy to reflect subnational economic imperatives. If institutionalised, this is a move with the potential to transform economic geographies by opening economic opportunities for marginalised communities across hinterland South Asia (5). In particular, expanded river trade routes could make the small producer a direct beneficiary of the Act East policy (6).

### Role of Subnational Policy Innovation

Emerging trends and patterns also underline the capacity of border stakeholders to bypass

the federal level to produce innovative cross-border problem-solving solutions. The construction of the 726 MW Palatana gas power project in southern Tripura in 2015 is a case in point and will be bookmarked as one of the earliest instances of a subregional approach to problem solving. Given the challenges in transporting heavy equipment to Tripura due to the difficult terrain, Bangladesh allowed the transshipment of heavy turbines and machinery through its territory, a critical factor in the successful completion of the project. Direct links between local authorities on both sides also played a role in expediting the export of surplus power from Tripura to Bangladesh. Tripura's power minister and the Bangladesh minister of state for power at that time worked together to finalise power tariffs for the transmission of power from Tripura to Bangladesh in 2016.

There are also several other successful instances of diversified sectoral cross-border interactions. Manipur and Myanmar's Sagaing Division cooperated to facilitate a private sector-led health sector initiative in 2013 (7). Manipur's Shija Hospitals and Research Institute led a team of doctors under its Mission Myanmar Project at the invitation of the Myanmar government to conduct corrective surgeries in Monywa, Sagaing (8). Although ostensibly a private sector-led initiative, the project saw robust collaboration between Manipur and Sagaing, the respective central government departments as well as the direct interest taken by the chief ministers of Sagaing and Mandalay in expediting modalities.

Similarly, cross-border district-to-district coordination is adding an additional institutional layer to India's regional engagement. District officials from Tripura and Mizoram have held cross-border meetings with their counterparts in Bangladesh

to discuss ways to step up interagency coordination on a whole host of border security issues, including smuggling, human trafficking, and migration.

The locational advantage of border states as primary points of contact with the neighbourhood can also help plug transboundary governance gaps (9). Border regions can effectively leverage location to steer sectoral regional dialogues on cross-border trade, transport, and health. The pandemic has clearly underlined the need for moving towards more localised metrics in assessing the disease preparedness of regions and highlighted the shortcomings in benchmarking tools such as the Global Health Security Index. South Asia has been conspicuously absent from the several multisectoral disease research networks that have made considerable headway in capacity building in various parts of the world (10). For instance, the Connecting Organisations for Regional Disease Surveillance brings together six regional networks spread across 28 countries of Asia, Africa, West Asia, and Europe to combat outbreaks more effectively, but South Asia is not part of the network. Identifying cross-border sites for subregional cooperation in epidemiological data collection across South Asia can not only result in more accurate disease burden estimates but also help plug implementation gaps and shortcomings of top-down, national approaches. There are interesting takeaways from cross-border disease surveillance networks around the world in this regard. For instance, the Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance Cooperation (MBDS) established in 1999 has institutionalised a strong focus on border health and public capacity building within the region. Steered by health ministers from member countries, the MBDS has 25 designated cross-border sites with a strong accent on local cross-border coordination.



Similarly, the East Africa Public Health Laboratory Networking Project provides a border laboratory network to cater to vulnerable populations in the border areas of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda.

What is often missed in mainstream accounts is the capacity of subnational policy innovators to build habits of cooperation within the neighbourhood in key social and developmental sectors. Subnational cross-border links are scripting impressive successive stories from below in addressing collective action problems. For instance, there are interesting takeaways for flood risk governance from the Saralbhanga, a tributary of the Brahmaputra that flows from Bhutan to India. In 2019, villages on both sides of the border put in place an early warning system using social media to share real-time flood alerts. The decentralised design has enabled a smoother flow of information by bypassing bureaucratic bottlenecks. For instance, intergovernmental flood warning information typically takes a circuitous bureaucratic route to reach villages on the India-Bhutan border. It is relayed from Gelephu in Bhutan to the capital Thimphu to New Delhi then sent to Guwahati, before reaching the district headquarters in Kokrajhar. It will only then be communicated to the villages along the border by which time it would often prove to be of little use to riverbank communities (11). Subnational policy innovation can nudge policy towards a ‘first mile’ approach that brings border communities to the centre of the design process instead of a ‘last mile’ approach that places frontline communities at the end of disaster risk reduction strategies. These emerging communities of practice can result in a less deterministic imagination of the neighbourhood, one that recognises how different scales tend to produce different meanings of the region.

## Northeast India as a Federal Frontier

The cumulative impact of these processes point to a recognition of the border region as “policy-makers in their own right, influencing policy from ‘inside’ (12).” What is most striking about India’s evolving subnational diplomacy is the sheer diversity of transborder exchanges being steered by border states in terms of its nature (formal and informal); activities (social, economic, cultural, political); duration (sustained and episodic); and actors (public and private). These processes constitute subterranean subregionalism(s), a form of integration that mainstream research and policy have so far not adequately engaged with. What is also clear is that a practice-based template can help incorporate a rich and hitherto untapped corpus of domain and field knowledge that national-level policymakers have no means of acquiring on their own. Inverting the policy gaze also “moves us beyond profitless debates as to who are and who are not significant actors in world politics (13)”. Illustrative examples from border regions across the world also offer interesting instances where the subnational level has led when federal policy has lagged (14). An illustrative example is the International Council for Local Environmental Initiative (ICLEI), which connects over 2,500 local and regional governments in a global network of stakeholders. Initiatives such as the ICLEI’s Cities for Climate Protection programme (CCP) and the International Solar Cities Initiative are examples of intermunicipal sectoral networks that span across the world. For instance, the CCP brings together more than 650 municipal governments from 30 countries (15). Networks such as these constitute geographies of innovation, given their capacity to jump scales and blur traditional jurisdictional boundaries.

As international engagement by border states grows, understanding the incentives and preferences of local political elites and how bargains are struck will become more crucial for Indian foreign policy. These multi-scalar competitive bargaining processes alert us to the fact that elite consensus can neither be taken for granted nor is it monolithic. Understanding subnational subjectivities will be critical since the credibility and success of India's neighbourhood policy need to be seen not just from the eyes of the federal government but also from the perspective of its multiple border stakeholders. Policy red flags such as Bihar's demand for an equity stake in power projects being executed by India in Bhutan or the Teesta River dispute between India and Bangladesh arising out of the deadlock between the Centre and West Bengal bring out the inadequacy of existing institutional arrangements to negotiate such conflicts (16).

It is thus clear that India's neighbourhood policy cannot limit itself to being a top-down process and must bring "a new set of lenses through which...we understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting (17)." The key takeaway from these trends and patterns is that the success of subnational economic diplomacy will be a highly contingent one and will depend on the interplay of several factors. Critical among these will be the capacity to institutionalise power-sharing norms among federal and state policy nodes as well as the ability to collectively tackle regulatory and procedural bottlenecks within the subregion. Its potential strength will also lie in the capacity to anticipate and address conflicts among key institutional actors on the crucial ideational and operational objectives. There are interesting takeaways from the manner in which Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) policymakers have proactively promoted network arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Knowledge Network on Forest Law Enforcement and Governance and the ASEAN Regional Knowledge Network on Forests and Climate Change as critical enforcement and compliance policy tools (18). This is also similar to measures by Brazil's federal government to institutionalise subnational international relations, including a formal recognition of 'federative diplomacy' within the foreign ministry and the setting up of a Federative Relations Advisory Board in 1997 to enhance interagency coordination between federal and subnational scales (19). What these instances underscore is that policy need not always dictate practice; instead, policy and practice can co-evolve into an institutionalised two-way flow of communication. Institutionalising consultations with a new set of border stakeholders—such as legislative bodies both at the central and state levels, media, and civil society organisations—can go a long way in ensuring that these actors become informed interlocutors in shaping India's evolving neighbourhood policy. Local subnational policy networks, both formal and informal, can work with—and not necessarily at cross-purposes—the Centre in shaping the course of India's regional interactions.

While this is not an attempt to read a larger-than-life role for the subnational actor, it is a cue to acknowledge that it is the border stakeholder who has the highest stakes in producing imaginative counterpoints to securitised regional development agendas. That said, the subnational is neither a homogeneous space nor is the subnational–desecuritisation link a given (20). For instance, Arunachal Pradesh's strong stakes in the securitisation discourse on the Brahmaputra results in a powerful alignment between federal and state interests.

Subnational water discourses can themselves have centralising features, as is evident in the dire warning issued by the Arunachal Pradesh chief minister in 2020 that opposition to the state government's decision to resume dam-building projects on the Brahmaputra will be seen as "anti-national" (21). The subnational can also conceal hierarchies of its own as can be seen in Assam's recurring concern about the lack of consultation with regards to upstream hydropower projects on the Brahmaputra, be it in Arunachal Pradesh or China. The inability of the state government to directly take up the issue with China was underlined by the Assam water resources minister in 2014. In a memorandum submitted to convey its concerns, the Assam government urged the federal government 'to ensure that the flow of water in the river Brahmaputra is not altered in any manner detrimental to Assam' (22).

Admittedly, India's neighbourhood policy has opened a valuable space for border states to become active partners in framing

the terms of the country's engagement with its neighbourhood. But this potential institutional innovation in Indian foreign policy is neither guaranteed nor infallible. If it is to succeed, leveraging the location of border states must go hand-in-hand with the federalisation of India's foreign policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's idea of cooperative federalism calls for a 'new partnership' between the Centre and the states. But for this 'new partnership' to be effective, it must have robust subnational stakeholders with a capacity to shape subregional orders. Shining a light on the agency that border actors wield in shaping the course of Asian subnational interactions can help fill a critical gap in India's regional imaginary. If engaged well, it can open up possibilities for rescaling India's foreign policymaking, from a national, formal, and top-down process towards building capacities at multiple policy scales. This is clearly a road less travelled for Indian diplomacy and its institutional journey is likely to have several forks and bends as it unfolds.

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIA'S NORTHEAST

## A Subregional Perspective

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**C. JOSHUA THOMAS AND HAANS J. FREDDY**  
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The strategic importance of any region in a country has significance in terms of its foreign policy decisions. Northeast India borders four countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China—and has been considered as a very sensitive region in India in strategic, political, economic, and cultural terms (1) India's geographic positioning and size makes it a natural connector to its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Being aware of this factor that could help in enhancing its connectivity through land and sea, New Delhi began to reinvigorate the idea of reconnecting with its neighbourhood through different subregional initiatives (mostly in the 1990s). However, subregional connectivity initiatives began to take concrete shape in the 2000s through bilateral, trilateral, and other efforts that sought to expand cross-border transport infrastructure. The 'Neighbourhood First policy', 'Look East policy' (now known as the Act East policy) have received a strong impetus to strengthen subregional connectivity and as an alternative to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. India's initial focus on its immediate neighbourhood (South Asia) coupled with the stagnated South

Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) limited its scope in terms of its economic ambitions as well as contributing towards the role of governance in the region. However, India soon began experimenting with the idea of subregions and the concept of extended neighbourhood.

Although the concepts of immediate and extended neighbourhoods have been seen as two entities, they have tended to reflect a continuum of the traditional mindset with India's immediate neighbourhood and the extended neighbourhood pointing towards those nations that are beyond the South Asian region. These arrangements have brought those countries within the SAARC and beyond into India's subregional framework. For instance, while Myanmar is outside the SAARC, it comes under subregional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. In this context, India's foreign policy can be understood both through the immediate and extended neighbourhood and through the subregional approaches (2).

This essay seeks to answer a few key questions: How is the Northeast significant in terms of India's foreign policy? In what ways have the subregional initiatives contributed towards its immediate and extended neighbourhood policy? How can the BIMSTEC serve India's ambitions and interests in the region through the Northeast?

### Northeast in India's Foreign Policy

In general, countries consider history, geography, the political imperative, socio-cultural milieu, the perceptions of the ruling elite in terms of national interests, and the distribution of power at the regional and international levels as significant factors in their foreign policy. Despite these factors influencing the foreign policymaking of any nation, foreign policy formulation in the context of border regions have received little attention in academic circles. While states may fail to address in their foreign policy decisions those issues that may have a direct bearing on the needs and concerns of a specific region, this may necessitate the restructuring of foreign policy and national interest to accommodate and be more sensitive towards the aspirations and needs of a particular region.

Northeast India is one such region that India's foreign policy considerations have neglected, particularly in terms of its neighbourhood policy. At best, the Northeast appears as a footnote or an appendix in the security considerations that affect foreign policy decisions (3). Northeast India suffers from an "acute policy void". This in part can be explained by its landlocked nature, its peripheral status, and the problems that afflict the region, which is seen by New Delhi as a law-and-order problem. For instance, it was only over four decades after its origination that the Centre began to recognise the uniqueness of the

Naga problem, and it is now seen as a political issue. It is only in the 1990s and after India reorganised its borders following Partition in 1947 that the idea of geopolitical imaginaries began to be a significant factor in the politics of Northeast. Such geopolitical imaginations were a result of new policy initiatives that sought to remove the limitations posed by the present geography of the Northeast and extend beyond its borders to South and Southeast Asian countries through frontline states such as Myanmar and Bangladesh. This is termed as the extended Northeast (4).

In the 'North Eastern Region Vision 2020' document prepared by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER), the end of the geographical border of the Northeast is identified as the beginning of Southeast Asia. It is thus thought that the region should build bridges—diplomatic and infrastructural—with countries in South and Southeast Asia. This is coupled with the fact that China is an economic behemoth in the region, which should be considered in India's economic and foreign policies (5). The Northeast region shares many cultural and natural affinities with countries in Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, China, and Bangladesh. It also shares over 96 percent of its borders with countries in the neighbourhood, making it significant in the context of India's foreign policy (6). Northeast India is thus geostrategically positioned, meeting South, East and Southeast Asia.

Globalisation, the end of the Cold War, and the formation of new identities, which brought new avenues of transborder interactions, saw a shift in narrative to one dominated by the realist tradition of geopolitics to geoeconomics. This came with liberalism, which paved the way for the internationalisation of the local economy. Such developments necessitated states to reorient their foreign policy decisions

to be on par with the global economy. It is in this context that the Look East policy (now Act East) emerged as a response to India's needs in terms of its influence in South and Southeast Asia. The Look East policy initiated new opportunities and identified potential areas that could be used to bridge historical and civilisational linkages, and emerged as a gateway to Southeast Asia (7). The Look East policy has had many consequences for the Northeast, particularly from the neoliberal perspective in that it enabled cross-border or interstate commerce, trade, and cooperation even in the anarchical international system that has the ability to change the terms of engagement by developing interdependence between nation-states (8).

### **BIMSTEC and the Northeast**

BIMSTEC is a crucial link between South and Southeast Asian states, especially since the economic linkages created through the 1976 Bangkok Agreement (which include Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka, and South Korea) failed to bring any significant results in terms of inter-regional trade.

The first phase of the Look East policy carried with it a great idealism that it could break the economic stagnation befalling South Asia. The second phase evaluated the growing Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia and the impacts of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. However, in 1997, it was through the diligent efforts of Thailand that a new regional grouping called BIMSTEC was formed to be a hub for trade and connectivity between South and Southeast Asian states, and for engagement with countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam (CMLV) (9).

BIMSTEC seeks to fuse Thailand's Look West policy and India's Look East policy,

and connect the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and SAARC. In particular, this initiative seeks to straddle the oceanic space in the Bay of Bengal that will link India's east with South and Southeast Asian countries. This link for India appears through the Northeast to reach the East and far beyond (10). The BIMSTEC charter sets the initiative as a platform for sector-driven cooperation. The Northeast is a resource-rich region and has the potential for cooperation in key BIMSTEC areas, such as accelerating economic growth and social progress. Indeed, the Northeast has the potential to engage in three key areas of cooperation—culture, commerce, and connectivity (11).

Northeast India borders four countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal), thus making it a hub for regional cooperation. India has been viewing this region as having the potential to increase investments through transnational connectivity more particularly through Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. This region presents an unparalleled economic opportunity that can be realised if transportation, border infrastructure, e-commerce integration, and cross-border supply chains are exploited. Policymakers in New Delhi expect that exports from the country will grow and that more investments will flow where regional integration will propel global economic interdependence. In the context of the Northeast, regional integration is expected to bring positive development to the region and internationalise India's hinterland economy through cross-border and maritime engagement with countries in East and Southeast Asia (12).

India's development concerns in terms of the Northeast receive primacy with the BIMSTEC. Several trade routes that existed prior to the arrival of British connected India with South and Southeast Asian countries. These routes

suffered setbacks due to British imperial policy, Partition, and India's substitution economy that deprived the Northeast of its natural markets with countries in Southeast Asia. In the post-independence period, underdeveloped roads and poor transportation infrastructure facilities, lack of trade opportunities and limited industrialisation, and communication difficulties posed serious challenges for domestic and foreign investments that could have boosted the economy of the region. Formal bilateral trade began in 1994 through designated posts, from Moreh in Manipur to Tamu in Myanmar, and Zokhawthar in Mizoram to Rih in Myanmar. In 2003, the Northeast became an integral part of the Look East policy.

Following these developments, numerous avenues for cooperation with Myanmar have emerged. For instance, the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road could connect Mandalay with the Asian Highway. Assam and Manipur, with modern medical facilities, have the potential for medical tourism. These are dependent on connectivity of the Northeast with the markets in Southeast Asia. Although connectivity remains a challenge in the context of the Northeast, the Kaladan Multimodal Project and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal initiative have the potential to overcome the challenges that appear in terms of connectivity, and thereby allow development and prosperity in the region (13).

Connectivity thus remains the key priority for the BIMSTEC in terms of the Northeast and could help in the acceleration of long-term economic growth and development. India leads this connectivity initiative that seeks to focus on transport, trade, digital, and people-to-people interactions. In the first meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Transport and Communication in April 2001, emphasis was placed on transportation and cross-

border facilitation, multimodal transport and logistics, infrastructure development, aviation, maritime transport, human resource development, and communication linkages and networking. In this regard, a series of negotiations and consultations were made, and the Asian Development Bank conducted a study that identified 167 projects, 66 of which are priority areas (14).

Additionally, the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicles Agreement (drafted by India in 2018) for regulating passenger and cargo vehicle traffic, the Coastal Shipping Agreement (drafted by India in 2017), the establishment of the BIMSTEC Transport and Connectivity Working Group, and establishing high-speed internet connectivity and mobile phone connections at affordable prices were identified as priority areas that needed to be considered (15).

In the context of Northeast India, many multilateral connectivity projects are underway, such as India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway Project, the road connecting Dawki and Tamabil in the Indo-Bangladesh border through Meghalaya, and the construction of the Feni Bridge connecting India and Bangladesh for transporting goods from Chittagong and Kolkata (16).

While the overarching goals of the BIMSTEC seems to be regional integration, transformation and development of the Northeast states remain the key in the context of India's role in the regional grouping. The general assumption is that the BIMSTEC provides new avenues for economic opportunities.

For the Northeast, it is very important to be integrated in the BIMSTEC connectivity framework. Indeed, its future is closely interlinked with the activities



of the neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh (17). In this regard, some of the initiatives that were begun, such as the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade of 1972 and the Coastal Shipping Agreement 2015 signed between India and Bangladesh, allowed only cargo. However, to promote passenger movement through inland waterways between the two countries, a memorandum of understanding and standard operating procedure was signed in 2018, and cruise services between Kolkata and Dhaka began in 2019. National Waterway 2 (NW) remains the primary route between India and Bangladesh. In addition to these, floating terminals are maintained for facilitating cargo movement in Dhubri, Jogighopa, Tezpur, Silghat, Vishwanthghat, Neamati, Bogibeel, Dibrugarh, Panbari and Oriumghat. NW16 (Barak River), which connects Kolkata and Bangladesh, has emerged as an important protocol route between the two countries. NW16 covers Northeastern states such as Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Assam (18).

With Bangladesh permitting the use of the Chattogram and Mongla ports for transit of India's cargo through railways, roads, waterways, and multimodal transport in its territory, it is expected that trade, reduction in logistics costs, and development of the Northeast region will be promoted. Another eight transport routes connecting the Northeast with Bangladesh have been agreed and these routes permit the entry and exit through Dawki in Meghalaya, Agartala and Srimantpur in Tripura, and Sutarkandi in Assam (19). Bangladesh has also welcomed private investors to develop inland container terminals (ICT) to enable the ferrying of containers to ports and reduce shipment delays typically seen in road transport. The Rupayan Group and Summit Power have evinced interest in these initiatives and have planned to begin services shortly. Approvals

for two other ICTs have been granted by the Bangladesh government to the Meghna Group and A.K. Khan Group (20).

Nepal and India have recently included the usage of inland waterways into the Treaty of Transit where the evacuation of cargo will occur through three routes. Upon completion of the Jal Marg Vikas Project, it is expected that Nepal will benefit greatly in terms of cargo transportation. While the Kalughat Terminal connects Kolkata and Nepal for cargo transport, the Ghazipur Terminal is dedicated for liquified natural gas trade. India has been keen to utilise the inland waterways to connect with Myanmar. The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has taken the initiative to develop the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTPP) being implemented by the Ministry of External Affairs. This project is expected to provide an alternative connectivity route to the Northeast from the Kolkata/Haldia port. Phase I of the of the KMTPP has been completed. An IWAI vessel through this route has been transporting 1,000 tons of cargo from Bhutan to Bangladesh through the Brahmaputra. However, these initiatives come with a constant need for dredging and the absence of assured fairways required for navigation facilities and lack of IWT vessels poses significant challenges that have hindered the outcome of these initiatives. If these challenges are managed efficiently, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal region can be integrated and can emerge as the hinterland for the BIMSTEC (21).

### Northeast and CLMV States

In general, Southeast Asia has emerged as an important manufacturing hub with a gradual increase in the sourcing, manufacturing, and shipping of finished goods from these

markets. Within this region, the CLMV states have begun to receive greater attention from the global economic community. Given the geographical advantages of being near big economies such as China, CLMV states have the additional benefit of having access to large markets through economic partnership agreements. Some of the CLMV countries have already begun negotiating various partnership agreements with other major markets. For instance, Vietnam was part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, which became the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership upon the US's exit from the pact.

According to data, trade between the CLMV states has shown an upward trend, increasing from US\$4.47 billion in 2000 to US\$11.85 billion in 2014 (22). India's overall trade with ASEAN countries amounted to 16 percent but its foreign direct investment (FDI) with CLMV states, which is concentrated with Vietnam, amounted to US\$1 billion and includes over 90 projects in 2014 (23). This has the potential to expand in various sectors, such as agriculture, agro-processing, agro-chemicals, mining, oil and gas, energy, healthcare, information technology, skill-development and textiles.

During the third India-CLMV Enclave held in 2016, India's commerce minister emphasised the significance of connectivity with those states within the framework of the Initiative for Integration and Narrowing Intra-Asia Development Gap and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Process (24). Highlighting various avenues for economic cooperation, the minister said that capacity-building projects, software development and training, entrepreneurship development, English language-based skill enhancement, tele-medicine services, and quick-impact projects needed to be developed with

Cambodia initially and subsequently with the other three states. It was also stated that the Export-Import Bank of India would finance these projects on lines of credit (Sen, 2016). India must ensure that while pursuing its policies with CLMV states, it does not lose sight of the benefits that the Northeastern would accrue through these initiatives. It thus makes the Northeast an inescapable element of India's policies towards the CLMV states, and its developmental needs must be considered (25).

While these are significant in the context of the Northeast, there are serious efforts to operationalise the principal infrastructure links between India and CLMV states. The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade has said that the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is expected to serve as the lifeline for the Mekong and the Northeast (26). The 1,400-km highway will connect Southeast Asia through land routes and will promote business, education, health, tourism, and trade. In addition, during the Confederation of Indian Industry India-Cambodia Conclave 2020, a corpus amount of INR 554.65 crore for project development was set aside for promoting investments in CLMV states to assist in integrating domestic manufacturers and producers in regional value chains. Two-way trade in 2019-2020 was estimated to have increased from INR 8,134.85 crore to INR 104 billion (27). Further, it is expected that the Mekong River region and India would be connected through the KMTTP. To develop an export-oriented economy, the natural resource potential of both the CLMV states and Northeast India will have a significant role, as it has the potential of offering unique opportunities for comprehensive industrial growth and investment.

Laos, which has emerged as a power bank owing to its multiple hydro projects, is heavily dependent on hydro-generated power; the country exports power during rainy seasons and imports power during the dry season. Due to inefficient trading mechanisms, the country has been exporting power at a lower cost vis-à-vis its imports, thus requiring long-term planning that would enable stable power generation through dams and thermal powered plants. This will allow power transmission lines from Laos's Luang Namtha to Myanmar's national power grid. India could help Laos and Myanmar through these transmission lines. It would open opportunities for India to invest in the power sector and subsequently transfer power from Laos to the Northeast (28).

## Conclusion

Connectivity initiatives remain a high priority and there are numerous possible and prospective avenues for constructive cooperation between India and countries in the BIMSTEC and CLMV region.

