

ORF OCCASIONAL PAPER #51

JUNE 2014



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'Look East through Northeast': Challenges and Prospects for India

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, India has been seeking to situate the country's troubled Northeast at the heart of what eventually evolved into its so-called 'Look East' policy. The enthusiasm over the 'Look East' thrust of Indian foreign policy has also grown as Europe and the US have found themselves mired in economic stagnation with no immediate prospect of recovery. This has compelled India to look to Southeast and East Asia as priorities for developing trade and commerce in order to keep its own economy in shape and post reasonable growth rates. This has led Indian policymakers and analysts to revise their attitudes on the country's long troubled Northeast. No longer is it seen as a remote and dangerous frontier zone; rather, many view it as "gateways of opportunities of international trade and commerce".¹ Some have gone to the extent of saying that this new 'strategic vision' could be a 'game-changer' for Asia, especially because it has the potential to bring China, India, and Southeast Asia—home to nearly half the humanity—closer to high levels of economic integration and capable of making the region the world's number one economic hotspot. Various regional initiatives such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) are seen as holding “promises of historic proportions for trans-national region-building in the area.”²

For India, using the Northeast region to link up with these tiger economies holds an allure similar to that of icing on a cake: it could end

the long decades of isolation for the remote region and turn it from a bounded lake of no return to a land bridge capable of giving India a “strategic, cultural and economic space” to the East, which is denied to it in the West due to the volatile and fluid situation in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the rest of Middle East and Central Asia.³ Delhi is driven as much by domestic as by foreign policy concerns to 'Look East' through the country's Northeastern region.

The end of the region's multiple insurgencies and violent homeland agitations that led to militarization eating into vital resources that could be more gainfully used for development, is a prospect welcomed by any regime in Delhi: success in conflict resolution in an area 'that looks less and less India and more and more like the highlands of South-east Asia' as anthropologist Peter Kunstadter had described it, would beef up the country's claims to success in institutionalizing pluralism and democracy and enhance its global standing at a time when it seeks a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Securing a place at the global high table appears more difficult should India remain a country of proliferating insurgencies and violent agitations: the festering of such conflicts raises questions over the country's ability to handle its internal problems. Thus there is great impetus for taking the 'Look East' initiative forward. It is also time, however, to examine the progress that has so far been made in order to introduce whatever course correction may be necessary and re-evaluate the paradigm in which the 'Look East' thrust is conceived.

Since there is considerable literature on the origins and unfolding of India's 'Look-East' policy,⁴ this paper will seek to focus on the considerable hurdles and limitations encountered in carrying forward India's 'Look East' through Northeast—problems caused by the nature

of physical terrain, the history of violent conflicts in the region and its immediate neighbourhood which remains volatile, and the poor state of transport infrastructure and local industries in Northeast India and Myanmar, through which India has to access other ASEAN countries by land. In view of these limitations, it will never be easy for India to 'look east' through its Northeast which opens into the conflict-ridden, poorly developed areas of Myanmar, mostly located on difficult physical terrain.

It will be argued that although India will have to try to use the Northeast as a land bridge to Southeast Asia—more for ending the isolation of this frontier region to boost its future growth—India and its economy will largely have to 'look east' through the sea into Southeast Asia for trade and human movement for a wide variety of reasons. It makes definite logistic and economic sense to try using the Northeast to open out to south-west China, which unlike Southeast Asia, is landlocked, but decision making levels in India are still divided on issues like reopening the World War II vintage Stilwell Road. This introduces an element of uncertainty on whether or not India is prepared to take some risks that go with allowing the 'Look East' to blossom to its full potential by using the Northeastern 'land bridge'. Security concerns, especially related to Chinese military presence and China's growing influence in Myanmar, tend to hamper India's march ahead with its initiatives for the 'Look East' policy.

It is apparent that 'Look East through Northeast' makes sense for India only if the initiative seeks to include China in the equation. This is where the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) initiative becomes highly important; this initiative has now made some progress, with India

setting up a joint study group to figure out how to take the process forward. Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang's 2013 visit to India led to an agreement between the two neighbours to 'explore' the possibility of developing a BCIM economic corridor. During Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Beijing in October 2013, a decision was made to initiate a 'joint study' that will explore ways by which the initiative could be taken forward. The joint study group set up by India has since been involved in organising stakeholder conferences to strategise on the BCIM economic corridor. During one such conference in Calcutta on 2nd May, 2014, former Indian ambassador to Bangladesh Rajeev Mitter, who heads the study group, remarked: "From India's perspective, the BCIM Economic Corridor will mark another important dimension of India's Look East policy, which has been energetically pursued since the 1990s". The primary aim has been to enhance trade, investment and connectivity between India and countries to its immediate East extending up to Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific.