The idea of an 'extended Northeast' seems to be pertinent as it is only through the Northeast that the BIMSTEC is an important asset in India's cooperative mechanisms for influence in the region. However, what is more important is for policymakers to break the Northeast's 'appendix status' in foreign policy, especially in the forward-looking initiatives.

Further, the idea of subregional cooperation is a good approach to study the challenges that make the Northeast a secondary player rather than putting it at the forefront. Not only will India benefit from such a study, actions based on it will bring dividends in development and prosperity and herald peace in the Northeast.

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# INDIA'S EASTWARD ENGAGEMENTS

## From Look East to Act East

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**DURGA PRASAD CHHETRI**  
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Southeast Asia is witnessing a complex interplay of collaboration, competition, and engagements driven by the rebalancing of power and security. One discerning trend that has emerged is India's increasing international engagements, particularly its strategic engagement with Southeast Asian countries. India once viewed the region through the prism of the Cold War, but since 1990, India has expanded trade links and forged greater engagement with the region (1) through its 'Look East' policy, perhaps New Delhi's most important foreign policy initiative in the immediate post-Cold War period (2).

The Look East policy (now known as the Act East policy) has three main interlinked dimensions: economic, institutional, and security. Economic calculations are vital if India is to be a credible player in Southeast Asian security architecture, especially since India's neighbours view its potential as a strategic partner due to its economic might. While the Look East policy was initially driven by economic calculations, security considerations have increasingly become dominant and may now be driving the

relationship. Indeed, India has recalibrated its foreign policies and started focusing on 'multi-alignment' instead of 'non-alignment'. Many believed that non-alignment had lost its meaning and appeared irrelevant in an international order with a sole superpower (3), and so India began to pay greater attention to East and Southeast Asia (4).

In the post-Cold War period, India adopted a more pragmatic interest-oriented foreign policy. (5) The demise of the old order provided India with greater flexibility to formulate changes to its traditional foreign policy (6), with an increased emphasis on economic interests, the abandonment of an idealistic approach symbolised by non-alignment, the primacy of national interest in such decision-making, and the rejection of reflexive anti-Americanism (7). As such, India has utilised bilateral, regional and subregional institutions to pursue relations with countries in its neighbourhood (8). Leveraging its location at the geostrategic nexus between South and Southeast Asia as well as its commanding position over the Indian Ocean, India is now seeking to structure such an

environment through an active policy of security engagement with the major powers, with key countries in Asia and Indian Ocean Island countries.

### The China Factor

Southeast Asia is the primary site of major power competition between India and China. Indeed, the rivalry between New Delhi and Beijing has shaped and expedited their involvement with other Southeast Asian countries. Post-Cold War, China has adopted the view that multilateral institutions are platforms to advance its interests and has come to embrace and even initiate such institutions. In 2003, China became the first non-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (9). In addition, Beijing has forged greater cooperation on economic, transnational, and non-traditional security issues. China's economic, political, and strategic engagement with India's immediate neighbours like Nepal, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean have expedited India's proactive engagement with the Southeast Asian countries. These factors, combined with China's growing influence in the region have inspired at least some in ASEAN to regard India as a useful partner to offset China (10).

Ongoing disputes and mistrust between China and India, coupled with Beijing's growing economic, political, and military global role, have also been important motivators behind New Delhi's engagement with Southeast Asia. The bilateral relationship involves territorial disputes and elements of rivalry for political dominance in Southeast Asia, as well as strong incentives for cooperation. Therefore, the Look/Act East policy has been conceived

to not only balance and deter but also engage China (11).

### Engaging with Southeast Asia

India's engagement with Southeast Asia has been based on trade, migration, language, culture, and religion (12). Economic reforms initiated in 1991 in the post-Cold War period created the momentum for India to strengthen its relations and trading links with Southeast Asia, with former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee saying in 2001: "the Cold War moulds have been broken and this has enabled us to strengthen our links without ideological barrier" (13). The objectives for this deeper engagement appear to be three-fold: to institutionalise linkages with ASEAN and its affiliates, such as dialogue partnership, ASEAN Plus One Summit Meetings, and membership to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); to strengthen bilateral relationships with member-states; and to carve a political and economic niche in Southeast Asia (14). These objectives are also important components of the Look East policy (15).

India's adoption of the Look East policy in 1992 was welcomed across Southeast Asia. Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew encouraged ASEAN to admit India as a dialogue partner and described traditional Indian cultural values as akin to the Confucian values that he saw as the glue binding much of Asia together (16). India became a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, attained full dialogue partner status and became an ARF member in 1995, became an ASEAN summit partner in 2002, and inked the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity in 2004 (17). Indeed, ASEAN is central to India's Look East policy.

In recent years, India's engagement with Southeast Asia has also developed strategic dimensions. Broadly, as China's relationships with India's neighbours deepen, the strategic relevance of India's connections with neighbouring Asian states in the Pacific Ocean will also grow. China's assertiveness, particularly in maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, is prompting Asia-Pacific nations to look to India to play a balancing role (18) alongside other external powers such as China, Japan, Australia, and the US (19). Indeed, India has also shown a desire for a greater role in Asia, including as a security provider (20).

### The Northeast: India's Gateway to Southeast Asia

India's Northeast—a strategic plank situated between New Delhi and Southeast Asia over the Bay of Bengal—anchors the convergence of the Look/Act East policy and regional cooperation in Asia. Bordering China and Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh and Myanmar to the west and east, the Northeast region is a key frontier in India's eastward engagement. It has entry points into all these countries that connect it onward to the ASEAN both by land and sea. Since 2014, India has been trying to integrate its Northeast region with the vibrant Southeast Asian economies. In this context, the Bay of Bengal becomes significant to emerge as an economically integrated region that has the potential for growth. Northeast India through the Bay of Bengal stands as the bridge of connectivity between India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. By developing its inherent strength, the region can create the necessary condition to access the Southeast Asian countries along the international route via the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and its extension to Laos and Cambodia.

The Northeast region is a physical and strategic component of India's Look/Act East policy, where it is key to enhance connectivity by land, air, and sea to create corridors of economic cooperation. Given the region's strategic value, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has invested political capital into reorienting “tyranny of distance” (21) narrative to mainstreaming the Northeast in India's eastward outreach. The government perceives the Northeast as a critical geostrategic space and understands the need to connect the Bay of Bengal by promoting infrastructure projects in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Northeast region is, therefore, once again becoming India's “pivot of Southeast Asia”.

### From Look East to Act East

The Modi government has adopted a “neighbourhood first” approach to foreign policy since coming to work. By transforming the Look East into an Act East policy, India has emphasised that it seeks a more direct and engaging economic and security engagement with countries in Southeast Asia (22). Announcing the policy revamp in 2014, Modi said, “A new era of economic development, industrialisation and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's ‘Look East Policy’ has become ‘Act East Policy’” (23).

The policy aims to improve partnership and cooperation with the states of East and Southeast Asia, as well as to address China's growing assertiveness in the region. In 2018, Modi said, “Southeast Asia is our neighbour by land and sea. With each Southeast Asian country, we have growing political, economic, and defence ties. With ASEAN, from dialogue partners, we have become strategic partners over for 25 years and we seek to cooperate for the architecture of peace and security in this

region" (24).

The intensification of the strategic partnership between India and Southeast Asia is reflected in several high-level visits by the top leadership both ways and the many rounds of security dialogues, political consultations, joint military exercises, and trainings that have been held in recent years (25). ASEAN remains key to this revitalised engagement, and in 2018, Modi stressed that the main tenets of the Act East policy were ASEAN centrality, ASEAN's consensus-driven approach, and support for open and inclusive regional security architecture (26).

There is an increasing emphasis in India-Southeast Asia ties in dealing with non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, cybersecurity, and environmental threats. Geopolitical developments in the region also explain the new security focus. India is already a military presence in Southeast Asia through its bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are closer to Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia than to the Indian mainland, and India is also actively expanding facilities for its navy, air force, and army (27). India's concerns in the domain of security have continued to be focused on peace and stability and building a security architecture for the region. At the same time, India continues to emphasise an inclusive, open, balanced and equitable regional architecture.

## Conclusion

The eastward engagement, which has been a cornerstone of India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, is part of the country's broader effort to assert itself on the world scene. Through the Look/Act East policy and other defense and military engagements with key regional powers, India has clearly signaled an ambition to play a leading role in the international politics of the broader Asia Pacific region. Transforming the Look East into Act East policy was a clear recognition of the emerging security architecture in Southeast Asia. At the same time, it is also a means to boost the economy of the Northeast region.

The policy's fundamental objectives are to reassert the country's position in Asia, economically and as a security provider. Indeed, the Modi government has shown interest and commitment to expand India's influence in the security architecture of Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region to counter the rising power and influence of China (28). By 'acting' East, India can play a meaningful role in shaping the regional order in a manner that is advantageous to Indian interests. As such, the Act East policy represents the securitisation of India's eastward engagement (29).



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SECTION II  
**Connectivity for  
Prosperity**

# THE POLITICS OF CONNECTIVITY IN THE NORTHEAST

## Regional, National and Local Dimensions

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UDAYAN DAS

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Connectivity is often perceived as a precursor to development. Logistical and technical in character, connectivity is an instrument for creating networks of trade and social mobility and transcending geospatial barriers. However, this perception of connectivity, ancillary to social and economic development, is inadequate to view it as a political act. The premise of this paper is that connectivity is political (1). While connectivity seems like a real and material investment of brick and mortar, it is made and unmade through ideational factors of how regions are defined by states. Connectivity is not just a dotted line that happens to cut across places owing to material combinations of demands and supplies, nor can it be reduced to a conduit as a carrier of goods and services. What places will this line cross and which will it not? Who will be connected and who will be left behind? What kind of goods and services will flow through the corridor? Such questions are crafted by the imaginations of the state establishment towards a particular region, pegged to reality. ‘Imagination’, as used here, is more synonymous with a worldview—or perspective—that has partly

developed due to historical and material factors and has given rise to versions of interests and approaches. When it comes to a region, several imaginations are at work, with some becoming dominant. For instance, in conflict-prone regions, perceptions of security/insecurity often triumph over other imaginations of market or community. As a result, connectivity becomes constrained by the security-development trade-off.

This paper uses connectivity in India’s Northeast region to situate this premise. It probes why despite the immense potential and gradual increase in government attention and funding Northeast connectivity is more a story of missed opportunities than success. There are two broad arguments in this regard. First, India’s understanding of the Northeast is mired in security imaginations, which dictates its proposals and projects of connectivity. Security concerns are foremost, shaping—and often constraining—connectivity in the region. This security-driven understanding is principally at odds with a market- or community-driven imagination of connectivity (2). In a market-oriented

view of connectivity, goods and services flow freely owing to the calculations of demand and supply, and profit and loss. In the case of the community-driven understanding of connectivity, roads, railways and corridors are for social mobility in the region. In the security-driven logic of connectivity, markets and communities are often caged and regulated. This security imagination of the region is broadly an effect of three causes—the Northeast region’s international borders with difficult neighbours; its geographically and politically contested relationship with the Indian State; and a legacy of continuing homegrown insurgency (3). Even though the markers of all three have changed, to some extent for the better, they remain operative.

This imagination has imprints at two levels of connectivity when it comes to scale—first is the regional level where the concern is the Northeast’s connectivity vis-à-vis the larger Bay of Bengal region and contiguous states; second, the national and local level where the connectivity of the Northeast region with the rest of India and within itself is in question. At both levels, the insecurities of the Indian State are resulting in obstacles for meaningful connectivity projects that could facilitate market and community concerns. In other words, despite connectivity infrastructure producing material assets like roads, railways, and corridors, there is no surety that these connectivity projects will create investment from a market point of view or result in the movement of people in the region. As a result, connectivity projects in the Northeast—where hard and fraught borders with external neighbours and the community’s relationship with the State are both troubled—are statist in character.

## Regional Dimensions of Connectivity: Engaging the External

India’s Northeast region shares international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. While its connectivity with the Himalayan states has been constrained by terrain, connectivity in the region became a principal concern of India’s erstwhile ‘Look East’ and present ‘Act East’ policies (4). The idea is to change the Northeast’s landlocked limitations by connecting it with the economically booming countries in Southeast Asia. The Northeast has often been termed a ‘springboard’ and ‘bridgehead’ to the ASEAN states (5). This push has been also formalised through regional and subregional organisations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor (BCIM-EC).

A key concern is related to Myanmar. While the Northeast has the potential to serve as a gateway to the growing economies of Southeast Asia, most of its international border is primarily with Myanmar. The sociopolitical turmoil in Myanmar and the security issues related to the Indo-Myanmar border have been crucial determinants of connectivity projects in the region. Consider the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project, which intends to connect the Northeast with the sea and mainland India through Myanmar. It was sanctioned by the Indian government in 2008 but is yet to be completed due to security concerns (6). The Indo-Myanmar border is comprised of a heavily militarised but difficult terrain along which the cross-border movement of insurgents, gun running, and drug trafficking is common (7). Not only do such issues cause project delays and logistical errors, but they also highlight two further concerns. First, connectivity

projects in conflict zones invariably become militarised and can hardly function as economic or community corridors. The State is unable to untangle security concerns from trade or people, and, as a result, development becomes security laden. The second concern is that even if connectivity projects are initiated and completed, such zones rarely translate into thriving business or community spaces as conflicts do not draw investors and surveillance does not inspire movement.

It is also equally important to ask where China fits into India's connectivity plans for the Northeast region. India and China share a difficult border relationship with the latter claiming some areas in India's Northeast. China has also undertaken an ambitious connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative, spanning South and Southeast Asia and partnering with most of India's neighbours. While India shares space with China in several multilateral groupings, New Delhi's security perceptions of Beijing have taken precedence over the potential economic gains from shared regional economic and connectivity projects. Consider the BCIM-EC, a project that has many promises but is yet to take off (8). India's sovereign concerns with China and its apprehensions of cheap Chinese goods flooding the Northeast markets halt any fruitful imagination of a regional corridor (9). Additionally, India will not want to play second fiddle in a Chinese-dominated regional project in its own backyard.

This raises a crucial question—can Northeast connectivity function substantially and meaningfully if China is cut out? India cannot forego its core national interests of security and territoriality but leaving China out will also mean a compromise on possible gains in connectivity projects. Notably, unless business investors in the Northeast region can tap the South Chinese markets,

connectivity will not yield benefits for them (10). Physical connectivity is not the glue; connectivity is a means to an end, not the end in itself. Unless financial logic is put into practice, the connectivity projects rarely find their ends. In this case, where sovereign lines are of far greater importance, politics will hardly bend for economic and community gains. Unless India and China can manage their security relationship better, regional connectivity projects will rarely have a chance for a breakthrough.

This leaves India with Bangladesh to find a gateway for the Northeast. There has been positive momentum in bilateral relations, which has resulted in increased funding for connectivity projects between Bangladesh and the Northeast by India (11). While security relations with Bangladesh have improved, one of the key bones of contention is illegal migration. Migration from Bangladesh, stuck in the legacy of Partition and ethnic democratic politics, can be a livewire issue for the Northeast (12). Such issues of identity may be far more fundamental than latent economic and material gains from cross-border projects. As a result, connectivity corridors can be controversial. Alongside that, Bangladesh as a conduit can only link the Northeast with the Bay of Bengal and the rest of India but does not lead to the contiguous states of Southeast Asia. Bangladesh presents a feasible alternative but not the geographical promise of Myanmar that fits well with India's 'Act East' policies.

### **National and Local Dimensions of Connectivity: Engaging the Community**

Besides regional cross-border connectivity, the Northeast also needs connectivity with the rest of India and within itself. In many cases,

the Indian State has attempted to club the three levels of connectivity needs (regional, national and local). While India's relationship with the neighbouring states is a principle deciding factor in the case of regional connectivity projects, the relationship between the State and the community is the key element for national and local plans.

Several years of insurgencies and conflict have left a deep distrust and lack of connect between the State and the local communities. As a result, neither party is very trusting of each other. Scarce resources, geographical disconnect, and a mosaic of ethnic identities with vulnerable borders and difficult terrain have impeded the material development of the Northeast for several decades. Connectivity can certainly be the panacea for the region. However, the meaning of connectivity for the State and the community are different and contested, and do not necessarily converge (13).

For the people, connectivity should ideally add some value to their lives, such as by aiding the growth and modernisation of the transport sector and beyond. In other words, connectivity should mean something to the people, and they should have a role in the creation of the connectivity projects. Indeed, the community-led imagination of connectivity is down-up (14). On the other hand, the State-led imagination of connectivity is top-down (15). There is no dearth of grandeur in the design of such projects, but they might not be planned as per the requirements of the community nor designed by them. The fate of connectivity in the Northeast is a statist project that is a plotted line that traverses the region but does not spread into tributaries and distributaries to connect other streams of people to it. The

State-led imagination of connectivity does not want to risk getting into the intricacies of the region but wants to use it to connect beyond borders (16). Indeed, several connectivity projects at the national and local scale in the Northeast were initially intended for border forces' movement and maintenance after the 1962 Indo-China war (17).

There are two offshoots of this statist imagination being dominant at the national-regional level. First, it certainly does not have many gains for social connectivity. Physical connectivity and local gains are not an automatic cause and effect. Connectivity should be designed in a way that serves the purpose of the local markets and people. For that to happen, the State must build trust and have an ear on the ground to source views from the people in planning connectivity (18). Bringing in multiple stakeholders, the use of local know-how and a social mapping of connectivity is essential. In an ecologically vulnerable region like the Northeast, community concerns regarding the environment must also carry pivotal weight, which can be only sourced from the people.

Second, as there is not much conversation between the State and the communities in the making of connectivity projects, confusion exists at both ends. The State is apprehensive of the communities' intentions and the communities about the State's designs of connectivity. For instance, several communities in the Northeast are concerned that highly modernised and large-scale connectivity projects will increase the flow of migrants, especially migrant labour, from different parts of India, upsetting the region's delicate demographic balance (19).

## The State and Connectivity: Possible Trajectories

At both the regional, and national and local levels of connectivity projects, the Indian State's perception is dominated by security, which is reflected in the nature of the projects undertaken. At the regional level, hard and troubled borders, coupled with complex relations with the neighbouring countries constrain the connectivity projects. On several occasions, these security imaginations do not allow transnational market calculations and community aspirations to operate.

At the national and the local level, insurgency and historical legacies of conflict have given rise to a fractured relationship between State and community. The absence of engagement with the community results in the lack of meaningful connectivity projects with a social and cultural impact. A recourse to connectivity requires engagement with both external state actors and communities within to overcome security-led imaginations of connectivity and allow market and community-centric imaginations to be accommodated in the making of such projects.

Market and community considerations are necessary at both levels. While the Northeast requires financial development to go past its laggard growth and deprivation, it is also a uniquely situated region amidst transnational communities and a mosaic of local ethnicities that have been estranged and conflicted. For such a region, security-led imaginations of connectivity can only be incomplete, limited or even fragmented as they neither completely allow financial growth nor social accessibility. This would mean business cannot flourish and change the materiality of the region, nor will there be the necessary

engagement of the people who have ties that go beyond political borders.

So, what can the Indian State do? First, it must necessarily engage with external and internal stakeholders. Unless connectivity projects can horizontally widen across states and vertically deepen with the local level, such plans will only have a limited purpose and impact. This does not mean that the State must completely abandon security considerations. Security considerations must become only one of the many approaches to consider in the making of connectivity. The State must emphasise that connectivity project has clear objectives for what they connect, whom they connect, and how they connect.

Second, militarised zones and hard borders do not make good corridors. If the State is unable to negotiate with the neighbouring countries, it will have a steel ring drawn around it as to how far it can connect and how it will structure connectivity. In several cases, these are not even material borders but the perception of threat in a zone and the risk of connecting to a neighbouring country. In such cases, better confidence-building measures are the key to negotiate mutual gains and not just abide by the template of existing or historical barriers. Unless seen as opportunities, barriers can seldom be transcended. The very idea of connectivity is fluid, unlike the nature of borders, which are predominant and defined. Externally, mental maps must be redefined, and they can only happen with a political change in the overall relationship between countries.

Finally, a crucial engagement with the people is key. Unless connectivity projects speak the language of the people, they will always be isolated statist projects on the ground.



Connectivity must allow people to feel connected to each other—whether through the materiality of roads or idioms and metaphors of names and symbols. In the Northeast, where kinship and community ties are complex and barely to the scale of the State, connectivity

should aim to speak to the people and hear what they say. The key to connectivity in the Northeast is to connect the region and the people, within and outside, and the security-led version of connectivity is certainly unable to do both.

*The author thanks Prof. Shibashis Chatterjee, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, for his useful insights on the paper.*

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# EXPLORING THE CULTURAL PROXIMITY BETWEEN NORTHEAST INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

## The Manipur Experience

VIJAYLAKSHMI BRARA

The sociological understanding of culture is that it is a social construct. Sharing a similar culture with others is what defines societies. Nations would not exist if people did not coexist culturally. There would be no societies if people did not share heritage and language, and civilisation would cease to function if people did not agree on similar values and systems of social control. Culture is preserved through transmission from one generation to the next, but it also evolves through processes of innovation, discovery, and cultural diffusion. We may be restricted by the confines of our own culture, but as humans, we can assimilate, copy, or even denounce various cultures. The more we study another culture, the better we become at understanding our own.

Cultural proximity, more specifically, relates to the sharing of a common identity, the feeling of belonging to the same group, and to the degree of affinity between two countries or a region. The sociological concept allows for the evolution of bilateral attitudes and moods over time and for asymmetries within pairs of countries.

Besides the cultural markers of assimilation, learning and sharing the process of cultural production is an articulation, and all related elements—such as history, geopolitics, economy, mode of production, and popular symbolic capital—contribute to this articulation (1). It is a combination of essentialist “being” and constructivist “becoming”.

There exists another concept that is indigenous to India—*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, a Sanskrit word that means ‘the world is one family’. It dissolves the binaries of the self and the other, us and them, transgressing boundaries, amalgamating and assimilating, and carries with it all that defines a family.

India’s Act East policy should also include this notion of one family. We need to recognise the cultural similarities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. But what happens when the concept of family starts narrowing down, basing itself on race, ethnicities, and the idea of differences, questioning the basic conceptual category called the Northeast and questioning the cultural differences rather

than the cultural proximities? It is what happens when racism expresses itself in the nationalistic language (2).

Following this argument, this essay will deal with the issue of cultural assimilation and the need to recognise cultural proximities and conceptual oneness rather than just seeing the idea from trade and other economic perspectives. It also considers the divisive ideas based on ethnicities and imagined nationhood and how these are becoming impediments to the understanding of policies like India's Act East and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and forums like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

## The Discussion

According to one analysis, "India's Northeastern states — a strategic plank situated between Delhi and Southeast Asia over the Bay of Bengal — anchor the convergence of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision and India's Act East policy. Bordering China and Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh and Myanmar to the west and east, Northeast is a key frontier in India's Indo-Pacific engagement (3)." But this approach is inadequate and incomplete. The problem lies in looking only at the physical and economic, a capitalistic approach that benefits only a few perspectives, while the value of people-to-people interactions is unassessed. Even if the focus is on infrastructure, it is mainly only roads. Connectivity only through physical terms will lead to a 'bypass syndrome' (where the focus is only on constructing such roads while ignoring other infrastructure in the city) when it comes to Northeast. The idea of the Northeast should not just be a gate, a passage, or a frontier, but a space for engagement with

the wider region. This can only come through cultural connectedness and proximities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, ideas that are incorporated into the understanding of the geo-cultural space.

Northeast India has become the subject of much importance because of its strategic geographical location as 'border-lands' with East and Southeast Asia, and currently being exposed to global economic and geopolitical trends. According to Dutch scholar Willem van Schendel, Northeast India is not only the northeastern borderland of Southeast Asia, but it can also be described as its northwestern borderland (4). According to van Schendel, scholarly research on these borderlands is an essential prerequisite for a proper understanding of its peoples and the far-reaching social and religious transformations they are engaged in.

To be sure, under India's Look East policy, policymakers and academics have considered the contemporary social, economic, and political problems of the Northeast states. There is, however, a genuine neglect of cultural unity and affinity among this region and Southeast Asia, and other transnational regions and countries like Southwest China and Bangladesh. This unique relationship in culture-historical experiences of the peoples of the Northeast with those of Southeast Asia is of genuine importance, especially amid the drive for economic and political unity with Southeast Asian countries.

## The Second World War Connection

The Battles of Imphal and Kohima in 1944 were among the Allies' greatest and fieriest fights during the Second World War. A cinematic retelling of the battle, *Imphal 1944* by filmmaker Junichi Kajioka, tells the

story of friendship between old enemies and of Manipur and its people who helped the soldiers, thus helping many of them survive the battle. It was this grand war that connected Manipur and Nagaland to the rest of the Southeast Asia. And arguably, it was Subhash Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army (INA) that first thought of aligning with India's Southeast Asian neighbours during what is called the Southeast Asian theatre of the Second World War (5).

Today, Manipur and Nagaland are on the World War tourism map with war tourists visiting the war cemeteries in Imphal (Manipur) and Kohima (Nagaland) that are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Manipur, notably, attracts many Japanese war tourists every year. The Nippon Foundation of Japan has helped set up the Imphal Peace Museum at the location where many Japanese soldiers lost to British forces.

Another Japanese war memorial in Imphal was inaugurated in 1995 after initial efforts by Japanese war veteran Lt. General Iwaichi Fujiwara, who was acknowledged as the godfather of the INA, to commemorate fallen Japanese soldiers.

### Religious-Cultural Connection

There are remarkable similarities between Indonesia's Bali and India's Manipur—the kingship, the state, the rituals, the kinship, the spectacle, and the splendour. The Gayatri mantra, a powerful mantra from the Rig Veda, can be heard on the streets of Bali throughout the day, and the Hindu Trimurti—Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), and Mahesh or Shiva (the destroyer)—are widely worshipped through the Pedanda (high priests), who resemble

Manipur's maibis (priestesses of indigenous faith). Additionally, Thailand's Ayutthaya bears some similarities to ancient Ayodhya; and the Ramayana has its own indigenous versions in Indonesia and Thailand.

Many scholars in Manipur assert that their origins are from the East. Substantiating their argument, they say that most of the migration routes can be traced through the East. Members of the Chakpas, an indigenous community in Manipur and considered the first settlers, have over time reached till the South of China. Poireton, a Meitei (6) folk hero thought to have introduced fire to Manipur, is said to have come from Burma (present-day Myanmar). The art of preservation of *puyas* (the traditional texts) come from the Han system. The Manipuri words *che* (paper), *ya* (teeth), and *che-che* (elder sister) are Chinese words. The traditional diaspora of the Meiteis, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is spread from Southwest China, particularly Yunan, to Myanmar. The languages spoken in the Northeast are part of the Tibeto-Burman, Tai and Mon-Khmer group of languages. The Meiteis from Southeast Asia certainly feel a connect to Manipur since they experience a familiarity with the clothing, food, physical appearance, and proximity to their own cultural metaphors.

This region has been a land of great migrations from China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, and recent migrations (roughly 300 years ago) from Rajasthan and Punjab. Manipur was a trade route from Mumbai, Kolkata, Assam, and Manipur to Yangon and thereon to Southeast Asia.

Unfortunately, our colonial and post-colonial literature has converted this region of great migrations and trade routes into a conglomeration of closed societies.

Another important point is related to the ancient Manipuri saying *Nongpok Thong Hangba* (the opening of the eastern door) (7). Three important ancient ascetics, the Mangang, Khuman and Luwang (8) elders propounded the Meitei religion, associating it with the polity and philosophising in *Irenba Puari Ahoiron* (The Philosophical Treatise of the Universe). Starting in the 17th century, intensive debates on the conversion to Hinduism began in the Pombi-pham (a people's durbar). By the 18th century, King Garib Nawaz decided to make Hinduism a state religion, but only if the old religion shall be revived after seven generations. It was then that the 'eastern doors were shut' and the 'western doors opened'. The seven generations are said to have passed in 1977, paving the way for *Nongpok Thong Hangba*. Therefore, connecting with our Southeast Asian neighbours is part of our mythico-historical past, and the connectedness is intrinsic. The Look East/Act East policies should be seen as an indication of that.

The historical past with the linkages with Japan, Indonesia, Myanmar, and South China; the opening up of the trade routes with Myanmar and further interactions due to communication networks and increased mobility; and the present surge of Korean content (although this is a pan-India phenomenon) means the Northeast is coming into the fold of a 'cultural collective'.

This cultural collective goes beyond political boundaries. The regions of this cultural collective need to be recognised, studied, and worked upon by BIMSTEC, FOIP, Act East, and all other players that want connectivity and proximity by engaging with the Northeast region and not just using it as a gate. But these studies will always be at odds with the boundaries of nation-states and, therefore, need to go beyond the security narratives that

skirt the region and recognise the importance of *Nongpok Thong Hangba*, the opening of the eastern door for Manipur. This is a great desire among the people of the region. The centrality of the location and engagement with it is of prime importance. But the signs do not look good; in contravention of the basic objectives of the Act East policy, India decided not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, despite it including the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations grouping and Asia-Pacific nations including Japan (9).

### Eulogising Differences

Although there are several indicators of oneness with Southeast Asia, there is also a language of dissent, differences, separateness, uniqueness of ethnicities, territorialities, and boundaries—the rise of the 'imagined nations' as mono-ethnic entities. This is essentially a colonial and post-colonial theorisation, which see the origin of ethnicities in isolated spaces, like closed societies. There is plenty of colonial literature, such as *The Meitheis* by T.C. Hodson(10) and *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and other Hill Tribes* by William McCulloch (11), that present monographical accounts of the societies of the Northeast. Unfortunately, post-colonial researchers continued the tradition and ultimately the region, which was malleable to migration and fluid in terms of territoriality and ethnicities, emerged as closed, untouched static societies. This is one of the bases through which the homeland demands and issues of contested territories in this region emerged, creating a discourse of differences rather than amalgamations within. So, while there is evidence and eagerness to link with Southeast Asia, there is also eagerness to draw fissures within the region. Therefore, two processes are ongoing simultaneously—on one side,

we are claiming cross-territorial intrinsic connections, and on the other, we are claiming to be different from our neighbours.

## Conclusion

These two approaches form the basic crux of understanding the cultural space of Northeast India and Southeast Asia. These aspects need to be incorporated into the policy initiatives, and therefore it is important to engage with the region rather than just treating it as a frontier.

Today, the world is churning back to the eastern knowledge and eastern notions of development. This churning must be recognised alongside an understanding that western normativity is a thing of the past. Infrastructure development will certainly bring the region together, but one must remember that Northeast India is part of the cultural matrix of Southeast Asia. So, while the world is recognising the eastern ideologies and epistemologies, it must also remember that the Northeast and its cultural origins are all part of the Southeast Asian ethos.

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BAY OF BENGAL FOR INDIA'S NORTHEAST REGION

SOHINI BOSE AND PRATNASHREE BASU

The eight states in India's Northeast region occupy a unique geographical place between the rest of the country and the neighbouring nations of Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar. The region has long been identified as a bridge between the rest of India and the neighbouring countries but has remained a mere transit place for decades. There are great opportunities to transform the Northeast into a thriving socioeconomic zone, both in terms of the development of connectivity and commerce, and to strengthen India's diplomatic, economic, and security partnership with its neighbours. Vital to this endeavour is exploring the potential of inland waterways and maritime connectivity routes that run through (river routes) and are near the Bay of Bengal region.

## The Significance of the Sea

The need to protect the autonomy of the important sea routes passing through the Bay of Bengal and the lure of its energy reserves has attracted many stakeholders to its waters. Consequently, the Bay has become

a zone of competition and collaboration for its littorals and the major powers involved in it. The dynamic strategic environment in the Bay has made it one of the epicentres of the Indo-Pacific, reflecting many of the latter's opportunities and challenges. Connecting India's Northeast with the Bay will help the former to partake of these opportunities. As the Northeast is traversed by many rivers and their tributaries, all flowing into the Bay, riverine connectivity emerges as the obvious choice. It is a cheap and environment-friendly means of transport, and strengthening it in the Northeast with the support of adequate multimodal linkages can transform the region.

The Northeast region is estimated to have about 1,800 km of river routes that are navigable by steamers and large country boats. Cargo movements via these routes include tea, cement, coal, fly ash, limestone, petroleum, bitumen, and food grains (1). The rivers Lohit, Subansiri, BurhiDihing, Noa Dihing, and Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh, and the rivers Dhaleshwari, Sonai, Tuilianpui, and Chintuipui in Mizoram are used for navigation by small country boats. In Manipur,



the Manipur River and its tributaries (Iril, Imphal, and Thoubal) are also used by country boats for the transport of small cargos. The other primary rivers in the Northeast are the Brahmaputra, Barak, and Teesta. The Brahmaputra has several small river ports and more than 30 pairs of ferry *ghats* (crossing points). The Barak too has small ports at Karimganj, Badarpur, and Silchar, and ferry services at several places. These rivers flow into Bangladesh and a portion of Myanmar is also a part of the Barak River basin. They are thus conducive channels for connecting the Northeast with the Bay and the rest of India, bypassing the narrow Siliguri Corridor.

In recent years, India has undertaken multiple initiatives to enhance the multimodal connectivity of the Northeast, such as the ‘Special Accelerated Road Development Programme in North East’, and is also considering developing the Asian Highway (AH) network. One of the principal routes of the network (AH 1) will connect India and Bangladesh via the Northeast before it enters Southeast Asia. Several projects are underway for the development and improvement of roads and bridges, interstate bus terminals, airports, railways, and air connectivity (2).

As China expands its footprints across the Indo-Pacific, India considers developing closer ties with Japan a geopolitical priority. Indeed, Japan is already assisting India in the effort to strengthen connectivity in the Northeast (3). The Northeast is important for Japan as it requires technical development, has the potential to connect with the region and the rest of India, and because it shows New Delhi’s great trust in Tokyo by partnering with it in the sensitive border region. The two countries have established the ‘Japan-India Act East Forum’ that synergises India’s Act East policy with Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (4). Some of

the infrastructure projects to be undertaken by the forum are based in the Northeast (5). The Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor also aims to establish a regulatory framework for the development of multimodal transportation between the Northeast and countries in East and Southeast Asia (6), which will open its access to the sea.

### Linking the Northeast to Nearby Ports

A well-connected network of ports and waterways has the potential to situate the Northeast in the centre of India’s growth trajectory. To open the region’s access to the sea, it is important to identify ports in its vicinity through which it can reach the Bay. Geographically, the Kolkata-Haldia port in India, the Chittagong port in Bangladesh, and the Sittwe port in Myanmar are closest to the Northeast.

The Kolkata-Haldia port is situated on the River Hooghly in West Bengal, 223 km from the sea. It is India’s oldest operating port and has robust linkages with Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Kolkata is the closest metropolitan city to the Northeast region and is thus well-linked to it through multimodal networks. In terms of riverine connectivity, River Barrak (National Waterway 16) connects the Northeast with Kolkata through the India-Bangladesh Protocol routes (7). Developing the Aricha-Dhulian-Rajshahi-Dhaka route for navigation will further reduce the distance between Kolkata and the Northeast (8). The Brahmaputra and Barak-Surma rivers were used extensively for transport and trade between Northeast India and the Kolkata port during the colonial era (9), but many of the riverways on this route are seasonal, increasing the dependence on rail and road connectivity. Furthermore, the Kolkata port

and the Haldia Dock Complex (10) suffer from a low draft, which makes navigation difficult (11). Two deep-sea ports—at Tajpur and Sagar—have been conceptualised to overcome this problem.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) will connect the Haldia Dock with Myanmar's Sittwe port situated on the Kaladan river. The aim is to facilitate transport, and shipments from Myanmar's eastern ports to the Northeast, while increasing connectivity between the two countries. Road transport connects Mizoram with Myanmar's Paletwa and Sittwe, and coastal shipping will connect Sittwe to Haldia (12). The project is a part of India's Act East policy and a geopolitical counterbalance to Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port (13), which has been built by China as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

However, the KMMTTP project has been underway since 2008, and the Sittwe port only became ready for operation in 2021 (14). Amid the difficulty in operationalising the KMMTTP, Bangladesh offered to join the project (15) via the Chittagong port as an alternative to Sittwe (16). In a meeting held at the end of April 2022, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina offered Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar the use of the port for providing a sea-link to two of India's landlocked Northeast states, Assam and Tripura (17). Situated on the Karnaphuli river, about 16 km away from the sea, the Chittagong port is Bangladesh's principal seaport and one of the busiest in the world. Under the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement, the Chittagong port can be used to ferry goods to the Northeast via the Ashugonj river port. The latter is already used for transporting rice to Tripura and is expected to reap even more profit with the operationalisation of the Agartala-Akhaura

rail link (18). It is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2022 (19). In 2018, India and Bangladesh also agreed to use the Chittagong and Mongla ports for the movement of goods to the Northeast (20). The transit route of the Haldia port through Bangladesh and Assam can also be linked to the Chittagong port and onward to the southern tip of Tripura to provide the Northeast region with an alternative sea link (21). A Bay container terminal is under construction at the Chittagong port (22) and is expected to be completed by 2024 (23). The Chittagong port is also plagued by some challenges, such as congestion and dependence on tidal currents.

While boosting the Northeast's connectivity with these ports will certainly benefit the region, it stands to gain more if the entire coastline of the Bay is linked by coastal shipping agreements. Currently, such agreements are in place between India and Bangladesh, India and Myanmar (24), and Myanmar and Thailand. The only missing link is an agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, the Northeast needs to overcome several challenges first.

### Avoiding the 'Conflict Trap'

Due to its sparse population, difficult terrain in pockets, fragile ecology and often turbulent political situations, the Northeast region is not an easy-to-considered investment destination (25). But the betterment of the region, both politically and socioeconomically, is inextricable tied to the expansion of physical connectivity links. Multimodal physical links will also enable better connectivity with the hinterland areas, thus creating greater opportunities for India's larger eastern and northeastern regions and the neighbouring areas. Functional hinterland connectivity for the resource-rich Northeast will improve the

overall trade in manufactured and agricultural goods (such as rice, bamboo, tea, ginger, and pork), but modern agricultural techniques must be developed and adopted through targeted investments to improve the yield and efficiency of produce (26).

There are two key advantages of boosting connectivity linkages within the Northeast—enhanced road, rail, and waterway links will boost the region’s socioeconomic conditions, and strengthen the operationalisation of foreign policy outreach towards Southeast Asia under the Act East and Neighbourhood First frameworks. Better trade ties with countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar will bolster the growth and development of the wider region (27).

Improving telecommunications and digital links alongside enhancing waterway, road and rail connectivity to Northeast India will ensure the easy transfer of technical knowledge, expertise and other necessary infrastructure to maximise the potential of outbound trade in the region, especially via the Bay of Bengal. Investments must also focus on quality control and marketing of regional agro-based products to expand their demand. Enhanced connectivity will also likely expand employment opportunities, which will certainly have an impact on the recruitment activities of the insurgent outfits in the region (28).

After decades of neglect, the central government has finally begun to commit financial and strategic resources through policymaking, aimed at realising the “potential (of the Northeast region) to become the growth engine for India (29),” earmarking approximately US\$700 million for trade expansion. Effective implementation is vital to realise the goals of the Act East policies as mere investments in infrastructure

investments may not be able to capitalise on the region’s potential and link it with the Bay littorals. For instance, infrastructure projects such as the Trilateral Highway, reviving the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Routes, and dredging the Brahmaputra River have had little impact on the economies of the Northeast states (30).

Strategic and security concerns have often trumped developmental considerations in the region. The actions of insurgent groups, drug trafficking, smuggling, and undocumented migration have historically impacted infrastructure projects in the Northeast and have only recently begun to subside. In addition to monetary and other developmental resources, the policy must also focus on improving the law-and-order situation and the monitoring of international borders.

Insurgent groups operating in Assam, Mizoram and Manipur have long held the development of the region and its people hostage. The presences of groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) have for decades disincentivised the internal development of the region, as well as bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Despite the decrease in insurgent activities in recent years, connectivity networks remain susceptible to disruptions, as seen during the road blockades in several states in 2020 (31), (32). This, in turn, has served to further foment socio-economic unrest in what is identified as the ‘conflict trap’ where societies in the Northeast are caught in a brutal cycle of underdevelopment and violence (33).

But the very reasons that have hindered development are also why development is an imperative that can no longer be overlooked. The central government has undertaken several initiatives to improve the law-and-

order situation in the region (34). But attempts to address the security challenges must go hand-in-hand with ending the physical isolation of the region and engaging the neighbouring countries in the mitigation of violence (35).

The operationalisation of multimodal connectivity links within the Northeast is thus a prerequisite for the extension of India's connectivity links with the larger Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific region via the Bay of Bengal. The simultaneous surveillance of cross-border movement, monitoring of border patrols, management of the free-movement regime, and an intelligence-sharing system with Bangladesh and Myanmar is essential for ensuring that the connectivity networks allow seamless and unhindered movement.

## Conclusion

India's Northeast region remains shrouded in geographical isolation, social unrest, and economic backwardness. However, it holds great potential to enhance India's foreign policy outreach in the neighbourhood and beyond. Its geographical location makes it ideally suited to expand connectivity with

neighbouring countries. Additionally, as an underdeveloped region, it is also an apt avenue for collaboration with partner countries, such as Japan, which will only serve to strengthen bilateral ties. For these goals to be realised, it is essential to encourage the Northeast region's access to the sea through improved multimodal connectivity, particularly the inland riverine routes. However, these river routes may be seasonal, and so require concerted efforts to ensure year-round navigation. It is also important to install night navigation facilities in these rivers. There is also a need to cultivate a demand for a greater number of vessels in these waters as without it the connectivity efforts will not be maintained. Once operational, these river routes leading to the sea can also be utilised for tourism purposes. It will thus generate greater employment opportunities for the region's people. A tripartite agreement on multimodal connectivity between India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar will ease the uptake of such efforts. Maintaining law and order is also critical to ensure that such initiatives are not stunted.

*This essay is an updated version of a previously published paper titled "In Search of the Sea: Opening India's Northeast to the Bay of Bengal".*

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# INDIA-JAPAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE BAY OF BENGAL

## RENEWED FOCUS ON INDIA'S NORTHEAST

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MADHUCHANDA GHOSH

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In the evolving Asian maritime security landscape, the Bay of Bengal's regional architecture is emerging as a critical geostrategic sub-region. The rise of China and the relative decline of the US influence in the Asian maritime domain are some of the structural factors that have affected the regional strategic balance in the Bay. As the world's largest bay, rich in untapped natural resources, reserves of gas, and other minerals, the Bay of Bengal has gained key importance as a new frontier for development and confrontation. For its close proximity to the Malacca Strait, one of the most critical sea lanes of communication for global oil supplies and global trade (1), the Bay of Bengal has assumed pivotal importance for the Indo-Pacific maritime powers including India and Japan. Strategically located in the middle of the Indo-Pacific region, the Bay is home to one-fourth of the world's population (2) and the Bay's coastal rim is inhabited by nearly half a billion people (3). Linking the Indian and the Pacific oceans, the Bay of Bengal constitutes the trade route for one fourth of global commerce (4). It constitutes the principal maritime waterway for the Persian

Gulf's energy trade with East Asia.

The Bay of Bengal's shipping routes are increasingly used by many of the world's largest economies for trade with the resource-rich Africa and the energy-rich Persian Gulf. Surrounded by littorals as India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Maldives and the two landlocked states of Bhutan and Nepal, the Bay is emerging as the new theatre of strategic competition, as extra-regional powers are jostling for expanding their strategic influence in the region through their growing engagement with the region's key littoral states.

The region is surrounded by large supra-structural bodies, such as the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia. Established and emerging powers in the region seem to be caught up in a complex web

of deepening economic dependencies on the one hand and growing security uncertainties on the other. This paper examines how India's Act East policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) are converging in the Bay of Bengal's regional architecture. It also examines the factors behind Japan's growing strategic focus on India's Northeast, which is emerging as a new strategic theatre in the Bay's regional architecture.

### Shifting Geopolitics in the Bay of Bengal Region

The changing and complex geopolitical landscape in the Bay of Bengal is increasingly marked by growing interdependence among the regional states and extra-regional actors, as well as the strategic competition and security challenges to regional peace and stability. The Bay of Bengal and the South China sea are lynchpins that connect the Indo-Pacific (5). The Bay acts as the bridge connecting the dynamic East Asian economies with the traditional European markets via the rapidly growing Africa and the energy-rich Persian Gulf. The strategic environment in the Bay of Bengal region is in a state of flux, as evident from the rise of new power centres and shifting power dynamics in the region. As the global economic centre of gravity shifts from Europe to Asia, the Indian Ocean and its strategic Bay of Bengal sub-region have gained critical significance as maritime highways of global trade and energy flows. The regional security environment in the Indian Ocean is adversely affected by emerging traditional and non-traditional security threats and challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has exhibited how non-traditional security threats can critically affect the global and regional order causing geopolitical shifts.

While scholars like Christian Bouchard

and William Crumplin point out that the Indian Ocean region is "neglected no longer, (6)" Robert Kapan contends that a map of the Indian Ocean exposes the contours of power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (7). The strategic cogitations in the Indian Ocean region, including the Bay of Bengal, have to take into account the growing engagement between the extra-regional actors and the key littoral states. China's aggressive diplomacy with the Bay of Bengal states and its military adventurism illustrates a new reality in the regional maritime space which poses a security challenge for the region. As Beijing endeavours to establish a new China-centric world order, facilitated by its Belt and Road Initiative, the region is witnessing a growing imbalance of power. China's rise as a comprehensive national power and the relative decline of the US, which dominated both the Indian and the Pacific oceans for a long time, are causing major structural shifts in the emerging regional strategic landscape.

### India-Japan Strategic Convergence in the Bay of Bengal's Regional Architecture

As the Indo-Pacific concept acquired increased salience in geopolitical discourse, the Bay of Bengal which is at the heart of this vast oceanic expanse, has assumed key strategic focus in the foreign policy calculus of many states including India and Japan. New Delhi, which has in the past neglected this subregion, has now elevated it to high priority as evident from the several number initiatives (such as SAGAR and Project Mausam) that have been premised on India's claim of primacy in the region. Scholars like Harsh Pant argues that India needs to strengthen its economic, military, and political relationship with the US, Japan, and other countries in the region to balance China's growing military



assertiveness (8). Indian Prime Minister Modi and the American and the Japanese leadership, have placed the idea of building a trilateral and quadrilateral framework of cooperation at the centre of their foreign policy approach vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, as Raja Mohan noted in 2015, India's foreign policy under the Modi government appears more self-assured in navigating the great power rivalries in Asia (9).

The Indian leadership's foreign policy articulations such as the Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) have overlapping strategic interests with Japan's FOIP in striving for an Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and open to all countries in the region. A review of the recent joint declarations, including the India-Japan Vision 2025 (10) reveals New Delhi and Tokyo's intent to expand strategic engagement with a focus on enhancing regional connectivity, capacity-building assistance (strengthening the capacity of maritime law enforcement, Maritime Domain Awareness and other human resource development) and in such fields as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, counter terrorism and non-proliferation.

The growing maritime security partnership in the Bay of Bengal between New Delhi and Tokyo can be attributed to strategic factors. The structural changes in the regional security environment, the growing power disequilibrium, the need for promoting a rules-based regional order, freedom of navigation and the emerging traditional and non-traditional security challenges are some of the key factors shaping India-Japan security cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. For both India and Japan, the most imperative strategic feature of the Bay of Bengal is

that it is a key area for the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC). The Bay's centrality to the international maritime highway of trade and energy flows has factored in the growing focus of the major Indo-Pacific powers in the region including Japan. The Bay sits astride one of the most important chokepoints for global energy supplies, the Strait of Malacca which is critical as a source for both India and Japan's energy demands. Malacca Strait which is the world's second largest oil trade chokepoint after the Strait of Hormuz (11), is considered as the vital lifeline of Japan's energy supplies from the Persian Gulf and any disruption of energy flow will give a severe blow to the Japanese economy.

New Delhi and Tokyo have exhibited a strong intent to promote a rules-based regional order as envisioned in India's Act East policy, the SAGAR doctrine, and the IPOI and Japan's FOIP. For both countries, the Bay of Bengal is a vital maritime space for promoting the rules-based order that will ensure the freedom of navigation, free flow of trade, energy supplies and connectivity linkages. Indeed, Modi has stated that India, seeks a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR-Security and Growth for ALL in the Region (12). SAGAR signifies the economic and maritime security outreach of India's Act East policy. Indeed, the articulation of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific as a free, open and "inclusive region, including all countries in the geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it (13)" signifies New Delhi's intent to expand its strategic engagement with regional and extra-regional powers at the bilateral and multilateral levels. It clearly indicates India's vision of inclusivity, which is in stark contrast to China's unilateral strategic moves in the region.

## India-Japan Maritime Security Partnership: The China Factor

China's naval power projection in the Bay of Bengal constitutes a cause of apprehension for both New Delhi and Tokyo. The expanding footprint of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean Region seems to have propelled India to accelerate the modernisation of its naval forces, for which India is increasingly seeking cooperation from Japan such as building submarines (14). Beijing's intent to acquire naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal region has created security worries for New Delhi and Tokyo this acquisition may serve a dual purpose- the commercial ports could be used as military facilities by the PLAN to help mitigate China's geographical disadvantages in the region and expand its footprint in the region. For instance, China's military base in Djibouti provides it with a rudimentary power projection, that is bolstered by its access to ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar (15). China's extensive engagement with the Bay of Bengal's key littoral states (like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal) appears to be a part of its String of Pearls strategy to ensure that its partners in the Bay region do not tilt towards the emerging Indo-Pacific idea.