This affords the opportunity to optimise the dynamic synergies of the extended Asia-Pacific neighbourhood not just as a means to accelerate socio-economic development but also as a factor for regional peace and security. India's Look East Policy has already delivered impressive gains. The planned BCIM economic corridor will prove itself unique as it places the eastern and northeastern states of India at the heart of sub-regional cooperation within the broad parameters of the Look East Policy.⁵ By linking the land initiative of the Look East policy to the BCIM economic corridor, India has finally driven home the point that the country's Look East must work through both land and sea: through land via Northeast and through sea to coastal south-east Asia and Australia-Oceania. Obviously it makes much more sense to access Southeast Asia

by sea for trade and human movement, than through the Northeast, for the following reasons:

- (a) India's major industrial centres are on the western and eastern coast, far west, up north or down south, from where shipping goods to Southeast Asia by sea makes much more commercial and logistic sense, rather than moving them inland into northeastern India which is beset by transport bottlenecks. Even the export of raw materials like iron ore is easier and cheaper if they are moved into India's eastern ports like Paradip, Vizag or Haldia from central India, on the way to Southeast Asia.
- (b) India's major markets and the bulk of its population are in the mainland states and it makes much more sense to bring in goods from Southeast Asia by sea through the ports on the eastern coast – Calcutta/Haldia, Paradip, Vizag and Chennai. Such imports will be much more cost-effective and time-saving than if they were to be brought in through the Myanmar-Northeast India land route.

For example, Calcutta is only 1,614 kms or 1,003 miles (872 nautical miles) by sea from Bangkok. If some traders want to send a consignment from an industrial location or a mining area in eastern India to Thailand, a few hundred kilometers to Calcutta port by road or rail followed by sea transport would make much more sense than by taking the land route. From Calcutta to Siliguri on the “Chicken's Neck” is about 600 kms, from Siliguri to Moreh on the Manipur-Myanmar border is 1022 kms and then from Moreh to Mae Sot on the Myanmar-Thailand border would be another 1360 kms as and when the Trilateral

Highway is completed. From Mae Sot to Bangkok or anywhere else in Thailand would be another few hundred to more than one thousand kilometers. The land distance is more than double than by sea and calculating the relative transport cost, with rising fuel prices, the cost differential between the land and the sea route is enormous.

- (c) India's 'Look East' policy will never work unless Bangladesh facilitates the necessary transit linkages to help India connect its mainland to the Northeast. Unless the pre-Partition transport linkages are re-established and India is able to integrate its road and rail infrastructure with Bangladesh, the Northeast cannot be easily accessed and if that is not possible, there is no point for India in attempting to connect to Southeast Asia through the Northeast. The reality is that India first needs Bangladesh to help access its own Northeast before being able to use the region to connect to Southeast Asia.

Bangladesh, however, will allow that to happen only if it is able to gain major concessions on a host of issues, including the following:

- Getting a fair share of the waters of common rivers;
- Obtaining major trade concessions that will help it address its highly adverse trade balance with India;
- Finding a solution to its land boundary disputes and maritime boundary disputes with India in a way that Bangladesh can avoid being 'sea-locked'.

Again, India-Bangladesh relations so far have tended to be affected by regime changes in Dhaka and that introduces a huge element of uncertainty in bilateral relations.

- (d) Myanmar is the only country in Southeast Asia with which India's Northeast shares a land border and therefore it is highly relevant to India's Look East through northeast policy. The success of such policy will largely depend on the internal situation in Myanmar and how its relations with India shape up. There is a standard foreign policy argument here: How can India's relations with so many countries of Southeast Asia be left to depend on its relations with one country, namely, Myanmar, which is now passing through an uncertain process of change from military rule to democracy and which is unable to resolve its multiple ethnic conflicts, some of which have in fact aggravated in the last two years.