China's unilateral securitisation efforts in the region are detrimental to the strategic interests of India and Japan. Beijing's military adventurism in the region, in some ways, seems to have impelled New Delhi and Tokyo to bolster their maritime security partnership and initiate counter securitisation efforts in the region at the bilateral, minilateral and multilateral levels. Bilateral naval exercises like the JIMEX in the Bay of Bengal, India and Japan's concluding the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and the revival of

the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) indicate securitisation efforts for bolstering regional security in the backdrop of China's rising military assertiveness in the region. As Horimoto Takenori contends, India and Japan need to facilitate cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region due to the escalation of the strategic competition between the US and China (16).

China's aggressive diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal region seems to have factored in India's intent to consolidate its ties with the regional states. This is particularly evident from New Delhi's efforts to reinvigorate the BIMSTEC, which has assumed a key place in Japan's foreign policy, best seen through its engagement in infrastructural and connectivity projects in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. Japan's engagement with BIMSTEC as a partner in the areas of trade and investment, infrastructure and connectivity and energy cooperation will bolster the ties and further consolidate Japan's strategic clout in the region (17).

## Japan's Engagement in the Northeast

India's Northeast region, which borders China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, has emerged as an area of key strategic importance in India-Japan relations. Japan's growing focus on the Northeast is driven by geopolitical factors. The Northeast, as a gateway to the Indo-Pacific, connects with one of the most economically dynamic geographies of the world, the ASEAN. Moreover, Japan shares historical legacies with India's Northeast through collective memories and memorials about Second World War (18). Japan also shares Buddhist religious linkages with the Northeast.

The Northeast's key role in the FOIP was reflected in the Japanese Ambassador Suzuki Satoshi's statement at an address in Guwahati Assam, in February 2021,: "The vision for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is at its center; and India's North East, including Assam, occupies an important place in this vision. (19)" Tokyo is heavily investing in Northeast India's regional connectivity via two immediate neighbours, Bangladesh and Myanmar which will bolster India's linkages with the wider Indo-Pacific including the ASEAN states. Japan's strategic engagement with India's Northeast which began since 2004, became a part of India's Act East Policy during the Modi government's time. In 2017, India and Japan set up the India-Japan Act East Forum (AEF) with the aim of providing a platform for bilateral collaboration focusing on the modernisation of the Northeast under the rubric of India's Act East policy and Japan's FOIP.

Japan's growing engagement in the Northeast is evident from the investment of about 205.784 billion Yen (US \$1.8 billion) towards infrastructure and manufacturing projects (20). The AEF focuses on boosting the developmental infrastructure, industrial linkages and people-to-people and cultural linkages. Notably, the increased engagement through AEF with Northeast's participation, comes amid repeated incursions by Chinese troops into the Northeast region. Indeed, as Rajiv Bhatia notes, the AEF is a direct response to China's increasing focus on connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative. In terms of area coverage though, Japan has excluded Arunachal Pradesh from its purview because of China's insistence about it being a disputed area (21).

## The Way Forward

The Bay of Bengal's shifting geopolitical discourse has been instrumental in bringing likeminded Indo-Pacific states such as India and Japan closer to bolster cooperation and expand the contours of their strategic engagement. While China's looming presence in the Bay has been viewed as the central maritime challenge for India in the Indian Ocean region with the potential of an escalating security dilemma, Japan's concerns with China's growing might in the Indian Ocean region relate to the safety of passage of its trade and energy routes. Non-traditional security challenges in the region have also been a cause of major concern for India and Japan which have figured prominently in recent joint statements. With the shifting geopolitics in the Bay of Bengal region, India and Japan are likely to intensify maritime security cooperation at the bilateral level as well within minilateral and multilateral frameworks as evident from the Quad and Malabar security exercises. However, both countries are likely to be careful to ensure that their efforts for enhancing maritime security in the Bay of Bengal do not alarm the neighbours and countries close to the SLOCs.

To that end, India and Japan are entering into security and economic partnerships with potentially strategic partners in the Bay of Bengal. As the Bay of Bengal's strategic significance as a key pivot in the Indo-Pacific region continues to grow in the global geopolitical landscape, India and Japan's proactive approach for enhancing the regional security of the Bay, through existing bilateral, trilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation, is likely to have a decisive impact in shaping the emerging security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

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**SECTION III**  
**Development  
Agenda**

# THE IDEA OF A SUSTAINED NORTHEAST IN INDIA'S TRANSREGIONAL ECONOMIC ARCHITECTURE

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RAKHEE BHATTACHARYA

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The Eastern Himalaya and Brahmaputra valley of the Indo-Myanmar frontier—comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim—was perceived by the post-colonial India as a “single geographic unit and one socio-economic entity” (1). The regional delimitation of this “generalized spatial concept” (2) was legitimised as Northeast India, which was marked by the dominant reference to borders and boundedness, having only one accessible route via the 22-km Siliguri Corridor. This State-centric determinant that constructed the idea of the post-colonial Northeast essentially overlooked the reality of the diverse landscape of this geographic unit and its natural and timeworn transregional trails and settings. With multiple land and maritime accessibilities to the neighbouring areas, this space has historically enabled flawless economic interactions. This was completely overridden during the early post-colonial times for state security. This territorial appendage consequently became a fact of geography, an act of administration, and a subject of geopolitics in the larger scholarly and policy narratives. However, India's

neoliberal regime reinvented the ‘locational advantage’ of this frontier to interlink the neighbouring geographies primarily for economic gains through transregional engagements. With this new idea of an open and unbound Northeast galvanised in India's neoliberal economic programme, it has been revisited as a valued geography of South and Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. As both political and economic imperatives have reimaged the Northeast in a transregional space, this geographic unit has once again become a construct of the State, while its new determinism has tended to snub the views and contestation of the local people.

These varied external determinisms have produced challenges in the narratives of the Northeast, and there has been a constant search for an idea of the Northeast in both scholarly and policy debates with a sustained definitional category. In this backdrop, this essay explores the idea of the Northeast by centralising transregionality as a grounding term in India's ongoing transnational economic architecture while congregating the people's interests. The first section locates

such engagements of India with two important subregional forums, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), as both centralise the Northeast as a significant geography. The next section considers border trade as an important instrument to locate the Northeast at transregional and neighbouring areas. The concluding section, however, flags off the contesting voices from the Northeast against any hegemonic architecture, and then explores the interfaces and intersections of State determinisms and people's aspirations towards constructing a sustained idea of the Northeast.

### Neoliberal Geography and Transregionality from Above

The Northeast has been recognised for building alliances over the past three decades with regions and countries to India's East and Southeast. With immense locational significance for interlinkages with other geographies and enhancing accessibilities, the Northeast has been reconfigured as a 'gateway' for trade revivalism and a circulation network with the immediate and extended neighbourhood. Economic expansionism has, therefore, provided ground to reconstruct the idea of the Northeast at a transregional level

with the Brahmaputra valley and surrounding hill and plain areas of the Indo-Myanmar and Indo-Bangladesh frontiers to produce multiple accessibilities up to the greater Bay of Bengal region. This evolving narrative of region-making centralises location in relation to the neighbours, routes, and even natural resource reserves, which is deemed deterministic (3) and is typically ingrained in any neoliberal programme.

### Measuring gains: Trade and investment as state project

Trade centralises the epistemic logic of region-making in any State-centric economic project. So, if a hypothesis is constructed around India's trans-spatial region-making endeavour along with Northeast primarily for ensuring a sustained supply chain and enhancing the volume of trade, then both the ASEAN and BIMSTEC are the most significant forums to examine it. Both these superstructures have centralised the idea of Northeast for interlinking routes and trade engagements since 1997 (when India became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum and BIMSTEC was initiated). To understand the gain, the compound annual rate of growth for trade volume with ASEAN (see Table 1) and BIMSTEC (see Table 2) have been estimated in five-year periods from 1997 till 2021. This is also to see the impacts of India's two towering

**Table 1: Growth Rates of India's Trade with ASEAN, 1997-2021**

Years	Export	Import	Total
1997-2002	10	15	13
2002-2007	28	31	30
2007-2012	25	20	22
2012-2017	3	6	5
2017-2021	3	7	5
2014-2021	2	5	4

Source: Author's estimate based on annual trade data by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India

foreign policies of the past three decades, the Look East and Act East policies.

The total trade volume with ASEAN grew significantly between 1997 and 2012, before declining in the 2012-2017 period. The decline can be explained by India's political transition in 2014, which possibly generated uncertainty among international players. To regain confidence, India announced a new foreign trade policy (2015-2020) that underlined the importance of transnational trade in economic growth. This was ratified under the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade Facilitation in 2016 and was followed by a National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (2017-2020). The objective was to transform the trade ecosystem by reducing the time and cost of doing business, and ease access to trade-related information and infrastructure augmentation. At the same time, India emphasised restoring connectivity with its immediate and extended neighbourhood and geographies, with the Northeast becoming an important frontier in this cross-border interlinking programme. These measures were targeted to boost trade over the 2017-2021 period. However, estimates of trade with ASEAN show that it remained constant (5 percent; see Table 1). Growth in the entire period since the Act East policy came into being (2014-2021) has been 4 percent. This can be attributed to global events like the

COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent trade restrictions.

The total volume of trade with BIMSTEC grew until 2012, followed by declines thereafter. Trade growth also declined in the years since the Act East policy came into effect (2014-2021), also attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, as the pandemic ends, a sustained engagement programme is expected to be beneficial for India in the coming years. But how important is the Northeast in such trade dynamics?

Data shows that only five states—but none in the Northeast—account for 70 percent of India's total trade volumes (export), including to the ASEAN and BIMSTEC. Notably, 95 percent of India's trade with East and Southeast Asian neighbours have been through states and regions other than the Northeast, despite the geographic unit being centralised in transnational engagements (4). States in India's western and southern regions continue to dominate external trade (5), with the Northeast at the margin of the country's trade ties. Similarly, foreign direct investment (FDI) data from the ASEAN countries shows that while the volume has increased over the years, Northeast states are not the beneficiaries. For instance, in 2019-2020, Maharashtra received 30 percent of all FDI from ASEAN, followed by Karnataka (18

**Table 2: Growth Rates of India's Trade with BIMSTECK, 1997-2021**

Years	Export	Import	Total
1997-2002	11	25	15
2002-2007	19	22	20
2007-2012	19	20	20
2012-2017	15	7	12
2017-2021	8	4	7
2014-2021	7	4	6

Source: Author's estimate based on annual trade data by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India



percent), Delhi (17 percent), and Gujarat (11); Assam received only 0.01 percent (6).

So, the region that is enticed for global trade and investment has hardly made any transformation so far.

States in India's west, south and north have business-friendly policies on land, labour, power, and taxation, and a more established industrial base and capital networks. While India's rankings in the East of Doing Business index (68 in 2020) and the Logistics Performance Index (44 of 160 countries in 2018) (7) have improved over the years, such changes are concentrated in the core states that dominate trade and business affairs in India, decidedly making it regionally imbalanced. This is a structural challenge, where power relations in the trade regime tends to create such imbalance. In this hierarchical structure, the Northeast has not made any significant departure despite being reimaged as a potential neoliberal geography and an enabler of increased trade with the neighbouring ASEAN and BIMSTEC countries.

### Locating the Northeast in Neighbourhood Trade Relations

Regional asymmetry in India was reinvented and State attention got manifolds since 2014. There was a renewed focus on improving neighbourhood relations under the Act East and Neighbourhood First policies. This policy regime has, for the first time in India's post-colonial history, underscored that the Northeast cannot be understood appropriately and constructed robustly without recognising its neighbouring areas, which all have connected histories, contiguous geographies, shared economies, and common cultures. People had shared lives that were sustained across the natural boundaries with intimate

and cordial exchange relations. Trans-spatial economic connections were part of the varied ethnocultural practices across the borders, which prevailed primarily through a subsistence worldview. This was disrupted immensely in the early post-colonial period due to the geopolitical issue of the State's border-making and -sealing projects, and the Northeast became a homogenous construct with outer territoriality being militarised and securitised. This destroyed the multiple natural connections of market, exchange, mobility, trade, and livelihoods that had once thrived. However, the neoliberal regime has recognised this earlier trans-spatiality and reconstructed the idea by restoring older transregional relations through border trade, border *haats* (markets), and the restoration of lost pathways. The exchange of commodities across international borders is part of a thriving border economy that supports livelihood activities and improves cordialities among cross-border communities. Border trade with Myanmar, for instance, has been functional since 1996 following the inking of a border trade agreement. Such agreements were part of India's agreement for overland trade relations between its Northeast and five neighbouring countries of Burma (Myanmar), East Pakistan (Bangladesh), Tibetan Autonomous Region, Nepal, and Bhutan through land custom stations (LCSs) notified under Section 7 of the Customs Act, 1962.

The Northeast has a long international border (5,182 km), with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Total border trade with these neighbouring regions was INR 197.02 lakh in 2017-18, but this was only a 0.18 percent share in India's total border trade (see Table 3). Notably, Bhutan and Bangladesh have a substantially higher share of trade than the other three countries/regions. In Bangladesh's case, this is due to sustained efforts by New

**Table 3: Border Trade with Neighbouring Countries (2017-18)**

Countries	Border Area	Border trade (in INR lakh)	Total trade (in INR lakh)	Percentage share of border trade in total trade
Bangladesh	1596km	172 (87.4)	9300 (8.56)	1.85
Myanmar	1640km	0.02 (0.01)	16069 (1.47)	0.001
Bhutan	455km	23 (11.6)	924 (0.85)	2.49
Nepal	97 km	0.0 (0.0)	7051 (6.49)	0.0
Tibetan Autonomous Region	1395 km	2.0 (0.99)	89714 (82.61)	0.002
<b>Total</b>	<b>5182 km</b>	<b>197.02</b>	<b>108595</b>	<b>0.18</b>

Note: Figures in the parentheses in columns 3 and 4 are the percentage shares of India's border trade and total trade

Source: Author's estimate based on annual trade data by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India

Delhi and Dhaka to boost trade by centralising the Northeast states, especially Tripura (8). Additionally, new transregional logistics infrastructure, settlement of border disputes, and the opening of border routes for trade have helped boost economic interactions with Bangladesh (9).

At the same time, despite concerted efforts from India, trade ties with Myanmar have not improved substantially, and informal trade still dominates across this border. This is primarily due to Myanmar's internal political turbulence. This poses a challenge to India's agenda of economic expansionism through Myanmar, which can give it access to the Asia-Pacific region. The experience is similar with Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, with which the Northeast has deep historical connections. Thus, border trade, a major constituent of State economic architecture towards building a neighbourhood relation, has so far not unleashed any inspiring outcomes despite its vast potential to restore economic localism from below.

### Moving Beyond Geography

The above analyses raise an important question: Why has India's idea of forging transregional economic ties failed to centralise the Northeast? This is possibly because the State-centric determinism has constructed the Northeast in a homogenised geographic frame that tends to ignore its plural, complex, and diverse sociocultural composition, which has mostly resisted such homogeneity pushed from above. The Northeast has been a site of resistance against various political and economic imperatives of the State as 'top-down', 'exploitative' and 'extractive'. The new economic architecture under the "pervasiveness of neoliberalism" and its "hegemonic ideology" (10) has reframed the idea of the Northeast sans borders and territorialities for economic agglomeration, alliance, and corridor programmes. This has so far not translated into any visible gains, while produced anxiety and contradictions in the social consciousness and its ramifications are reflected in the conflicts between the society and State (11). This is making the Northeast a fluid frontier, which is mostly described as "wild and lawless" (see Marshall, 2021) (12) when people raise a voice against the State architecture. In reality, these

resisting forces draw strength from various constitutional mechanisms of Sixth Schedule, Article 371A and Inner Line Permit (13) that were produced by the early post-colonial State to protect indigenous rights in the Northeast. These instruments gain power with a common support to the idea of the preservation of land, resources, and identity in this culturally- and socially-diverse space. The sovereign entities thus draw support to resist the idea of an open and unbound Northeast that is being forged in India's neoliberal programme.

As such, the architecture of an unbound Northeast needs to recognise the antiquity of resistance to create ground for negotiation. An informed choice of an unbound Northeast, having a historical reference and within a frame of democracy, is essential to map the expectations of the social forces in the larger economic strategy of the State. Tripura has largely displayed such political maturity to create trans-spatiality through bilateralism where local participation has also been spontaneous and enhanced people's business and livelihood opportunities (14).

The neighbourhood is pertinent and integral to the Northeast and for its sustainability. Spatial delimitations and the fixity of artificial boundaries in the past produced around power structures and national security were unleashed with an idea of an unsustainable and fragile Northeast. However, as neoliberal State

determinisms are reimagining an alternative narrative of trans-spatiality within a frame of economic architecture, the relationships between the State, space, people, and resources need careful negotiation to attain sustainability. In a way, any accepted approach tends to oversimplify the ground realities, and undermines plurality, complexity, sensitivity, and the significance of the social forces that are deeply embedded in the local power relations in the Northeast. Thus, no singular and linear external determinism can conceivably make the idea of the Northeast sustainable. In this regard, approaches that constantly invented and reinvented the idea of the Northeast in the past endured fluidity and unsustainability and could not provide a frame to emulate to change the frictional State-society relationship that essentially pushed incumbents for innovative approaches to frame the Northeast. Nevertheless, an 'ideological category' of the Northeast needs epistemic logic and a methodological approach that acknowledges the plurality of the space, its social order, the collective voice, and the geographic and economic potential. As the space has been reinvented for greater national and global geostrategic gains, the foundation for its sustainability lies in accommodating and balancing the local forces. Alternatively, it will continue to be a site of undying contestations that will make the idea of the Northeast protuberant in the State's imagination.

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# ECONOMIC COOPERATION VIA NORTHEAST INDIA

## EVOLUTION THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

.....  
NILANJAN GHOSH, SOUMYA BHOWMICK, AND ROSHAN SAHA  
.....

India's Northeast Region (NER) is a critical driver of the nation's avowed Act East policy. The region is economically important on two fronts: the region's strategic location, connecting the product markets of the larger Indian geography and the robust Southeast Asia; and the availability of strong input market catalysts, such as social (diversity, cultural richness), physical (connectivity, potential energy supply hubs), human (inexpensive, skilled labour) and natural (minerals, forests, water resources) capital.

This essay highlights the trade links between the NER and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (1), while also delineating the importance of economic corridors to strengthen the agglomerative forces (2) and ancillary industries that are imperative for the region's development into an economic core. The article proposes two major policy shifts to enable this transition: (a) *a 'big-push', or the 'critical minimum effort' that is necessary for the development of physical infrastructure in the NER*: This should come from private and public sources,

with the share of the former gradually increasing overtime; (b) *an emphasis on improving UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) parameters*, that will create long-term enabling conditions for the NER and BIMSTEC region to become a subregional economic hotspot in harmony with the natural environment and society.

### Contextualising the Role of the NER in Southeast Asia

Despite its resource endowments, the NER hasn't been able to tap into its economic potential (3). Over the years, the NER has been on the fringe, marginalised to a great extent, with its only purpose being to serve the interests of the Indian heartland (4). Moreover, the region's geopolitical positioning—about 98 percent of its borders are India's international boundaries (bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar)—and the remote access to the other Indian states has left it vulnerable to unique developmental challenges. The large-scale inflow of illegal migrants from the neighbouring countries

that has led to social and political tensions and deprivation among the local population, and the loss of connectivity and market access to the rest of India have acted as deterrents to the development of the region despite continuous efforts by the erstwhile local and central governments.

The central government now appears to have realised the implications of the cycle of underdevelopment, political and social tensions, and insurgency that operates in the NER. This region is critically important for developing and promoting the economic and strategic cooperation envisaged under BIMSTEC. The NER is essentially where Southeast Asia begins, making it a key player in the ideological, geographical, sociological, and economic construct of the BIMSTEC. The NER has unique characteristics comprising of diverse ethnic communities and rich natural resources (such as 190 billion cubic metres of natural gas reserves, 900 million tonnes of coal reserves, and 500 million tonnes of oil reserves) (5). Its hydroelectric power generation potential is estimated at around 50,000 MW, almost 40 percent of India's total hydropower potential (6). It also has huge reserves of limestone, which is an essential raw material in cement production, and a large human capital base. Yet, due to geographic limitations, the NER has often been neglected in policymaking or failed to respond adequately to development efforts. But this is now changing, with several Union ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, the Ministry of Jal Shakti, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, identifying the potential of NER in their respective domains. For instance, the current administration's plan of 'doubling farmers' income by 2022' is pegged on the NER's capability of boosting India's agriculture productivity. In consonance with this view, a new special economic zone (SEZ) was

proposed in Tripura to promote agriculture and agro-based industries, and other tradable products of the region (7). Additionally, the 2022 Union Budget has allocated INR1.98 billion (US\$ 24.8 million) for the development of organic farming in the region (8).

The NER's economic isolation has arguably ended since 2014 because of the Act East policy, which identified the need for bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation through the region as a cornerstone of larger objective of greater economic, cultural, and strategic integration with Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific (9). Other policies focused on dismantling the geographical obstacles and remoteness of the NER through the improvement of connectivity infrastructures and transportation routes with regional organisations as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement, the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, and BIMSTEC. In line with this view, the 2022 Union Budget allocated INR 15 billion (US\$ 188 million) for development initiatives in the NER (10).

The lack of development in economic activities and the perpetuation of traditional sectors of production in the NER has led to a loss of the dynamic economies of scale that could have been achieved with the establishment of manufacturing industries. However, economic and strategic integration through multilateral cooperation between the Southeast Asian countries could build synergies or cluster effects that will prove mutually beneficial in the long run in terms of greater productivity, more sophisticated networks, and consequently a greater integration into the global value chains (11). For the NER, this essentially reflects a shift from the traditional sectors to manufacturing and successfully tapping into the potential resource base, accompanied by a larger scope for development.

Moreover, attempts at cultural integration might help curb the rise of insurgent groups and the exploitation of the local population's sentiments, and ease political tensions in the region, which in turn could result in the better utilisation of development funds. However, the practical implementation of the Act East policy has not been smooth, and several challenges remain. Among these challenges, apart from national security, high barriers to trade are also important.

### Trade and Foreign Direct Investment in the NER

The NER has become an important geostrategic space for East Asian countries to exercise their statecraft (12). However, India has not yet invited other countries to participate in the development of the region. Foreign direct investment (FDI) and other capital inflow in the NER are considerably lower than other parts of India. According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, between 2000 and 2017, overall FDI in the NER was less than one percent of the total FDI into India (13). However, Japan has shown a keen interest in the region due to historical connections, such as Buddhist linkages. Recognising the immense potential of the NER, India and Japan have developed bilateral ties through partnerships in infrastructure development in the region. Both countries have invested substantial political capital to improve the NER's physical capital. The Japan-India Act East Forum, established in 2017, bears testimony to this.

Japanese investments have mostly entered the region as overseas development aid (ODA). In March 2022, the Japanese government loaned JPY 312.258 billion (USD 2.25 billion) under such ODA agreements for seven projects, including the Chennai Metro Project

and North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (14). Japan has played a progressively active role in infrastructure development and connectivity building in the NER (15). One such initiative is the 'Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project', wherein grants-in-aid from Japan are being directed towards the improvement of roads such as the NH-54 (Aizawl to Tuipang) in Mizoram to boost connectivity in the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Corridor; the NH-51 (Bajengdoba to Dalu) and NH-40 (Shillong to Dawki) in Meghalaya connecting to Bangladesh; the Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge across the Brahmaputra River between Assam and Meghalaya; and the Gelephu-Dalu Corridor (in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank) (16).

Many South Korean investors have also shown interest in the region. For instance, KOTRA, South Korea's trade and investment promotion agency, has expressed an interest in investing in Assam (17). Private investors like the Automotive Tyre Manufacturers Association are also keen to invest in the NER (18). Such capital infusion can give a boost to the region's startup environment, and renew the demand and supply chains to generate new business opportunities.

#### The NER's trade potential with BIMSTEC

Since liberalising the economy in 1991, India has inked preferential or free trade agreements (FTAs) with several countries, including its BIMSTEC partners (19). Bilateral FTAs between India and Southeast Asian nations and the ASEAN-India FTA have resulted in a substantial elimination of various trade barriers except non-tariff measures. However, despite these provisions of free trade, most of the trade through the NER suffers from high costs associated with transportation and the loading and unloading

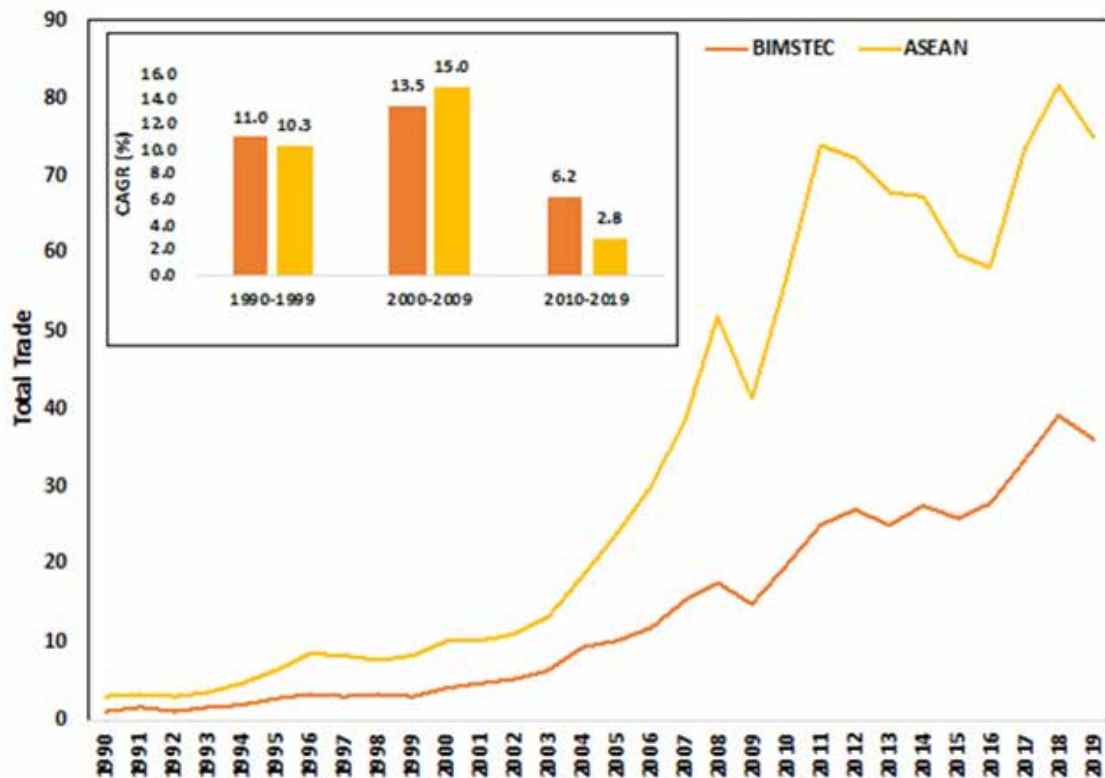
of goods at the borders. The lack of proper infrastructure connecting the countries in the region is a further impediment to what is a potential economic hotspot. Notwithstanding these barriers, trade with BIMSTEC nations has been on the rise (see Figure 1). Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have emerged as major partners within the BIMSTEC subregional grouping. However, not much of this trade can be attributed to the NER despite the complementarities that exist between the region and some of the countries.

Since Myanmar and Bangladesh share immediate borders with the NER, it is important to analyse the trade patterns that exist between India and these countries. A preliminary look at the export-import data (2018-19 estimates) between India and Bangladesh shows that cotton, vehicles other than tramways or railways, mineral fuels,

nuclear reactors and boilers, iron and steel, and cereals were India's top export items (21), while readymade garments, inorganic chemicals, plastics, and iron and steel were among the major items imported from Bangladesh (22). This indicates the presence of production networks across various commodity groups, especially cotton and textiles, cereals and preparation of cereals, and articles of iron and steel. Similarly, India's top exports to Myanmar (2018-19 estimates) include pharmaceutical products, mineral fuels, sugar and sugar confectionery, meat and edible meat, while major import items include edible vegetables and certain roots and tubers, wood (especially timber), zinc and articles thereof, iron and steel, and rubber (23).

Specific patterns of trade can also be identified between the NER, Bangladesh, and Myanmar

**Figure 1: Total Trade with BIMSTEC**



Source: *Enhancing Trade and Development in India's Northeast* (20)



(24). In trade between Bangladesh and NER complementarities exist between the resource structure of the NER and the demand pattern of Bangladesh (25). On the other hand, trade between Myanmar and NER is mostly transit in nature (26). Most of this trade is through the land border at Moreh, Manipur. However, due to inadequate physical infrastructure, security concerns, and the large volume of informal trade, the total land-based trade is still negligible compared to the bilateral trade between India (via the NER) and Myanmar.

### Corridors and Agglomeration Forces

National plans for corridor development generally include the aspects of developing rural infrastructure and boosting local businesses. However, the utilisation of these corridors for cross-border regional cooperation requires the linking of national plans and corridors of different countries. Developing transport corridors across countries is a primary move to creating economic corridors in a region. Indeed, research has established that transport corridors are necessary conditions for economic corridors (27). Once a transport corridor has been developed, the agglomeration of economies and growth of ancillary industries along these roads lead to the development of economic corridors. Finally, with trade facilitation and provisions for the mobility of labour and capital across the border, these economic corridors develop into regional corridors that facilitate the move towards greater economic integration across the entire region. They encourage a vertical disintegration of production processes and trade in services between the two regions if the regional economy is adequately supported by cross-border infrastructure facilities. Economic corridors aim to fill regional infrastructure gaps and facilitate trade in

goods and services, even as they promote pro-poor socioeconomic development through employment generation and inclusive growth.

As such, the exploitation/development of regional economic corridors of this capacity can potentially be beneficial for the entire region, particularly in developing economies (28). While such corridors entail huge capital expenditures from the government exchequer, their “public good” characteristic creates a business-enabling environment, thereby helping private investment flow, and ensure future flows of incomes and employment into the region. Besides generating income and employment for the local population, an economic corridor also considerably reduces trade costs and enhances regional integration and cooperation, which then becomes a self-sustaining system, assuming there are no major external shocks to it. These clustering or agglomerative forces arising out of regional cooperation gradually help develop complementarities and fragmentation in production processes that supplement the comparative advantages of trade among these nations, leading to larger gains from trade.

According to the Asian Development Bank, (29) once established, economic corridors can be beneficial in the following ways:

- Reduction in trade costs through reduction in transport costs and time lost in cross-border logistics, improved security or supervision at borders, better regulatory and governance frameworks, and so on.
- Increasing competitiveness of regional production in global markets through the vertical disintegration of the production line, enabling greater exploitation of comparative cost advantages across various locations along the length of the corridor.

- Development of supporting infrastructure to aid production units also leads to the development of the region as a whole.
- Regional integration provides access to a larger market and a greater variety of goods and services, enhancing trade volumes.
- Improving the quality of life of the local population and narrowing the development gaps across regions through access to infrastructure (such as electricity), higher incomes and employment generation.
- Give major impetus to the income of countries participating in such regional cooperation through the generation of domestic demand, both in terms of consumption and higher private investments. Moreover, it also increases the potential for fiscal expenditure for these governments.

Over the years, India's improving trade relations with Southeast Asian countries has led to an overall greater engagement of the NER in the Indian trade scenario. It is the transport corridors built across the NER that facilitates trade between the rest of India and other countries in Southeast Asia. Besides, these regions of India also have a vast endowment of natural resources and considerably large production capacities for agricultural goods. These transport corridors and significantly porous borders with lax security also encourage plenty of these local products to be exported to the neighbouring countries through informal channels. This has been a great source of income for the local population. It is identified that the transformation of these transport corridors to economic corridors can not only ease trade costs for India and the neighbouring

countries but can also potentially lead to the overall development of the NER. Besides a reduction in trade costs, these corridors can also influence inward FDI flow, employment generation, infrastructure development, and increase the base capacity of the fiscal space for investment in social sectors. If such policies are inclusive, they may prove beneficial for the NER.

Although much has been said about developing economic corridors and boosting trade ties, the impact of such debates and discussions have not translated into transformations on the ground in a manner that proponents of a free and prosperous Northeast BIMSTEC subregion might have expected. The BIMSTEC is an existing framework where this concept has been envisaged as a policy tool. The development of a trilateral road network between India, Myanmar, and Thailand and the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project are two examples of transport corridors that have been proposed. It is worth examining the enabling conditions that will facilitate the transition of these transport corridors to logistical hubs and ultimately to the creation of larger economic corridors. For example, transport costs are a significant portion of the trade costs associated with the flow of goods between two countries. A well-planned regional infrastructure will not only reduce trade costs but also encourage efficiency-seeking industrial restructuring.

Fuku Kimura and Izuru Kobayashi argue that improving location advantages by setting up SEZs that provide an improved climate for local investment, reducing the cost-of-service links that connect remote production blocs through improved transport facilities, and developing human resources and coordination among various stakeholders are fundamental incentives to the regional development of fragmented production blocks (30).

Pushpa Raj Rajkarnikar recommends infrastructure development (including electricity, roads, railways); the establishment of enquiry counters across borders; the standardisation of procedures for documentation, transit, and dispute settlement; capacity building in partnership with private sectors; and the integration of customs as effective measures to address issues related to trade across border states (31). Mohammad Masudur Rahman suggests that incentivising private sector participation is crucial for the transformation of transport corridors between Northeast India and Bangladesh to full-fledged economic corridors (32). Moreover, the NER could then gain access to the larger and more developed markets in Southeast Asia through the port facilities in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

Louis Lebel and Boripet Lebel point out a dialectical relationship between policy narratives and infrastructure development (33). Once transportation is facilitated, it generates demand for other allied industries, such as power and telecommunications, which ultimately reinforce the “shared prosperity” narrative. These transboundary policy narratives enhance regional cooperation by increasing the significance of individual projects.

### **Physical Infrastructure and Sustainable Development**

The development of a road network traversing India’s northeastern states that also connects landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan into Myanmar and Thailand is expected to boost the trade and economic ties between the countries of the region. However, notwithstanding the administrative bottlenecks that exist, the development of this road network into an economic corridor will

require improvements in infrastructure and broader developmental parameters.

The authors propose to examine two major enabling factors of the transition from a transport corridor to an economic corridor. A ‘big-push’ or the ‘critical minimum effort’ is necessary for the development of physical infrastructure in the region. Infrastructure development is an immediate priority, and akin to a necessary but not sufficient condition. In this context, infrastructure development is perceived to be a short-run enabling condition. Once the basic facilities are in place, improvements in the parameters identified under the SDGs will create the long-run enabling conditions that will foster the evolution into an economic corridor. With both enabling conditions in place, the Northeast and the neighbouring countries can then become a subregional economic hotspot.

Ghosh et. al. have argued that the SDGs are essential parameters that influence the conditions necessary for businesses and economic activities to thrive in a region. By their comprehensive nature, the SDGs incorporate four types of capital—physical, human, social, and natural. These, in turn, drive financial capital, as has been substantiated by the high degree of correlation between the SDG Index and the Ease of Doing Business in that paper. This model can be replicated in this context and improvements in infrastructure in the short run and SDGs can in the long run help drive financial capital into the region.

The policy design for the development of the region should be such that infrastructure development falls under the purview of sustainable development. In other words, in a shorter time frame, physical capital enhancement should be the primary focus but in the longer horizon, one must look at sustainable business solutions so that

infrastructure development is organically on the lines of sustainability. Therefore, the authors argue that through infrastructure development and implementation of SDGs, the transport corridors in the Northeast can be transformed into economic corridors that will facilitate further regional integration in future.

## Conclusion

A move from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity can serve to facilitate cooperative ventures of nation-states to achieve economic prosperity. Southeast Asian countries remain one of the least integrated in terms of their participation in intraregional trade. Some of the factors that have potentially hindered regional integration are historical political tension, mistrust, cross-border conflicts, high trade cost, asymmetry in the sizes of the countries, and limited transport connectivity, among others. However, it is important to identify the potentials that

subregionalism could unravel in terms of knowledge transfer (34).

Over the years, India's improving trade relations with the countries of Southeast Asia have led to a greater overall engagement of the NER in the Indian trade scenario. It is the transport corridors built across the NER that facilitate trade between the rest of India and other countries in Southeast Asia. It is identified that the transformation of these transport corridors to economic corridors can ease trade costs for India and the neighbouring countries and can potentially lead to the overall development of the NER. The NER posits itself as a gateway to Southeast Asia, and has a rich endowment of social, physical, natural, and human capital that can pave the way for greater cooperation between India and countries in South and Southeast Asia. But there are several challenges that must be addressed. The SDGs provide a framework for pursuing investment opportunities in the region that not only generates high economic returns but also greater cultural harmony and environmental stability.

## ENDNOTES

- (1) A grouping of seven South and Southeast Asian countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.
- (2) Agglomerative forces refer to the advantages that emerge due to the economies of agglomeration. These benefits arise when firms/industries cluster in a region leading to reduction in costs, pooling of labour and knowledge spillovers among other things. We argue that an economic corridor through the NER can strengthen these impacts.
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- (25) Major exports from the NER to Bangladesh include raw materials like coal, limestone, boulders, and agro-horticultural products like ginger and citrus fruits. Imports from Bangladesh, on the other hand, comprise finished commodities like cement, synthetic fabrics, readymade garments, and processed food.
- (26) Major export items from the NER to Myanmar include cumin seeds, cotton yarn, auto parts, soya bean meal, wheat flour and pharmaceuticals. Import items are betel nut, dry ginger, green mung beans, black matpe beans, turmeric roots, resin, and medicinal herbs.
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# STRENGTHENING CONNECTIVITY IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST

## THE JICA EXPERIENCE

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SAITO MITSUNORI

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India's Northeast region is extremely significant to the Indian operations of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). JICA, an incorporated administrative agency under the Japanese government, aims to promote international cooperation by executing Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects. Japan's ODA to India began in 1958, with over 6,878 billion yen (approximately US\$60 billion) committed for development across sectors such as transport, water and sanitation, energy, and forestry since then. Notably, ODA loans worth 405 billion yen (approximately US\$3,522 million) have been committed towards projects in the Northeast, 77 percent of which (315 billion yen, or approximately US\$2,740 million) have been pledged in the past 15 years alone, and with many projects currently under formulation in the region.

To achieve the vision of "leading the world with trust," JICA projects are designed based on official requests from partner countries. This aspect of Japan's cooperation supports the self-help efforts of developing countries and aims to encourage future self-reliant

development. The allotment of JICA projects may be interpreted as a reflection of the mutual recognition by both governments of where development needs and diplomatic importance coexist.

As such, India's Northeast is increasingly important to Japan given its promotion of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP), a core pillar of Japanese foreign policy. The concept of FOIP was announced in August 2016 by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Kenya (1). He stated that the key to the stability and prosperity of the international community is the dynamism created by combining "two continents"—rapidly-growing Asia and potential-filled Africa—and "two oceans"—the free and open Pacific and Indian oceans—and that Japan would work to realise prosperity in Asia and Africa. Japan has aimed to promote peace, stability, and prosperity across the region to make the Indo-Pacific free and open as an 'international public good' by promoting a rules-based international order, including the rule of law, freedom of navigation and

overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and promotion of free trade. To materialise its FOIP vision, Japan has long sought to strengthen strategic cooperation with India, which historically has had strong ties with East Africa, as well as with the US and Australia (2). Indeed, the concept was first clearly declared in 2007 during Abe's speech to the Indian parliament, termed the 'Confluence of the Two Seas' (3).

When it comes to the development perspective, India has noted that the Northeast is "lagging far behind the rest of the country in most important parameters of growth" (4). Of India's 28 states, three Northeast states have a rank below 20 and three between 15 to 20 on the SDG India Index 2020-21, and only Mizoram and Sikkim have an SDG Index score equal to or better than the national average (5). Thus, JICA believes that an improvement in the region's socioeconomic indicators will contribute to inclusive development in India and the achievement of SDGs.

Located at a strategically and economically critical juncture between India and Southeast Asia, as well as within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries, India's Northeast is considered a concrete symbol of developing synergies between India's Act East Policy and Japan's FOIP. It is in this context that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Abe pledged to reinforce efforts to align the two policies in September 2017 (6) and expressed a commitment to work together to enhance connectivity in India and with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including those in Africa. Consequently, the 'India-Japan Act East Forum' was established in December 2017 to expand cooperation between the two countries in the Northeast in key infrastructure projects. The forum is comprised of all the relevant union ministries

and Northeast state governments from the Indian side, and the Embassy of Japan in India and all government-affiliated agencies in New Delhi from Japan's side. The forum has been held six times and participants, including JICA, have discussed the possible areas of cooperation, such as connectivity, road infrastructure, health, forest conservation, water supply and sewerage, electricity, disaster management, people-to-people exchange, and capacity development. Now, Japan is the only country with an independent framework to discuss the development of India's Northeast at such a high level.

### JICA Projects

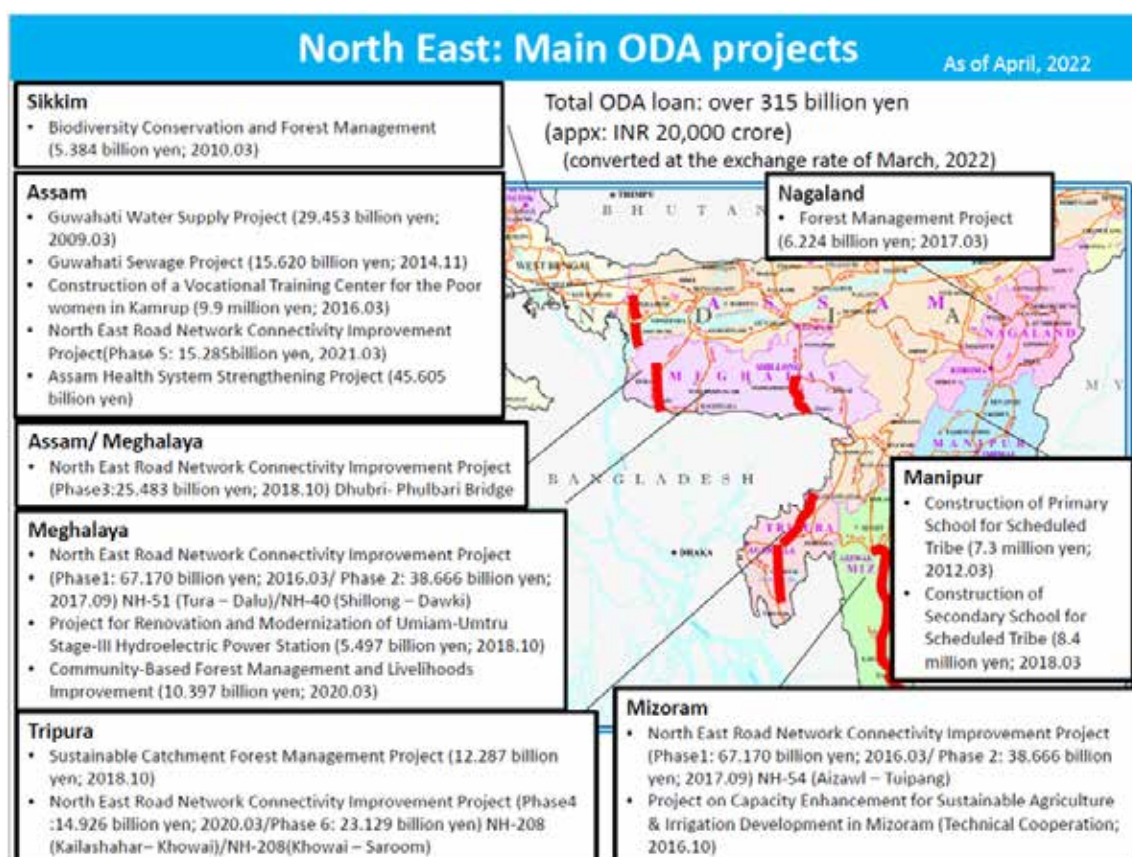
As of April 2022, JICA is currently overseeing 14 ODA loan projects and one technical cooperation project in the Northeast (see Figure 1). While these projects are across sectors, six are focused on improving connectivity in the region.

India's Northeast is a key strategic area, sharing international borders with Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. This characteristic geographical location coupled with time-consuming customs and procedures is making the Northeast an isolated area with high transportation costs. Also, in 2015-16, the GDP per capita in the region was INR 76,540, far lower than the national average of INR 112,432 (7).

Presently, India's efforts in the Northeast are focused on "economically consolidating these areas with overall economic benefits flowing to local population while integrating them in a more robust manner with the national economy (8)" by "developing and improving road connectivity including the international trade corridor in the North East and roads in the North Bengal and North Eastern region



Figure 1: Main ODA Projects in India's Northeast



Source: Embassy of Japan in India

of India” (9). Improved road infrastructure ensures efficient and safe transport regionally with other South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) countries and helps to promote cross-border trade and commerce between India and the neighbouring nations. There is a strong need to unlock constrained connectivity to and from the Northeast by improving the road network, which is critical for the economic development of the region.

Several road projects in the Northeast are funded by international cooperation agencies. For instance, the World Bank has assisted in state road projects in Mizoram (2014-21) and Assam (2012-19) and is currently assisting the Meghalaya Integrated Transport Project (2020-26) to improve transport connectivity and efficiency in that state (10). Similarly,

the Asian Development Bank has provided assistance towards the North Eastern State Roads Investment Program (2014-21) to increase transport connectivity along regional trade corridors in the region (11).

In 2012-13, JICA initiated a “data collection survey on transport infrastructure development for regional connectivity in and around South Asia (12)” to investigate the agency’s assistance projects for regional transport infrastructure development (including ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ aspects) in and around South Asia. Based on the survey, JICA shortlisted candidate projects by evaluating 13 multiple criteria, including connectivity for land-locked countries, traffic potential, economic growth potential, project impact on industries, ease of implementation, and

expected synergies with other development projects. The survey became the basis of JICA's 'Northeast Connectivity Improvement Projects,' which assists with the development and improvement of national highways in the region.

JICA envisaged working closely with India's Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH) and the National Highway Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) to assist in improving connectivity in the Northeast. The projects are aligned with India's development policies such as a Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for the Northeast, which seeks to improve the national highways connecting the major cities in the region, and the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 in 2008, which aims to ease the flow of people and goods by developing transport infrastructure and to attract foreign direct investment to create job opportunities.

Based on the findings of JICA's 2012-13 transport survey and the mutual understanding of the importance of improved connectivity in the Northeast, Japan and India agreed to implement several prioritised projects. JICA has supported improving and constructing prioritised sections of national highways (657 kms in total) in phases 1-5 of its Northeast Connectivity Improvement Projects. Under these projects, JICA has extended an ODA loan of 161 billion yen (approximately US\$1,405 million) to construct and improve:

- NH 54, from Aizawl to Tuipang, both in Mizoram, to connect Myanmar's Sittwe port to the region.
- NH 51 (Tula to Dalu) and NH 40 (Shillong to Dawki) in Meghalaya, which will provide links with Bangladesh.

- NH 127B (new Dhubri-Phulbari bridge between Assam and Meghalaya, and Srirampur-Dhubri in Assam state), to provide a link between Nepal/Bhutan and Bangladesh
- NH 208 (Kailashahar-Khowai) in Tripura, which will connect to Bangladesh.
- Project formulations of phase 6 (Khowai-Sabroom) in Tripura and phase 7 (Phulbari-Groigre) in Meghalaya are underway.

Among these, the Dhubri-Phulbari bridge construction project is significant as it will be the longest river bridge in India, spanning over more than 19 km. The construction of the bridge is expected to dramatically improve access from Bhutan to Bangladesh via India and facilitate the movement of people and the flow of goods; passenger and cargo volumes are expected to increase by 2,954,000 people per year and 11,841,000 ton per year, respectively, in 2030 (13). Additionally, the project is expected to bring about many development impacts, including a dramatic reduction in travel times (from eight hours via existing land routes to only 23 minutes from Dhuburi to Phulbari). This will improve market access and services, and promote the development of the rural agro-related sector, improve access to higher education facilities and modern health facilities, and generate large-scale employment opportunities (14).

The other highlight is the development of the Bangladesh-India corridor, capitalising on connectivity opportunities from Bangladesh's Chattogram northbound through Tripura and onwards into the Northeast. JICA is contributing to the project through the construction and improvement of NH 208 (Kailashahar-Khowai) in Tripura. Currently, there is limited intraregional trade between

India and Bangladesh. In 2011/2012, the ratio of exports from Bangladesh to India was only 2.1 percent, and the ratio of exports from India to Bangladesh was 1.2 percent (15). The project is expected to bring about huge socioeconomic impacts in facilitating the movement of people and the flow of goods. For example, passenger and cargo volume are expected to increase from 1.8 million persons per year in 2019 to 4.7 million in 2026, and from 9,500 ton per year in 2019 to 3.3 million in 2026, respectively (16). In Bangladesh, JICA has supported the building of bridges from Ramgarh to Baraiyarahat, and India has assisted in road development from Ramgarh to Chattogram to provide seamless traffic flow across the two countries. Additionally, the World Bank has implemented a regional connectivity project (April 2017-2023) worth US\$170 million to support the modernisation of customs clearances in Bangladesh to promote cross-border trade (17). As a part of this project, the World Bank has also assisted in the development of the Ramgarh customs office (Bangladesh border), which is in contact with the Sabroom (Indian border) at the southern end of NH 208. Thus, this project is a highlight of Japan-India cooperation as well as collaboration with other development partners to enhance regional connectivity.

Additionally, between 2016 and 2022, JICA also provided technical assistance to MoRTH to improve the capacity of developing highways in mountainous regions. Roads in mountainous areas, such as in the Northeast, are often composed of multiple civil engineering structures with bridges and tunnels, and proper maintenance is essential for the road to function as a network. In India, there is a scarcity of technical experts in the field of designing and in the supervision of highway works, including tunnels in hilly terrain. Thus, this project was formulated based on the MoRTH's request to improve

capacity in this specific field. Through the project, JICA assisted in developing five technical guidelines in the field of planning, tunnel, slope protection, bridge, and operation and maintenance in mountainous highway development. These guidelines were successfully approved by MoRTH on 31 January 2022 and will be published soon (18). Based on these guidelines, pilot projects were taken up, including the provision of a detailed project report, recommendation for NH 54 in Assam and NH 717 in West Bengal, and the technical transfer at NH 10 in Sikkim by Japanese experts. Furthermore, as part of the project activity, counterpart personnel from MoRTH, NHIDCL, National Highways Authority of India were trained in India and Japan by relevant authorities (such as Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the East Nippon Expressway Company Limited) to learn about the latest technology in the development and maintenance of highways.

JICA will continue to provide support to capacity development for the maintenance of resilient mountainous highways under a new technical cooperation project from April 2022. As a part of the new project, JICA will focus on the development of technical handbooks to assess the disaster risk of slopes on mountainous highways, technical inspection manuals for road maintenance work, and an operation and maintenance manual for tunnels (19).

Through these ODA loan and technical cooperation projects, JICA has supported India's efforts to develop and improve road connectivity in the Northeast and with the neighbouring countries. These projects will significantly contribute to enhancing the movement of people and goods, which will spur economic prosperity and stability in the region, in line with Japan's FOIP vision.

## The Way Forward

The Northeast region's importance is only expected to grow and JICA will continue to implement projects in the region based on the agreements Japan and India. Connectivity improvement will remain a strategic pillar of JICA's work in the region. Equally important is the promotion of the human security and industrial development. As such, JICA's contribution will extend to other areas under the Act East Forum. For instance, JICA is currently implementing water and power infrastructure development projects, and projects to improve forest management and the income levels of people in the region. Amid

the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of the health sector has also been noted, and JICA is now formulating health projects in Assam and Mizoram. The agency is committed to achieving inclusive and dynamic progress in the Northeast as this is crucial in the bilateral and regional contexts.

The year 2022 marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and India. JICA is committed to contributing to further blossoming of the 'special strategic and global partnership' between the two countries by unleashing its great potential.

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# TRADE AND DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST

## A TRIPURA-CENTRIC VIEW

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**INDRANEEL BHOWMIK**  
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India's neighbouring countries mainly comprise the members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—along with Myanmar and China on the eastern and the northern front. Though not a uniform platter, these countries represent a world of historical links, shared legacies, and commonalities, while diversities in terms of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political identities are well enshrined (1).

To leverage and strengthen the region's strategic positioning, India has imbibed a 'Neighbourhood First' policy, (2) which is reflected in collaborations like the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative on a host of vital issues. Similarly, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) aims to facilitate, promote, and foster trade and services among Bay of Bengal coastal countries, with Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka joining the BBIN countries. Just beyond the immediate neighbourhood, India's relations with the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was further cemented with the adoption of the proactive Act East policy in November 2014, which is an upgraded version of the Look East policy from the 1990s.

These alliances will draw greater attention to India's Northeast. The Northeast region (NER) has been a land of immense promise that is yet to reach its potential. The SDG Index created by the NITI Aayog shows that most of these states rank in the lower tiers in terms of their scores.

The Northeast in the present context refers to the seven sister states—Mizoram, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland. Each state has its own unique feature; Sikkim is left out from this study as it does not share a border with the rest of the states in the region and is therefore distinct. The Northeast region is politically and socioeconomically diverse but has traditionally lagged in achieving basic development parameters and faces deficits in terms of economic necessities, including fiscal strength.

The NER states, in pursuit of strategies to encourage high mass consumption, are dependent on substantial economic intervention by the central government, often determined through constitutional grants designed on geostrategic considerations. The 5132km-long (3) international border that spreads across these seven states witnesses multiple forms of cross-border linkage, including trade, which is often informal and clandestine. The associated challenges of law and order, insurgency, security, and cross-border terrorism have also dampened progress for many decades, as the substantial military presence in the region has been a deterrent for economic actors. Moreover, years of infrastructural and educational underinvestment (4) had fuelled discontent among many in the NER. Thus, with limited economic opportunities, youth from the region migrated in search of work, safety, security, and aspirational opportunities (5). Thus, the integration of the region with the rest of India continued as a method of development transition in the form of the mingling of people, liberal transfer of funds, and defence strategies. However, India's changing external environment and domestic dynamics saw the evolution of the Look East policy, which attempted to link the land-locked Northeast states with the economies of the ASEAN region (6).

The waning of insurgency and the adoption

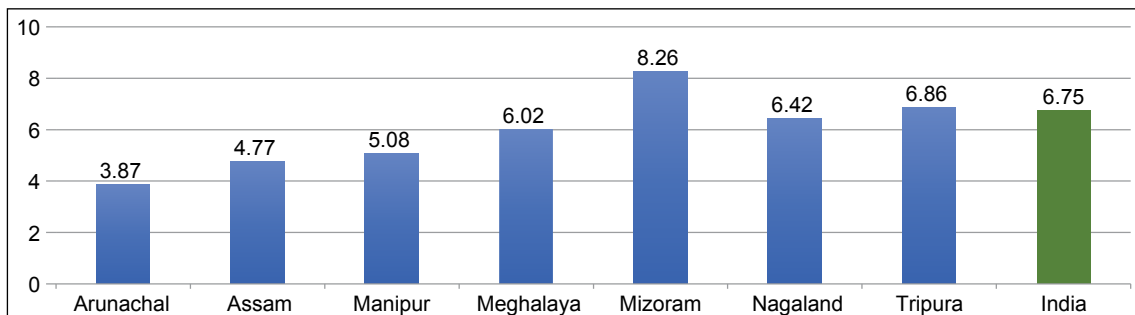
of new policies in the realm of economics and strategic interventions, including the two phases of the National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (7), have more recently added a developmental impetus to the region. This paper explores the opportunities for Tripura in terms of trade linkages and associated development activities against emerging relations in the neighbourhood.

## The Potential

Typically, the NER had been characterised by low productivity due to factors like geographical isolation, limited irrigation, and a stagnant manufacturing sector, resulting in insufficient capital formation, and widespread poverty and unemployment. Even though the region boosted the production of two of the traditional products—tea and petroleum—not much is visible in the form of big business. Limited economic opportunities has often necessitated that the locals chalk out a living from their environmental surroundings, leading to the depletion of natural resources. At the same time, the availability of quick money through the manipulation of liberal grants, often led to time and cost overruns in development projects (8) (9).

Between 1993-94 and 2018-19, only Mizoram and Tripura had a higher annual growth rate than the national average (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR) (1993-94 to 2018-19) of NER States (in %)**



Source: Computed from Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation data sets

**Table 1: Average Annual Growth Rate, Northeast and India (in %)**

Sector	Northeast	India
1980-1994	4.14	5.26
1994-2000	3.38	6.38
2004- 2013	6.64	6,80
2014-2020	7.39	6.77
Agriculture	1.98	1.77
Manufacturing	9.53	8.64
Construction	7.34	4.43
Services	6.20	7.57

Source: Sharma (2020) (10)

In recent years, things are somewhat improving, as visible in the higher average annual growth rate (except for the services sector) for NER during 2014-2020 (see Table 1).

Improved relations with the eastern neighbours can open up numerous opportunities for the local and regional agricultural market, primarily fruits, vegetables and spices. Additionally, the abundance of exotic flora and fauna in the region can propel the production of several medicinal, beauty and aromatic products, which can be integrated into the global value chain network (11). Coupling these strengths with the rich heritage and culture of the region can boost the tourism and wellness sector for all the NER states.

### Tripura Perspective

Tripura is the second-largest state in the region in terms of population and economy. It is unique for being flanked by Bangladesh for almost 84 percent of its perimeter (856 km). Eight districts of Bangladesh share a border with Tripura, while all the eight districts of Tripura share their border with Bangladesh (see Figure 2). Thus, any kind of development

**Figure 2: Sketch Map of Tripura (Not to scale)**



Source: Prof SK De, Department of Geography, NEHU, Shillong

prospect for Tripura cannot be conceived without factoring in Bangladesh.

History attests to the ethnic, social, and cultural linkages of the people of Bangladesh and Tripura. The erstwhile kings of Tripura were the zamindars of Chakla Roshanabad, now situated in Bangladesh. Most of the people in Tripura can perhaps trace



their origins to Bangladesh. All rivers in Tripura flow to Bangladesh, and most of the hill ranges merge with the plains in that country. Moreover, Tripura's population had supported Bangladesh's *Muktijuddho*, the liberation war. Beyond these natural, social, and cultural tie-ups, there is a substantial informal economic linkage between the two. Minimal development, abject poverty, and lack of income and employment opportunities in the border areas fueled an informal trade market between the two neighbours. The long and porous border also aided infiltration and insurgency, a challenge that has been curtailed in recent years (12).

Tripura's economy is primarily government-led as the private sector has a limited footprint. Also, the state finances are not very robust, and dependence on the union government is at the centre stage of the development activities (13). Formal trade between India and Bangladesh occurs through the land ports in Tripura.

Tripura has eight land custom stations (LCS), six of which—Agartala, Srimantpur, Muhurighat, Khowaighat, Manughat, and Old Raghonabazar—allow the movement of goods and people, while in Dhalaighat, goods are not allowed. The Sabroom LCS is yet to be operational. Official trade between the two countries through Tripura began in 1995-96, and Agartala LCS processed trade amounting to INR 4.12 crores that year (14).

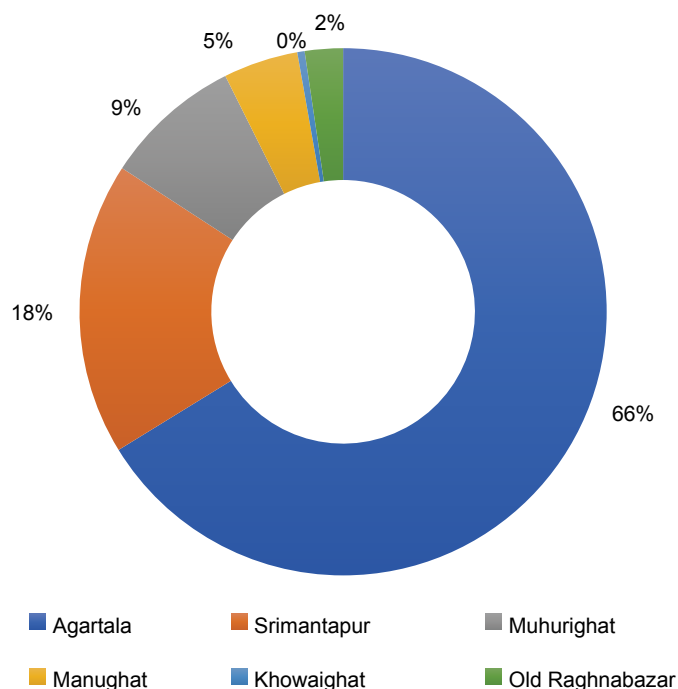
Recently, there has been a dramatic surge in trade. The total trade volume had crossed INR 733 crore during 2020-21, indicating an annual growth rate of 8 percent, despite the COVID-19 pandemic affecting operations. Crude estimates by land port authority officials at Agartala suggest that the volume may reach INR 1000 crores soon (if there is no surge in the pandemic, the figure may be reached in 2022-23 itself). Nevertheless, the average annual growth rate (AAGR) of the total trade during 2008-09 to 2020-21 was 24.9 percent,

**Table 2: Trade Through Tripura's Land Ports (in INR Crores)**

	Imports	Exports	Total Trade (Imports + Exports)	Annual Growth Rate of Total Trade (in %)
2008-09	48.69	0.87	49.56	
2007-08	84.15	1.51	85.66	72.84
2008-09	125.94	0.26	126.2	47.33
2009-10	162.88	0.42	163.3	29.40
2010-11	255.88	1.71	257.59	57.74
2011-12	329.05	1.55	330.6	28.34
2012-13	342.65	0.41	343.06	3.77
2013-14	229.83	0.41	230.24	-32.89
2014-15	357.65	1.02	358.67	55.78
2015-16	381.76	1.96	383.72	6.98
2016-17	300.23	4.6	304.83	-20.56
2017-18	384.22	6.46	390.68	28.16
2018-19	522.42	14.66	537.08	37.47
2019-20	644.78	30.34	675.12	25.70
2020-21	716.87	16.33	733.2	8.60

Source: Compiled from various issues of *Economic Review of Tripura*

**Figure 3: Share of Trade Volume among Tripura's Land Customs Stations (2018-19)**



Source: Computed from Economic Review of Tripura, 2020-21

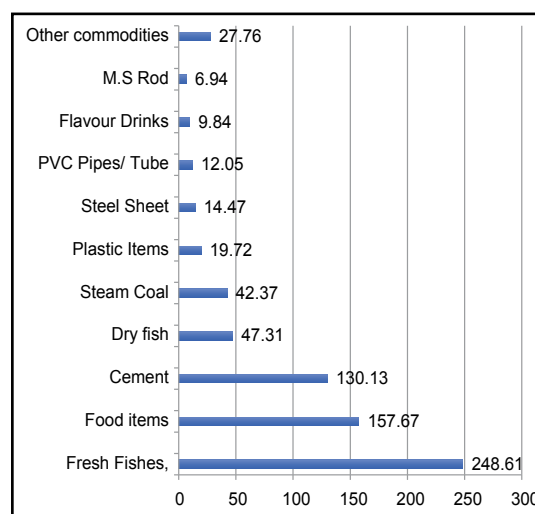
and the AAGR was above 30 percent for the three-year period preceding the pandemic. This improvement can be attributed to the numerous agreements and joint efforts on enhancing trade between the two countries.

In 2018-19, the bulk of the trade occurs through Agartala (66 percent) owing to the better infrastructural facility at the only integrated check post (ICP) in the state (see Figure 3). Srimantapur LCS accounts for 18 percent, while Muhurighat records 9 percent of the total trade. The volume of trade in Manughat and Old Ragnabazar are minuscule.

A distinct feature of India-Bangladesh trade through Tripura is the overwhelming trade surplus for Bangladesh (see Table 2). Exports from Tripura account for around 2 percent of the total trade volume. The export commodities include fresh ginger, cumin seeds, and fruits like grapes and some dry fishes. The import basket includes items ranging from primary

commodities to basic industrial materials and fuels, including manufactured items. In 2020-21, the most prominent import items were fresh fishes, food items and cement (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Imports from Bangladesh in 2020-21 (in INR Crores)**



Source: Computed from Economic Review of Tripura, 2020-21

Trade between Tripura and Bangladesh reached a new dimension with the opening of the border *haats* in 2014-15. Border *haats* are markets where people in the border areas trade their local products. The governments of India and Bangladesh agreed on the concept to promote the livelihood opportunities of the people residing in these marginalised areas. Selling of locally-produced agro-horticultural items, minor forest products, furniture, cottage industry items, handloom, and handicraft products are allowed in these *haats*. There are two functioning *haats* in Tripura—Kamalsagar in Sepahijala district and Srinagar in South Tripura district. The counterparts of these two places in Bangladesh are Tarapur and Chagalnaiya (15).

Sales volumes were the highest in 2016-17 (INR 17.67 crores) and have reduced since then (see Table 3). There is no uniformity in sale proceeds between the two locations, though the turnover in Kamalasagar is marginally higher than in Srinagar. Indian traders had higher sales for all years and locations except for Srinagar in 2019-20. Indian traders mostly sold spices, local vegetables, jackfruits, toiletries, saree, clothes like *lungi* and *gamcha*, tea leaves, and baby food. Bangladeshi traders sold dry fish, bakery items, and fruits like green apples, watermelons, and plastic goods (16). Border

*haats* were non-functional in 2020-21 due to COVID-19 restrictions. A third site is under construction in Kamalpur in Dhalai district, and a fourth is proposed at Raghna in North Tripura district (17).

Trading at the border *haats* is informal but is different from illegal or illicit trade, the volume of which has reduced in areas where these centres have been set. But the smuggling of restricted items and contrabands has not ceased entirely. However, many locals who were earlier engaged in informal channels find it easier and safer to abide and participate in the new system, which has also opened opportunities for women vendors (18). These efforts have improved people-to-people connectivity, spurred stability and peace and diminished the stronghold of insurgents.

### The Potential Game Changer

The 150-metre-long Maitree Setu—a bridge built on River Feni, the riverine boundary between India and Bangladesh—connects India's Sabroom to Ramgarh in Bangladesh (19). The bridge can potentially emerge as the gateway to the Northeast since Chittagong Port is approximately 100 kilometres away. The distance between Agartala to Kolkata will reduce to around 450 kilometres from 1600 kilometres via Assam and the Siliguri Corridor.

**Table 3: Sales at India's Border Haats (in INR crore)**

	Kamalasagar			Srinagar			Total
	India	Bangladesh	Subtotal	India	Bangladesh	Subtotal	
2014-15	-	-	-	0.18	0.09	0.27	<b>0.27</b>
2015-16	2.96	0.55	3.51	1.81	0.7	2.51	<b>6.02</b>
2016-17	5.88	0.59	6.47	7.39	3.81	11.2	<b>17.67</b>
2017-18	4.25	1.21	5.46	4.28	3.29	7.57	<b>13.03</b>
2018-19	3.17	0.91	4.08	0.94	0.63	1.57	<b>5.65</b>
2019-20	8.39	0.98	9.37	0.83	4.61	5.44	<b>14.81</b>

Source: Compiled from various issues of Economic Review of Tripura

Logistics costs will also be drastically cut, and the bridge has the potential to become a major trade corridor for the entire NER (20).

Sabroom, Tripura's southernmost municipal town and the recipient of a host of developmental interventions (most significantly the Maitree Setu), is well on its way to becoming a trading hotspot. Known for its multiethnic identity, Sabroom retained its agrarian character and peaceful atmosphere even during the turbulent times in Tripura. A subdivisional headquarter, Sabroom has been connected by a broad-gauge railway network since 2018-19, and the National Highway 8 connects it to Karimgunj in Assam. More importantly, however, the distance to Chittagong Port from Sabroom is lesser than its distance to Agartala. The Indian Railways is facilitating the freight handling station here to enable the movement of commodities at lower cost and greater speed. Linking port connectivity with rail connectivity can alter the dynamics of the town. Sabroom also has a designated LCS but it is currently non-operational. The construction of the new ICP is likely to be complete in 2022.

Additionally, the government of Tripura has laid the foundation for constructing a multisector special economic zone (SEZ) at West Jalefa, situated close to Sabroom. The SEZ can emerge as a centre to produce rubber goods, bamboo products, and agro-food processing items, among others. The SEZ will potentially generate employment for around 5000 people (21). Such an effort will have multiplier effects in the form of additional economic activity and employment.

Another developmental prospect for Sabroom is the proposed International Buddhist University at Manu-Bankul (22). The project, when completed, will attract students and

scholars from several East and Southeast Asian countries.

## Opportunities Through BIMSTEC

The emerging policy regime in India speaks of regional cooperation, connectivity, and improved relations with international neighbours, and Tripura can leverage its geographical positioning in this regard. On the economic front, investment from Bangladesh, particularly in the textile and apparel sector, can be explored. The expertise and experience of Bangladesh in global exports of cotton textiles can be advantageous for Tripura, with the proposed SEZ in Sabroom as a platform for investment from Bangladesh. Tripura and other Northeast states may explore possibilities of tying up with Southeast Asian countries for integration into the global value chain in the rubber goods manufacturing sector. The natural rubber produced in NER hardly has any value addition in the region (23). Access and connectivity to East Asian countries may alter the scenario. Similar opportunities exist for bamboo-based products.

Tripura and the other Northeast states also have the potential to become prominent wellness destinations. The climatic advantage of the NER can be marketed for tie-ups with global leaders in the wellness industry, mainly because youth from the region are proficient in this sector, (24) and their expertise can be leveraged.

Improving the health infrastructure can tap many patients from Bangladesh who transit through Tripura to hospitals in Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru. The state can also emerge as a valuable education hub. The prominence of Bengali and English in Tripura can attract middle-level school students from Bangladesh. The stress should be on

elementary and secondary education, and tie-ups with leading residential educational service providers can be explored. Focusing on middle-level education will limit the pressure of looking for placements, a challenge often faced by higher-education service providers.

India's third international internet gateway was inaugurated in 2016 at Agartala. Bangladesh has provided 10 Gbps-worth of bandwidth via the Cox's Bazar Port (25). The gateway, built jointly by Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited and Bangladesh Submarine Cable Company Limited, can be of great use for the implementation of the Digital India campaign.

Further, professional memorial tours on *Muktijuddho* can be considered from a tourism perspective. Similarly, the development of a Buddhist tour circuit linking sites from both countries can create and further promote trade and community-run enterprises and cross-cultural bonding among people. Plus, it can be used as a platform to conserve both cultural and natural resources.

The camaraderie between the two sides is likely to increase further with the proposed establishment of the Centre for Bangladesh Studies at Tripura University with a Chair named after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, often referred to as the founding father of Bangladesh and who served as its president and prime minister.

### The Way Forward

The opportunities can certainly be realised if the focus on infrastructural growth is maintained. The broad-gauge railway network across Tripura boosted the movement of goods and people within the state, and the operation of the Agartala-Akhaura railway link through

the Nishchintapur-Gangasagar gateway is poised to flag off new dimensions of economic activities and development.

The expansion of the national highway network, particularly in the last few years, has improved the state's internal connectivity and that with other states. Linkage with Bangladesh, therefore, can also be used to further economic development in other NER states.

The revamping of Agartala Airport in January 2022 is expected to fuel further growth, with the increased number of flights, passengers, and cargo. Apart from connecting Agartala with Sylhet and Chittagong, the new terminal is better equipped to cater to international tourists and transit passengers from adjoining areas of Bangladesh. Moreover, a quick transfer of cargo and freight carriers is also possible.

The LEADS (26) index of logistics infrastructure positions Tripura as superior to most other Northeast states. However, challenges like poor mobile/internet connectivity, limited inland waterways, inadequate storage and warehousing facilities, and the system of informal payment remain. These can be addressed by better utilisation of the IT ecosystem to boost trade and development within the region as well as with neighbouring countries.

Several issues need immediate prioritisation. There has been little progress at the LCS on the Ramgarh side of Maitree Setu, which will not facilitate goods and passenger movement until completed. The Agartala-Akhaura rail link has been delayed substantially due to non-economic factors, such as the pandemic-induced lockdown and sluggish acquisition of land (27); these need quicker intervention for settlement. The development of ICP

at Srimantapur needs to be fast-tracked, particularly to ease the burden at the Agartala ICP. Srimantapur LCS can be used as the primary entry and exit point of goods from/to Bangladesh, while Agartala ICP may act as the premier centre for passenger movement. If feasible, the proposed waterway from Daudkandi (Bangladesh) to Sonamura (India) on River Gomti can propel trade relations between the two countries to a new height.

Harnessing the trade enhancement opportunities should not be compromised. The state should welcome talented individuals

with an entrepreneurship zeal for investment on professional terms and conditions. Successful migrants from Tripura can be incentivised for investment and technical insights. A policy to encourage homecoming can be considered as newer openings are always on the anvil. Prudent governance is the need of the hour to keep pseudo-investors at bay and avoid dumping products, ideas, and services on the state's vulnerable population. All this is possible with political will and maintaining amicable relations with the neighbouring countries.

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SECTION IV  
**Security  
Conundrum**



# THREE NARRATIVES OF CONNECTIVITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND INSURGENCY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

## ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

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ALEX WATERMAN

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Assessments of the relationship between trade, connectivity, and development between Northeast India and the wider Bay of Bengal region on the one hand, and the security imperatives of Northeast India on the other can vary significantly depending on the interpretive framework drawn upon. Building a cross-border road, for example, may be viewed as an opportunity to usher in connectivity, development, and prosperity. Equally, it may be viewed as a security threat, enabling hostile actors to navigate otherwise difficult terrain, or indeed as an opportunity to extend the reach of security forces into far-flung regions. For some, the road may represent a business opportunity, but for others denotes the threat of extractive, imposed forms of development. In each of these, distinct narratives provide the interpretive framework through which the act of roadbuilding is understood. The narratives shaping these interpretations are important; they tell different causal stories of conflict in the region, rooted in very distinct understandings of what concepts like connectivity, development, and security mean and how they relate to one another. Crucially, they can generate very different

recommendations about how conflict in India's Northeast might be solved and how development and prosperity can best be ushered in, meaning they have very real policy implications.

This paper analyses three narratives of security, connectivity, and development in Northeast India as it relates to the wider Bay of Bengal region. Although elements of these narratives often appear alongside one another, the narratives themselves are distinct in the way they conceptualise the relationship between security, development, and connectivity. This has a bearing on how they tell the causal story of the conflict, analyse its dynamics, and propose policy responses. The first of these narratives sees connectivity, trade, and development through regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as a way out of decades of instability and insurgency in the Northeast. The second narrative flips this logic, seeing ongoing security imperatives as blockers to enhanced connectivity that must first be solved if aspirations of regional

connectivity are to be met. While the first two narratives emerge primarily from India's foreign policy and strategic communities, the third narrative recentres the region and orients its understanding of security and development around local perspectives.

Drawing on existing efforts to analyse world order narratives more broadly (1), this paper assesses these three narratives on the Northeast. It examines how and from where they emanate, how they conceptualise the relationship between connectivity between the Northeast and the wider region on the one hand, and security imperatives on the other, and crucially highlights differences in the way security is understood in each. It also highlights the key developments and dynamics that each narrative emphasises, which adds layers of complexity to the understanding of security dynamics in the Northeast and their relationship to the wider region. Finally, the paper outlines the key policy implications that emerge from each of the three narratives. It argues that greater policy attention to the third narrative will complement the priorities and goals of proponents of the first two narratives, while building in stakeholders from the Northeast.

### Why Narratives are Important

Narratives are simple stories or collections of stories that provide an interpretive framework to make sense of complicated and uncertain realities (2). They matter because if they generate enough traction, they can channel and shape policy debates in ways that privilege particular policies and responses over others (3). They can influence the reshaping of sociopolitical realities and renegotiate power relations (4). How Indian policy proceeds with regard to its Northeast region and its wider engagement with the Bay of Bengal region

will have a critical bearing on the regional and local power relations, as well as local livelihoods. This underlines the importance of analysing the narratives shaping the debate on how to drive Indian policy forward, as well as the importance of uncovering those narratives that have less traction.

Northeast India, which has faced insurgencies almost continuously since the country's independence, is approaching a critical juncture. Violence levels have declined almost continuously since 2010, and key peace deals have been struck with insurgencies in Assam in particular (5). The optimism emerging from this reduction of violence has been co-opted by the long-held narrative that deepening regional connectivity and enhancing development will further consolidate peace and security in the region. At the same time, key conflict drivers continue to linger (6), and peace talks to end the region's largest insurgency in Nagaland remain deadlocked, driving a counternarrative urging caution and the need to resolve these security imperatives before the region is ready to act as a gateway for regional integration. These two narratives are found intertwined in much of the discourse surrounding Northeast India's wider regional integration. India's Act East policy and initiatives such as BIMSTEC, while focusing on economics, do have a strong security flavour, and thus there is a degree of coexistence and overlap between the two (7). However, they reflect two competing ways with which to make sense of the Northeast's position in the wider regional integration, which often exist in tension with one another, and so merit analysis as separate narratives. Protracted peace processes have opened up the space for an increasingly vibrant cluster of civil society, academic and political voices from the region, shaping a third narrative urging that stakeholders in the Northeast be integrated as central players in the region's engagement with the wider Bay of Bengal.

**Narrative 1: Development and connectivity will usher in peace and security**

The first narrative holds that deepening the Northeast's regional connectivity and integration will, by enhancing development, bring about peace and security (8). It can be summarised as: "Free trade and physical connectivity in the region will end the 'remoteness' of the North East, accelerate growth and create better conditions to address the problems of insurgency in the region (9)."

Former Indian Ambassador to Thailand Ranjit Gupta, who was instrumental in the creation of BIMSTEC in 1997, saw physical connectivity as a vehicle for the region's economic development, which would in turn allay its security and stability challenges. In his words: "The most important point in favor of BIMSTEC was that it was meant to focus on the economic development and stability of the Northeast by doing away with its isolation and lack of connectivity with its geographical neighbors and even mainland India (10)."

This narrative reflects long-held assumptions in Indian policy circles that physical isolation and economic underdevelopment are key drivers of insecurity and insurgency. These date back to former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the earliest Naga rebels as 'misguided citizens' who needed to be reintegrated into the 'mainstream' through socioeconomic development, and is more recently prevalent in the Ministry for the Development of the North Eastern Region's Vision 2020 document (11). The embeddedness of this causal story can be seen in the many peace accords granting socioeconomic provisions and the importance assigned to large-scale infrastructural projects in annual home ministry reports. It is perhaps unsurprising then that this narrative has exerted a powerful influence on the very formation of BIMSTEC.

The relationship between development and security contained within this narrative rightly draws attention to the centrality of socioeconomic grievances in driving rebellion in the region (12). Naturally, the policy implications flowing from this narrative call for deeper integration and development to continue to ameliorate the conditions that underpin insurgency. Where this narrative performs less well, however, is where infrastructure, connectivity and development projects intersect with other conflict drivers. Here, the second and third narratives perform somewhat better.

**Narrative 2: Security first, then development and connectivity will follow**

The second narrative warns that the connectivity and development envisaged in India's regional engagement through BIMSTEC and Act East will only be realised if insurgency in the region is resolved. This narrative emerges from security circles and sees national security as a "function of a country's external environment and the internal situation, as well as their interplay with each other (13)." Given that 99 percent of Northeast India's borders are international boundaries and the region has faced a long history of known external support to insurgencies, it is unsurprising that a large section of the security discourse highlights the significance of cross-border dynamics in driving insurgencies. Indeed, writing in 2011, India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval noted that external factors are "and will continue to remain a vital factor in [India's] management of North Eastern security (14)." Applied to the relationship between security imperatives and regional connectivity, this narrative emphasises the continued challenges of cross-border insurgency. It draws attention to diplomatic and transnational security cooperation and its impact on the sanctuaries

of Indian insurgent groups over the decades, contributing in a significant way to the reductions in violence in recent years.

While much-weakened, cross-border insurgencies remain a real impediment to connectivity projects. Despite successful operations to disrupt these camps by the Myanmar military in 2019, several anti-talks armed groups continue to enjoy sanctuary in camps dotted along the India-Myanmar border. Indeed, Manipuri armed groups appear to have leveraged the 2021 coup to secure breathing space in Myanmar, cooperating with the *Tatmadaw* (15) and using the space to launch cross-border attacks on security forces in India, such as the November 2021 ambush on an Assam Rifles convoy in Churachandpur, Manipur (16). Indeed, in the past, India has been reluctant to develop connectivity initiatives such as the Stillwell Road (17), fearing that this will embolden and facilitate easy cross-border access for anti-talks groups camped in Myanmar (18). Given this emphasis on the cross-border dimensions of insurgency in the Northeast, the key policy implications of this narrative focus on the need for continued security cooperation with Myanmar (19). Such cooperation is recommended not only to reduce the space for Indian insurgent groups, but to secure key connectivity project infrastructure within Myanmar, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Initiative, and to balance against the influence of China (20).

This narrative surprisingly underplays the structural interdependencies between development and connectivity projects and the political economy of insurgency in the region. For the many armed groups in the region, including many ceasefire signatory groups, infrastructure projects represent lucrative extortion opportunities to finance their organisations. For example, the Jiribam-

Tupul-Imphal-Moreh railway project, which promises to connect Manipur to India's railway network via Assam and to Myanmar as part of the Trans Asian Railway initiative, is one such example of a connectivity project marred by armed group extortion—between 2017 and mid-2018, there were at least 14 cases of shootings, kidnappings and violence targeting project workers (21). Manipur's major highways are littered with armed group taxation points, while regional commercial hubs such as Imphal (Manipur) and Dimapur (Nagaland) are prime extortion turf for an array of armed groups. The border town of Moreh, which features as a key transit point in proposed Asian Highway routes, represents a key strategic location for the cross-border weapons and narcotics trade; both Kuki and Naga armed groups compete over the revenues from this lucrative shadow economy to finance their operations (22). There is thus a burgeoning parallel insurgent economy that intermeshes both the formal and illicit economies. Its sheer scale can be seen in the 2016-2017 budgets of the largest Naga armed group and ceasefire signatory, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim – Isak-Muivah, which amounted to INR 1.7 billion (23). Thus, while it is important to recognise the external security dimension, it is also vital to recognise the relationship between security and development *within* Northeast India and the impact the political economy of insurgency has in constraining wider regional aspirations.

### **Narrative 3: Place 'the local' dimension at the heart of approaches to regional engagement**

Indeed, the local dynamics of insurgency, militarisation, and their entrenchment into the political economy of the region directly impact human security in the Northeast, making it vital to understand narratives emanating from the Northeast if it is to truly emerge as

a regional hub. These narratives draw on the region's extended history and lived experience of conflict and reimagine concepts such as security, development, and connectivity through a local rather than national or foreign policy lens. This interpretive framework shines a critical light on many of the policy responses recommended by the first two narratives, and offers important opportunities to reflect on their local impacts. For example, while the first two narratives tend to frame development and infrastructure initiatives almost automatically as beneficial to the region, the third narrative approaches the motives driving them with a dose of scepticism. For instance, according to Myanmarese scholar Jiten Nongthombam, "The kind of connectivity that India and Myanmar is projecting in the region is profit-oriented connectivity rooted deeply in economic and geo-strategic policy frameworks (24)."

In this narrative, increased engagement will intersect with the politics of counterinsurgency and militarisation that have for so long dominated the political sphere in the Northeast. This, its proponents predict, will have the effect of fuelling and deepening inequalities and grievances between communities in the region, increasing resentment towards the Indian state through a lack of accountability, while counterinsurgency measures restrict the public sphere and in doing so breed further conflict (25). This projection is influenced by local experiences with development projects that have lacked accountability to local populations, leading to cases of alienation and displacement (26), as well as decades of living in the midst of insurgency and counterinsurgency in which the space for democratic dissent has been suppressed.

The key policy implications emanating from this narrative resonate to a certain extent with those of the second narrative, but tend to place

a heavier emphasis on the need to negotiate political solutions to the remaining conflicts in the region (27), or dismantling the structures underpinning militarisation and alienation from the 'mainland' such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (28). Most importantly, the narrative stresses the accountability of connectivity and infrastructure projects to local populations, to ensure that the region does not simply become a passive 'corridor' to the wider Bay of Bengal region and Southeast Asia, but a key hub driven forward by its own consolidated internal development (29). Combined with tackling the drivers of parallel insurgent economies, incorporating local stakeholders will ensure that regional connectivity initiatives co-opt and empower the Northeast in a way that allows the assumptions of the first narrative to be realised.

## Conclusion

The three narratives offer three distinct stories about what causes and sustains conflict in Northeast India, how those conflicts might be resolved and how regional connectivity initiatives might relate to these challenges. While the first presents a fairly optimistic outlook, the second reminds us of the significance of continued cross-border insurgency challenges. Greater emphasis could nonetheless be paid to the deeper, corrosive intermeshing of the formal economy and insurgent parallel economy, which threatens to sustain patterns of insurgent entrenchment and, as a result, counterinsurgent militarisation. Tackling these dynamics, while building in elements of the third narrative with its call for 'mainstreaming' the Northeast in India's wider regional engagement, can help to ensure that India's security priorities are met while allowing economic development to be realised.

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# MULTILATERAL CONNECTIVITY AND IMPORTANCE OF THE NORTHEAST IN BIMSTEC

## A SECURITY DIMENSION

PAHI SAIKIA

The end of the Cold War and India's turn to liberalism in the 1990s was the needed impetus to reorient the country's foreign policy towards developing multilateral ties with its Asian neighbours. It became indispensable for India and the neighbouring countries to look beyond 'Asian exceptionalism' and develop transnational networks beyond India's immediate neighbourhood. In 1997, India established linkages with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) forum, which was initiated by Thailand with the idea of subregional cooperation for accelerated 'economic growth and social progress' with countries in South and Southeast Asia (1). India's strategic interest, therefore, lies in developing multilateral ties with its Asian neighbours and establishing linkages with BIMSTEC for accelerated 'economic growth and social progress'. Multilateral connectivity in this context has been conceived through multiple dimensions—such as the pursuit of contemporary diplomatic, economic, and maritime security links, and historical cultural ties with neighbours from the Bay of Bengal region.

The COVID-19 pandemic situation has had a deep multifaceted impact globally and has led to many uncertainties regarding India's multilateral cooperation on various fronts. Nevertheless, India has made strategic foreign policy choices to rebuild the environment of cooperation. Indeed, India's regional multilateralism underlines the deepening of economic, sociocultural ties, political, and security cooperation, and it has committed to strengthening preparedness and response capacities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, India has been focusing on disaster preparedness and multilateral cooperation in the greater Indo-Pacific region. One of the key goals of such cooperation is India's Neighbourhood First and Act East policies within a narrative of "connectivity, commerce, and cultural commonalities" (2).

India's international collaborative efforts in the pandemic situation provide enough scope to revive multilateral arrangements both at the global and regional level. India's critical interests in the international order in different aspects, such as the economy and



energy security, require stable participation in multilateral regimes and institutions. However, the country's regional multilateral efforts must be reexamined in the context of opportunities and rising challenges to the state-centric institutionalised character of multilateral institutions, as well as the multifaceted challenges arising from geopolitical shifts and domestic complexities (particularly those related to intra-state politics, governance, and security).

This essay will examine the connectivity-security nexus from the perspective of two important intellectual traditions: one that emphasises impenetrable bounded spaces in the international order; and the second, which highlights the narratives of interconnectedness at the interface of global and domestic forces. Given the increasing challenges and geopolitical uncertainties, how can India's multilateral connectivity in the Southeast and East Asia be viewed? This essay will address the question from a security perspective. While India is trying to deal with the question of bounded territories as well as interstate cooperation, there is an emergence of new security issues and heightened vulnerability of connectivity, which are 'multidimensional' and that underline India's diversified connectivity through the Northeast. Individuals, the environment, and identities are used as key referent objects to understand the connectivity-security nexus.

With growing interdependence, the imperatives are not just about the prospects but also the vulnerability of connectivity. At the same time, it is important to realise that enhanced connectivity is essential to mitigate both military and non-military forms of regional security threats. Connectivity in this context is multidimensional, ranging from the projections of creating new lines of

communication for economic and physical linkages to the pursuit of historical and cultural ties with the neighbours from the Bay of Bengal region.

## Overview of History of Multilateralism in Asia

Multilateralism refers to "organizations, agreements, groupings or even loosely structured arrangements that bring together independent states" (3). Multilateralism is "the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states" (4). Regional groupings formed in Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia on the principles of common national interests, ideologies, and the identities of the member-states are an important facet of multilateralism. Early attempts at regional multilateralism in South Asia emerged in the 1940s through several intergovernmental initiatives, such as the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi (April 1947) with 25 Asian countries participating. The emphasis of the conference was on "Asian unity, economic development and the need for greater regional cooperation", but it did not result in a productive outcome for regional cooperation (5).

The Cold War further weakened the prospects of any regional cooperation; India's attention shifted to the formation of a group of non-aligned states with the objective of keeping the two superpower factions at a distance from Asia. Nevertheless, in 1955, the Bandung Conference was held to discuss the possibilities of cooperation on energy issues in Asia. Although the conference laid down the basis for 'cooperative ventures' for Afro-Asian countries, it did not lead to the establishment of an institutional set up for regional integration.

In the late 1970s, Nepal and Bangladesh made renewed efforts towards regional cooperation. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was launched in December 1985 at a summit meeting of the heads of the SAARC states in Dhaka. SAARC failed to construct a consensus approach or operate through strong common institutions based on solidarity and tolerance.

India's search for new terrains to contribute to regional multilateralism continued. The end of the Cold War and India's turn to liberalism in the 1990s gave an impetus to multilateral ties with its Asian neighbours. In the early 1990s, India tried to forge ties with the ASEAN countries. In 1997 India established linkages with the BIMSTEC. The emphasis was on economic cooperation between the member states—India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal. The member-states agreed to establish the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement to encourage trade in goods, investments, and services. At the same time, BIMSTEC has also opened possibilities for enhanced connectivity between India and Southeast Asia through the Northeast region for the transportation of goods and services. The idea was to bridge India's 'Look East' (now, the Act East) policy with Thailand's 'Look West' policy (6). Indeed, economic imperatives have driven the need for enhanced physical (through roads, railways, and ports), digital and energy connectivity in the region.

### Contextualising the Northeast

India's Northeast region, which shares about 98 percent of its borders with Bhutan, Nepal, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, is important from a geostrategic perspective and has been a major thrust of India's Act East policy due to its potential for connectivity,

spatial diversity, and ethnocultural co-existence. The region has the "potential to become the growth engine of the country and a driver of connectivity not just for India but for its extended neighborhood" (7). "Peace, progress and prosperity" is a key agenda for creating a mutually reinforcing framework of institutions while transforming the disturbed peripheries of India's Northeast into productive zones of the global capitalist economy (8). The Indian government has been focusing on upgrading rail, road, waterways, power, and telecom infrastructure in the Northeast, showcasing the renewed attention on the region in Indian foreign policy (9).

Diplomatic attention is also focused on revitalising the different linkages with South and Southeast Asia, including cultural, physical and economic. One of the objectives of India's eastward policy is to physically link the Northeast with South and Southeast Asian countries. The India-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge (*Maitri Setu*), which connects Tripura's Sabroom to the Chittagong port in Bangladesh, is one such attempt (10). The bridge symbolises growing bilateral relations and friendly ties between India and Bangladesh.

To facilitate the movement of people and cross-border trade, India has built the integrated checkposts (ICPs) at key border locations. Nine ICPs—at Attari (along the international border between India and Pakistan located near Amritsar in Punjab), Agartala (located in Tripura between India and Bangladesh), Petrapole (located near Kolkata in West Bengal, along the international border between India and Bangladesh) Raxaul (between India and Nepal near Patna in Bihar), Jogbani (between India and Nepal near Patna in Bihar), Moreh (Manipur, bordering Myanmar), Sutarkandi (Assam, bordering Bangladesh), Srimantapur (bordering Bangladesh in

Tripura) and Dera Baba Nanak (bordering Pakistan in Gurdaspur, Punjab)—have been operationalised at different border areas (11). Fourteen more ICPs are under construction at different border locations. The ICPs are also undergoing a digital transformation to increase cargo traffic and passenger movement and to reduce the overall cost of operations. Digitisation and management of border security is an important element of the transformation process (12).

ICPs are thus a representation of the connectivity and security complex at critical border locations. These ICPs manifest border security applications that allow a free flow of international goods and capital between India and its neighbours (13). They also represent the global security surveillance regimes accompanied by restrictions and measures to control transnational mobility across contiguous border zones. However, these applications face operational impediments, such as inadequate digitisation facilities, road infrastructure on both sides of the border, and a lack of mirror infrastructure in the neighbouring countries.

### The Security-Connectivity Nexus

The security-connectivity nexus can be conceived from two dimensions: from the perspective of micro-nations referring to ethnonational identities located in the border regions of India's Northeast; and from the perspective of the macro-nation the larger national identity. Complexities emerge from the voices challenging the dominant security framework of the macro nation, which is saturated with institutions of influence and dominance. Therefore, when it comes to physical connectivity, infrastructure projects, and development of the macro-nation, it refers to the economic processes that emphasise

the relations that are integrationist. From a micro-nation perspective, security and connectivity are contextualised more at an interpersonal level, through everyday exchanges at the border areas, which are also spaces of vulnerability.

From the perspective of the Northeast, security is key to India's multilateral connectivity and social development in the east. As such, governing security in the Northeast is a major thrust of strategic diplomacy. What is less visible in the political discourse is the security risks that are pervasive and part of the mundane lives, including the undocumented movement of people and goods across borders, drug trafficking, and the informal small arms trade. Porous borders in the Northeast are sites of unauthorised movements, and border zones are marked by hybrid governing structures. Managing security threats to the nation-state in the Northeast border zones is, therefore, an internalised routine.

From this perspective, the object of security must be understood beyond state sovereignty, and involves the survival, wellbeing, and dignity of people at both the individual and societal level (14). Security threats can also arise from non-military sources, such as infectious diseases, climate change, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, smuggling of persons, drug trafficking, and other forms of transnational crime (15). National solutions are often inadequate to mitigate their rapid transmission, and therefore require regional and multilateral cooperation (16).

Enhanced connectivity in the form of physical infrastructure networks as well as legal and regulatory frameworks has played a significant role in regional integration and multilateral security in the Asia-Pacific region (17). Trade, energy and transport connectivity,

and information and communications technologies have been identified as the key drivers of connectivity in the region (18). In the same vein, developmental initiatives and social progress in the BIMSTEC region can effectively happen with international connectivity among the BIMSTEC states and the markets beyond the subregion. Strengthening connectivity is therefore key to shape the politico-security environment of the region. Infrastructure and connectivity development in the Northeast will be a projection of the Act East policy through trade

with neighbouring countries, and boost the country’s economy and security as well (19).

Proposed air, road, railway, and river transport, and improved channels of communications between India and its Southeast Asian neighbours will spur unprecedented development and transforming the political, economic, and social landscape of the Northeast. More than economic corridors, the focus is on creating growth and development zones across the Northeast region. The larger approach is to

**Table 1: Priority Connectivity Projects Between India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand**

<b>Road</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Upgrading of Border Roads: 10 Projects [Bangladesh- 1, India-2, Myanmar-4, Nepal-2 Thailand-1]</li> <li>● Enhancement of Arterial Link to Borders and Ports: 15 projects (Bangladesh-5, Bhutan-1, India-7, Myanmar-1, Nepal-1)</li> <li>● Upgrading of Port Access Roads: 7 Projects (India-3, Myanmar-1, Sri Lanka-2 Thailand-1)</li> <li>● Coordination of Road Programs – Development of the Trilateral Highway (India/ Myanmar/Thailand) – New border link Mae Sot/Myawaddy (Myanmar and Thailand)</li> <li>● Lack of Through transport (2 projects)</li> </ul>
<b>Railways</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rail Connectivity to Landlocked Countries: 5 projects (India-Nepal)</li> <li>● Enhanced Rail Connectivity between Ports and their Hinterland: 7 projects [Bangladesh-5, India 1, Thailand-1]</li> </ul>
<b>Aviation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Expansion of Airport Capacity: 6 projects (BangladeshN-1, Bhutan-1, Myanmar-1, Sri Lanka-1, Nepal-1, Thailand-1)</li> <li>● Development of Freight Services and Facilities: 2 projects (India-1, Bhutan-1)</li> <li>● Development of Support Facilities for LCC Operations: 1 project (Bangladesh)</li> </ul>
<b>Marine</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Development of Deeper ware Ports: 7 projects (Bangladesh-1, India-1, Sri Lanka-2, Thailand-3)</li> <li>● Container Handling at Bay of Bengal Ports: 2 projects (India- 1 (Kolkata), Myanmar-1 (Thilawa))</li> </ul>
<b>Trade facilitation systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Development of Border Infrastructure: 4 projects:(Bangladesh-1, India-1, Thailand- Myanmar border-1, Nepal-1)</li> <li>● Construction of Inland Container Depots (ICDs) : 4 projects (Bangladesh-1, Bhutan-2, Myanmar-1)</li> <li>● Development of Automated Systems: • Customs IT upgrades in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal</li> </ul>

Source: Hazarika, 2018 (20).

create opportunities for tangible benefits, improvement in the quality of lives of the people, and harness the geographical proximity and common cultural background among the countries of a growth zone (21).

For instance, in 2015, India enacted two important policy changes with regard to border trade with Myanmar: a shift from barter trade to normal trade; and a shift from border trade to normal trade. However, contrary to projections, there has been a significant decline in border trade through the land between the two countries following the policy change; and border trade accounts for a negligible share (less than 1 percent) of India's total trade with Myanmar (22). The normalisation of trade in 2015 incurred high transaction costs, saw an increase in the required documentation, and a hike in the customs duties on imports from Myanmar. This adversely affected border trade as the Indian government made changes in the import tariffs on goods that were previously included within concessionary customs duties (23). Other impediments to land border trade between India and Myanmar include the lack of adequate border infrastructure, informal tax regime, smuggling of goods, and drug trafficking (24).

## Conclusion

This essay examined how multilateral cooperation in the context of security and connectivity in the BIMSTEC region provides the scope for regional multilateralism. The prospects of economic exchanges, and infrastructural and human connectivity between India and its neighbours in the Bay of Bengal region represent a complex web of governance structures in a variety of territorial and non-territorial spaces. Multilateral cooperation among state and

non-state actors in a complex security environment in the subregion must be understood beyond the discourse of systemic governance and global institutions.

The relation between security and connectivity in the subregion is critical, especially in reference to security concerns in the border zones in the Northeast. The porous border zones enable undocumented border crossings, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other organised crimes. These security concerns indicate the need to rescale security governance structures beyond the boundaries of a regulatory state. Rescaling security governance will not just mean a deregulation of the role of national actors but articulating ways towards the transnationalisation of security agencies. Essentially, it will also mean developing shared values and institutions among states in the Asia-Pacific region to mitigate a spillover of problems at critical geographical locations and routes of human mobility.

At the same time, the political discourses on connectivity through India's Northeast need to emphasise human-centred security perspectives. Thus, individuals and cultural communities become the key referent objects with regard to connectivity projects through the Northeast. From the perspective of micro-nations, the communities are not segregated or bounded units but represent identities that are driven by cross-cultural exchanges. Shared cultures along the border zones, for instance, are produced by history and enduring processes. Permeability and cross-border historical connections in the form of wars as well as trade and interpersonal relations represent these closely connected zones.

Multilateral partnerships with the BIMSTEC countries with a focus on the Northeast should entail human-centred policies for resource

development through livelihood projects, and capacity building through multilateral norms of behaviour between national governments, subregional institutions and transnational

actors. It is indeed imperative to explore the interlinkages between infrastructural projects for social development and rights-based perspectives of India's Northeast.

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# INDIA'S NORTHEAST

## THE CHALLENGE OF A VOLATILE NEIGHBOURHOOD

.....  
**SUBIR BHAUMIK**  
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India's Northeast originated as a directional category (1) during colonial rule to denote areas of the British Empire east of the large undivided province of Bengal and west of Burma (now Myanmar), which was also ruled by the British. The Northeast has now evolved into a key constituent region of post-colonial India, comprising the plains and hill regions of the colonial province of Assam, the erstwhile princely kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura, and the frontier tracts now constituting the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The evolution has involved the formation of several tribal-dominated states, carved out of the large colonial province of Assam that India inherited at the time of independence through the Bengal Boundary Commission Award that gave away the Bengali-dominant district of Sylhet and the tribal-dominated region of Chittagong Hill Tracts to the eastern wing, which later emerged as the independent nation of Bangladesh (2). India's Northeast, connected to the country's mainland by a tenuous 22-km wide Siliguri Corridor (sometimes referred to as 'Chicken Neck') is seen as a link region that connects the riverine plains of South Asia with the hills of Myanmar,

with one study describing it as that part of Asia where "it begins to look less and less India and more and more like the highland societies of Southeast Asia" (3).

The Northeast now consists of eight states (Assam being the most populous and Arunachal Pradesh the largest in size). But although Sikkim is part of the North Eastern Council (NEC), it is more a part of the Himalayan borderlands between India and China than the Northeast. The tenuous geographical link of the Northeast to the mainland has been seen as a source of strategic vulnerability by the Indian State, especially after Tibet disappeared as a buffer and was militarily absorbed into China in the 1950s. India's Northeast now has long borders with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan, each of which has been a source of worry for the Indian State at different points in time. Several ethnic groups in the Northeast have challenged the country's post-colonial nation-building project with violent armed campaigns, beginning with the Naga insurrection in the 1950s. China, and Pakistan before it, backed some of



these violent movements with weapons and training. The rebels have also operated from sanctuaries in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Indeed, Bangladesh's government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has announced 'zero tolerance' for terror and demolished the rebel bases in a determined crackdown since coming to power in January 2009, Bhutan has also thrown out of its territory several northeast rebel groups through a military operation ('Operation All Clear') in December 2003-January 2004. But a plethora of northeast rebel groups continue to operate out of Myanmar's Sagaing region and military cooperation with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) has not been able to get what India got from Bhutan or Bangladesh. This essay will examine recent developments in the neighbouring countries bordering the Northeast and try to analyse how they pose, or could pose, challenges to the region's security and stability.

### Historical Perspective

If Pakistan's attempt to take over Kashmir by force after Partition posed the first direct challenge to the territorial integrity of the nascent Indian Republic, the Naga rebellion in the 1950s was the first ethnic insurrection to threaten the country's ambitious post-colonial nation-building process. The Mizos and then the Manipuri Meiteis followed in the footsteps of the Naga rebellion to start an armed insurgency. Finally, the prairie fires spread to Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya with varying intensity in the 1980s. The Darjeeling hills and North Bengal foothills also experienced similar armed movements for secession and separate statehood, threatening the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor that physically links the Indian mainland to the remote Northeastern states.

Apart from counterinsurgency operations, India's first major initiative to address the security challenges in the east was when it militarily intervened in 1971 to put an end to the civil war in Pakistan's eastern wing, which led to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. As a friendly secular Bengali nation-state, Bangladesh helped India address its security concerns. The Naga, Mizo, and Manipuri rebels lost their bases and sources of patronage and initiated negotiations that led to the 1975 Shillong Accord with the Naga National Council, and the 1986 Mizo Accord with the Mizo National Front. While Mizoram has experienced calm ever since, Nagaland and the neighbouring Manipur have faced a new spell of Naga insurgency led by the China-trained leaders of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

The 1975 military coup in Bangladesh led to the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and brought back Pakistan-style military rule. Democracy returned to Bangladesh in the 1990s, but it is only after Rahman's daughter (Hasina) led the Awami League back to power, first in 1996 and then again in 2009, that India has finally reaped the fruits of its investments in 1971. Hasina has addressed all of India's security and connectivity concerns, cracking down hard against the Northeast rebel groups, and signing agreements that permit transit through Bangladesh and the use of its ports to ship cargo to the Northeast from the Indian mainland.

Myanmar experienced a long spell of military rule from 1962 to 2010 when electoral democracy was reintroduced. But only in 2015 did a comprehensive fair election bring to power Aung Saan Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The February 2021 military coup has put the clock back in Myanmar and unleashed a huge turmoil that threatens civil order and the peace process

with the ethnic rebel armies initiated by Suu Kyi's government. The Burmese army has cooperated in a limited way with the Indian army to attack the bases of Northeast Indian rebels, but Myanmar's Sagaing region remains the last major transborder base area for these rebel groups. Bhutan has been more stable since the introduction of democracy under a constitutional monarchy but it has a border dispute with China (like India has), which Beijing is trying to leverage to pressurise the tiny nation to break out of the Indian embrace.

## China

India's relations with China have worsened since a 75-day border stand-off between the two militaries at Doklam in Bhutan in 2017. Indian troops moved into Doklam after Chinese military intrusions were spotted, invoking provisions of a "security arrangement" (as described by former Indian finance minister Arun Jaitley) and managed to push back the Chinese soldiers who were trying to build a road (4). But a similar face-off in Eastern Ladakh in July 2020 led to violent clashes between the Chinese and Indian troops, leading to 20 Indian and many more Chinese casualties (5). The Chinese are upset with India's persistent refusal to join President Xi Jinping's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which Delhi sees as a violation of its sovereignty. In early 2022, India decided on a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics in Beijing after agreeing to send a team after China decided to use a soldier injured in the 2020 Galwan clash with India as an Olympic torchbearer (6).

The worsening of relations with China directly impacts India's Northeast. Firstly, the possibility of direct conventional war with China over the festering border dispute revives

memories of the 1962 war, during which the Chinese army formations came as far as the outskirts of Tezpur town, on the northern banks of river Brahmaputra in Assam. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's wartime speech, "My Heart Goes out to the People of Assam", was widely interpreted (or misinterpreted) as leaving Assam to its fate (7). Indian military strength has improved since the 1962 war but so has China's. India's ability to defend its Northeast against a Chinese 1962-style offensive is always a source of worry not only among security planners in New Delhi but among the people in the Northeast as well.

Secondly, India has to worry about loss of territory on the disputed border as China resorts to "salami slicing" tactics to wrest key frontier stretches to gain both tactical and strategic advantages. The Chinese have adopted a forward policy across the Himalayan border, pushing forward Tibetan nomads to populate inhospitable stretches, to which it can then lay claim. They are building a string of border villages, some well inside Bhutanese territory, that are expected to serve as quasi-military outposts and watchpoints, after having put in place a well-oiled network of roads and bridges (8).

Thirdly, growing conflict with China raises the possibility of fresh Chinese backing for insurgents in the Northeast. Media reports citing Indian intelligence and security officials have pointed to Chinese support for northeastern rebels since the border conflict aggravated (9). Most active Northeastern rebel groups are based in Myanmar's Sagaing region, which is relatively near the border with China. There have been reports that some leaders of the rebel groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam and the People's Liberation Army of Manipur are staying in Ruili inside Chinese territory (10). For any Indian military commander

defending the Northeast's border with China, having to look over the shoulder for fifth-column activity by China-backed rebels involved in sabotage, espionage, and whipping up unrest is the worst-case scenario. Even if there is no conventional war, the 'thousand cuts' approach one associates with Chinese hostilities is cause for worry. Some recent threats by Naga rebel commanders of seeking out China's help if political negotiations with India falls through has raised heckles in New Delhi. Negotiations with the NSCN have dragged on since 1997 without producing a final settlement of the long-festered Naga imbroglio, and some NSCN hardliners have occasionally threatened New Delhi with the "China card" (11). With Indian security forces, including the army, involved in a proxy war in Kashmir against rebels backed by Pakistan, a similar situation in the Northeast is clearly unwelcome by New Delhi. While the Indian State has succeeded in resolving some of the insurgencies by striking political deals, some of the prairie fires continue to burn. China has armed and trained Naga, Mizo, and Manipuri rebels during the Cultural Revolution and New Delhi cannot wish away the fears of a repeat if relations with Beijing were to get worse.

Fourthly, the fear of China using the North Myanmar region to dump its cheap goods in the Northeast illegally through contraband trafficking networks is a threat that cannot be discounted (12). Weapons of Chinese origin are easily available in the border region between Myanmar and the Northeast (13). China has been keen to reopen for border trade the Second World War-vintage Stillwell Road that connects Northeast India with its Yunnan province via Northern Myanmar as part of the trade initiative of the four-nation regional grouping comprising Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar but India has decided to go slow primarily because it fears the large-scale dumping of Chinese goods.

For India's Northeast, with its long-festered ethnic conflicts and separatist campaigns and a history of foreign support for some of the rebel groups, China is both an opportunity and a problem. If relations with China were moving in a positive direction, the use of the Stillwell Road to access the markets of southwest and western China could be boon for the Northeast. That might attract producers, both Indian and foreign, to set up shops in the region. But if relations with China were to worsen, as has been the case in the past five years, Beijing could pose serious problems for the Northeast through military pressure on the disputed frontier and by backing separatist rebels, apart from using Myanmar territory to dump cheap goods and small arms into the region.

## Myanmar

Myanmar's descent into chaos amidst rising conflict after the 2021 coup has already posed a whole host of problems for Northeast India. It has caused a substantial flow of refugees into Mizoram and Manipur, in much the same way, though on a much lesser scale, as caused by the Pakistani military crackdown in present-day Bangladesh in 1971. Worse, the unsettled conditions are likely to delay India's key connectivity projects in Myanmar, which are crucial to the success of New Delhi's Act East policy that seeks to situate the Northeast at the heart of India's engagement with the 'tiger economies of Southeast Asia'. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport project, which seeks to provide the country's Northeast an outlet to the sea through road and Kaladan River through Sittwe Port, and the 1,360-km India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are way behind schedule. India's foreign ministry has admitted that only 36 percent of the highway is complete, two decades after work on it started. Progress on the Kaladan

project is also behind schedule. The success of India's 'Act East' through Northeast policy largely depends on peace and tranquility in Myanmar, and these connectivity projects are crucial to it (14).

The continued strife in Myanmar has also encouraged a greater production of narcotics in the country's Golden Triangle, leading to greater drug trafficking into the Northeast. To check this, the Indian government has now given additional police powers to the Assam Rifles that guards India's border with Myanmar. This is a major non-traditional security threat emerging from Myanmar that cannot be overlooked (15).

India's efforts to neutralise the Northeast rebel bases in Myanmar's Sagaing region by calculated military cooperation with the Tatmadaw has also run into trouble. Reports suggest that the Tatmadaw are using these rebels to suppress their own resistance groups and are thus less than inclined to attack them. In the 1990s, Indian intelligence agencies struck covert deals with Myanmar's Kachin, Chin, and Arakanese rebels to deny the Northeast rebel groups a free run inside Myanmar. The focus of this covert strategy was to deny the Northeast rebels safe base areas inside Myanmar and a route to China that was used by the Naga and Mizo rebels to reach Yunnan for training and weapons in the 1960s. But that policy was discontinued after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee took charge. India focused on developing military-to-military relations with Myanmar and both armies even coordinated 'Operation Sunrise' in 2020 to attack both Indian and Myanmar rebel groups active on the long border. But the coup has changed the equations (16). Since Myanmar's Sagaing remains the only transborder base area for Northeast rebel groups, Burmese reluctance

to operate against them does not augur well for India. Even if the Burmese army was not inclined to directly help the northeastern rebel groups, they would be in no position to operate against them, the way the Bhutanese or Bangladeshi security forces did. This is the Tatmadaw is too heavily stretched now, having to fight a plethora of strong ethnic rebel armies, control civil disorder against military rule, and deal with the newly-emerging urban guerrilla groups among the majority Bamar community. The Tatmadaw has too much on its plate to be able to address India's security concerns. And since they are not willing to step down and restore democracy, the conflict graph is likely to rise sharply, torpedoing Indian connectivity projects that are crucial to the success of New Delhi's Act East policy. As the military junta is increasingly facing global isolation, it is becoming more and more dependent on Chinese support for survival. Greater Chinese influence in Myanmar is seen in New Delhi as a major cause for worry.

The military threat of China using Northern Myanmar to outflank Indian forces on the Line of Actual Control, perhaps in tandem with a similar push through Nepal and/or Bhutan (to cut off the Siliguri Corridor), is a worst-case scenario for military planners in New Delhi, who they are not willing to discount in the event of a full-scale war. That lies at the root of the Indian army's objections to reopening the Stillwell Road for trade because its commanders fear Chinese use of the road to outflank Indian defence in Arunachal Pradesh and eastern Assam. Hitler's use of Belgium to bypass the French Maginot Line defences to take Paris could be repeated in the Himalayas and the message of Xi's frequent exhortations to the Chinese army to prepare for "short but decisive military campaigns" since the Doklam crisis is not lost on the security planners in New Delhi (17).

## Bangladesh and Bhutan

Bangladesh and Bhutan had emerged as sources of worry until both countries took decisive steps to address India's security concerns. Bhutan demolished the bases that Assam's rebel groups had set up on the hilly border of the two countries in Operation All Clear. No Indian rebel group is known to have found any sanctuary in the tiny Himalayan kingdom since then (18). Bhutan also joined India in keeping away from China's BRI initiative, which perhaps led to the Chinese push into Doklam. India is closely watching fresh Chinese efforts to engage Bhutan through a roadmap to solve its border dispute with the kingdom. But Bhutan continues to be the largest recipient of Indian foreign assistance and Bangladesh has also been allocated more funds in the current Indian budget than the previous year (19).

Bangladesh has also delivered on India's security and connectivity concerns since Hasina assumed office as prime minister in 2009. The use of Bangladesh territory for transit and ports to access the landlocked Northeast has been accompanied by burgeoning railroad connectivity between the Indian mainland and the Northeast through Bangladesh. India has played ball by allowing Bangladesh outreach to the Himalayan nations like Nepal and Bhutan to access cheap hydel power needed for Bangladesh's speedy industrialisation. Hasina's administration has also crushed Islamist terror groups and firmly dealt with opposition parties trying to trigger violent street protests since 2018 when she returned to power for the third time in succession (20). But despite the '*Sonali Adhyay*' (golden phase) of India's relations with Bangladesh, there have been hiccups caused by the current Indian government's National Register of Citizens exercise in Assam and

the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 (21). New Delhi's failure to sign the Teesta river water sharing treaty has also upset the Hasina government (22).

The ruling Awami League, which is wedded to Congress-type secular politics, finds the BJP's Hindutva pitch discomfiting because that plays into the Islamist narrative of anti-Indianism in Bangladesh. The Islamist groups have tried to destabilise the Hasina regime by unleashing nationwide violence against Hindus during the 2021 Durga Puja (23) or even to protest Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in March 2021 (24). Both the Northeast and West Bengal have also, in recent years, experienced greater use of their territory by Islamist terror groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami as they flee Hasina's crackdown back home. These worries apart, the real apprehension in New Delhi about Bangladesh pertains to possible regime change. Bangladesh's policy towards India has depended on the regime in power. Bilateral ties suffered during two decades of military rule in Bangladesh and during the tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Bangladesh started sheltering rebel groups from India's Northeast such as the ULFA during the military regime of General H.M. Ershad and when BNP's Khaleda Zia was prime minister. Many Indian Muslim extremist groups also operated with impunity against Indian targets from their bases in Bangladesh. That ended when Hasina came to power. Zia has already threatened to review the many agreements Hasina's government has signed with India, claiming Dhaka has given much to New Delhi for very little in return (25). New Delhi is likely to be uneasy with growing Western criticism of Hasina's human rights record, especially the US sanctions against seven top security officials (26), which has

energised the opposition and could cause problems for Hasina and her government.

## Conclusion

Because of its location amidst several neighbouring countries, India's Northeast seems to be one area of the republic that is impacted substantially by developments in the often-volatile neighbourhood. Myanmar's military takeover and failure to return to democracy and a possible regime change in Bangladesh could have serious impacts on the Northeast. As would China's continued hostility. Notably, except China, none of the

neighbours pose a direct military threat. But with India still not able to resolve the multiple separatist insurgencies in the Northeast (although they have been contained), the fear of foreign support to these groups remains a major headache for New Delhi. Trafficking of weapons and drugs remain a worry, because both Myanmar and Bangladesh have been used in the past by Northeast rebel groups for these purposes. The same cartel is often responsible for trafficking both weapons and drugs, and insurgents protect the drug routes to ensure their supply of weapons is not affected. India's neighbourhood policy is, therefore, very important for the future of the Northeast.

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# CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS IN NORTHEAST AUGURS WELL FOR BIMSTEC

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NIRANJAN SAHOO  
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While many scholars term India's Northeast a 'region of identity' that makes it unique (1), others see this vast geography as the country's bridgehead to the East. Even former Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla called Northeast a "gateway" between the two pillars of Indian foreign policy, 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' (2). Framing the Northeast in the context of three Cs—connectivity, commerce, and cultural commonalities—Shingla said that a number of concrete multilateral and plurilateral initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), were being utilised to transform this strategic but laggard region into a powerhouse.

BIMSTEC is a "unique cross-regional grouping" between South and Southeast Asia, bringing together eight key countries (India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) and a population of about 1.6 billion, and with a combined GDP of over US\$2.8 trillion (3). Given its geographical location (bordering four key

BIMSTEC countries—Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal), the Northeast region is a vital part in this trillion-dollar economic opportunity that requires better border infrastructure, transportation, integration of e-commerce, and modernised cross-border supply chains. Home to about 3.8 percent of India's population and with a 5,300-km of international borders, the Northeast is seen by Indian policymakers from the point of pushing investments through transnational connectivity, particularly with Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh (4). Notably, the Northeast region did not figure in the policy roadmap when the Look East policy (as Act East was previously known) was first conceptualised. This resulted in many in the region urging for the need to "Look-East through the North East" (5).

Many are of the view that the Northeast's long-drawn economic and developmental challenges will be resolved once the planned connectivity and economic integration projects take off. But this is easier said than done. The Northeast is not an easy region to manage. This vast geography, comprised



of diverse ethnic groups, tribes, and migrant populations, is faced with multiple security challenges that often act as major roadblocks to governance and development. Indeed, a conducive security situation in the Northeast is key to the realisation of multilateral projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and East-West Corridor (to connect India up to east coast of Vietnam) (6). However, the Northeast region remains a major security flashpoint. Several border regions are restive and continue to pose major security challenges to developmental projects.

### The Security Situation

The eight states that constitute the Northeast—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Tripura—have been mired in deadly insurgencies with secessionist missions, violent agitations, ethnic riots, and heavy-handed state actions since the British withdrew from the South Asia (7). The oldest insurgency movement, the Naga sovereignty campaign, dates back to 1947 (8). The Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence a day before India achieved freedom from the British. Subsequently, numerous other ethnic groups in the region—the Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris and Assamese—challenged the Indian state to assert their distinct identities and political aspirations (9). Due to multiple structural factors, such as the lack of governance and mismanagement by states and local governments, militancy and violent agitations mushroomed in different parts of the volatile and sensitive region (10).

The NNC split in the 1960s, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland led by Thuingaleng Muviah emerged, which became a powerful militant group. Mizoram also saw

the birth of the Mizo National Front under Laldenga. While Mizo insurgency was pacified by carving out a state from Assam in the 1980s, the relatively peaceful Assam witnessed violent agitations, insurgencies, and ethnic riots of varied scales. Insurgent groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, and the Rabha National Liberation Front, soon appeared (11). As the insurgent groups indulged in large-scale killings and posed serious threats to the Indian state, the central government responded with strong police (paramilitary forces) and military deployments and counterinsurgency operations. Since the 1970s, over 100 companies of paramilitary troops, particularly the Central Reserve Police Force and Assam Rifles, have been deployed to curb the insurgencies and restore law and order. The Indian army also have a sizeable deployment in the region (12). In addition to the troop deployment, the Centre also instituted the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958 to facilitate strong and resolute actions against the insurgents (13).

#### Armed Forces Special Powers Act

The AFSPA, often termed ‘draconian’, grants the military forces seemingly broad authority over the local population in vaguely defined ‘disturbed’ areas. For instance, it grants police the authority to shoot anyone who is breaking the law or carrying weapons and ammunition. It also gives them the right to make warrantless arrests of people based on ‘reasonable’ suspicion and the right to search properties without a warrant.

The main highlights of the law—enter and search without warrant, arrest without warrant, and use force, even if causing death—

are indicative of the complete and utter lack of regard for human rights.

The law has been widely misused by the army, leading to local disenchantment and many region-wide protests including the sensational nude protests against Assam Rifles by 12 senior women from Manipur against alleged rape and murder of a 32-year-old woman by the armed forces (14). These killings and the decades of protests are testament to the fact that the civil-military interaction in the Northeast, within the larger context of AFSPA, is troublesome. From the people's point of view, living under AFSPA has not been a rewarding experience in any sense. They must face the protests, civilian killings, and unwarranted search and shooting due to an intense security paranoia. This in turn has resulted in a greater psychological toll on the people, leading to an acrimonious civil-military relationship (15).

In recent years, the Indian government has withdrawn AFSPA from several districts in the Northeast region—in Tripura in 2015; Meghalaya in 2018 (16); a complete withdrawal in 23 districts in Assam and three in Nagaland in 2022; and a partial withdrawal in six districts in Manipur, four in Nagaland and one in Assam in 2022 (17). The major push for the removal of AFSPA came in December 2021 following some killings and subsequent protests in Nagaland's Mon district (18). Indeed, the current central government has shown a stronger commitment in terms of legislative actions to restore peace in the Northeast than previous governments.

While removal of AFSPA from many districts is a pragmatic move, in reality, the step has been informed by an improved security situation over the decades. The number of violent incidents reduced by 82 percent, from 1,297 in 2009 to 223 in 2019 (19). Similarly,

the number of casualties has also dropped—from 42 to four among armed forces; 264 to 108 among civilians; and from 571 to 12 among insurgents between 2009 and 2019 (20).

Insurgency related violent incidents have also significantly declined, from 1,749 in 1999 to only 209 in 2021 (21). The year 2020 also marked the lowest number of insurgent incidents in 20 years (22). Additionally, between 2014 and 2021, there was a 75-percent decline in insurgency related activities (23), a 75-percent reduction in casualties from actions by security forces, and a 89-percent reduction in civilian deaths (24).

Notably, the status of insurgent groups also highlights the improved security situation in the region. The once restive Nagaland, for instance, has seen relative peace and stability due to progress in the peace process and the inking of ceasefire pacts or negotiations with the Centre. Similarly, Assam, the largest and most restive state in previous decades, has experienced relative peace and a positive democratic in recent years (25).

Successive central governments' outreach initiatives with insurgent organisations have paid rich dividends through ceasefire and peace agreements (26). To mention a few, the NLFT Tripura Agreement of 2019, the historic Bodo Peace Accords of 2020 and the Karbi Anglong Agreement of 2021 strengthen our idea of actual stability and peace in the Northeast (27). Additionally, inter-state disputes are also being resolved; in 2022, Assam and Nagaland agreed to settle their prolonged border dispute out of court (28), and Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have held a series of dialogues to sort out as many as 122 disputed sites (29). Further, following violent clashes in 2021, Assam and Mizoram are in talks to maintain peace and find durable solution to longstanding territorial disputes (30).

## The Way Forward

With its improved security situation and political stability, the Northeast region offers a critical opening to the BIMSTEC and other major regional initiatives. The removal of AFSPA amid a steady decline in insurgency in some volatile states indicates that the region is ready for a major push on the economic and development frontiers. The region—which lags in infrastructure, industrialisation, and growth—can benefit from mega infrastructural, connectivity, and industrial projects envisioned under the BIMSTEC and BBIN. For instance, several major routes connecting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region and Bangladesh will go through Northeast India. A major road from Dawki-Tamabil at the India-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya will connect all continental ASEAN countries. The other crucial routes passing through

Bangladesh and India has Agartala in Tripura as a crucial junction. Further, three significant India-Bangladesh connectivity projects are in progress in Tripura—the Feni bridge, Agartala-Akhaura rail route, and the inland waterways port at Sonamura in Sipahijala district (31).

The Northeast region is poised for a major transformation with a plethora of projects and initiatives underway via BIMSTEC. Expanding the region’s physical, digital, and institutional connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan, on the one hand, and Bangladesh and Myanmar, on the other, will be immensely helpful. However, all efforts should be maintained to keep a tight grip on the region’s fragile political economy. Given the volatile ethnic and sociopolitical environment, one major incident could quickly change the entire ecosystem, as witnessed during anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in 2019 (32).

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