India has had very limited success in handling the ethno-nationalist movements in its own Northeast. The most important and oldest among them, the Naga movement for self-determination, is far from resolved despite 17 years of negotiations. The strongest separatist groups in Manipur, from where India is trying to develop its road and rail network into Southeast Asia through Myanmar, are still active and far from neutralized despite substantial deployment of armed forces in the tiny state. Only the two southernmost states in the region, Tripura and Mizoram, have managed to control the ethno-nationalist conflicts but Tripura has no border with Myanmar and Mizoram opens into Myanmar's Chin Hills, which itself is a poorly developed and conflict-prone region with abysmal transport and administrative infrastructure. A detailed analysis can highlight the difficulties created by such conflicts

for developing modern transport infrastructure to facilitate trade and human movement with neighbouring countries.

Important decisionmaking blocks in India have major reservations about using the Northeast to open out to south-west China. Using the 'land bridge' of northeast India to access south-west China (and through it other areas of China far away from its eastern coast) makes much more business sense than trying to access Southeast Asia by land. So 'Look East' through northeast India could work better for Sino-Indian bilateral trade, if a substantial part of it goes through the region. Shanghai from Calcutta is 4,665 nautical miles (more than 5,000 kms) by sea whereas Kunming from Kolkata (by the route used for the Feb-March 2013 BCIM car rally) is shorter at 3,026 kms. If one were to add the cost of transport by land over 1500-2000kms from Shanghai to western or south-western China, the cost differential is obvious and huge and that in itself would justify exploring the land route through Northeast India and Upper Myanmar. But military officials in India believe that opening the World War II vintage Stillwell Road to regular traffic will only provide China with a great strategic advantage in the event of a war on the land borders of the two nations (as in 1962). Trade officials say the Stillwell road could be used by China to dump its goods on Northeast India and through it to the rest of the country. The fear of losing a trade war or a conventional war seems to create reverse pressures within India on pursuing its Look East policy to its logical conclusion.⁵

India's Northeast: Troubled Periphery

India's Northeast is seen as a region where India looks less and less India and more and more like the highlands of Southeast Asia. The ancestors

of most of the ethnic groups that populate this remote Indian region hail from Southeast Asia or Southwest China and are broadly of Mongoloid stock. Which is why some call India's Northeast, the country's "Mongoloid fringe."⁶ The migration of ethnicities into what is India's Northeast today before the advent of the British was primarily east-to-west. The Ahoms who ruled Assam for several centuries, or most of the other ethnic groups who inhabit the various states of northeast India, originally migrated from Southeast Asia or south-west China into where they now live in India's Northeast. That pattern changed when the British started encouraging migration from the Indian mainland into the northeast after their conquest of Assam in the 19th century. As the flow of migrants from west to east increased—from the Indian mainland to what is now Northeast India—the contours of the contemporary ethnic conflicts began to emerge.⁷

India's northeast has a long border with Myanmar (1,643 kms), through which it can access other countries of Southeast Asia or China's Yunnan province. But it has no common land borders with any other Southeast country, unlike China's Yunnan province, which shares borders with Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Which is why perhaps China's "Bridgehead strategy" to connect to Southeast Asia using Yunnan as a connecting bridge makes much more sense than India's Look-East policy through Northeast. In a way, the success of India's Look-East policy through Northeast would be dependent, to a certain degree, on India's relations with Myanmar and the domestic situation in both Northeast India and Myanmar, where there is a long record of internal conflicts, some of which remain unresolved and are, in fact, starting to flare up again.

India's Northeast is still home to scores of ethnic rebellions against federal authority and conflicts between its various ethnicities are a frequent phenomenon. Myanmar also suffers from ethnic rebellions being battled by the country's military, including those in the Kachin and the Karen-inhabited areas. Ethnic conflicts have also ravaged the Rakhine province (former Arakans), through which India is trying to work its Kaladan multi-modal sea-river access to Northeast India and Myanmar. Which means the physical terrain through which India's Look-East policy is supposed to unfold—with its package of trade and transport connectivity—is still prone to conflicts that tend to explode more often than appearing closer to solutions. That would adversely impact on how the Look-East policy using the Northeast can play out over a definite timeframe because it cannot only delay but sometimes even altogether derail crucial projects.

A close look at India's road transport network in Northeast India connecting the Indian mainland to Myanmar through the troubled region will help underline the difficulties. India's national highway number 31 enters the Northeast from West Bengal through what is popularly called the “Siliguri corridor” (after the biggest town in the area) or the “Chicken Neck” (because such is the shape that it makes on a map). This corridor is barely 21 kms wide and is flanked by Bangladesh and Nepal. The point at which it enters the state of Assam, the most populous state in India's Northeast, is dominated by the Bodo tribes. It is also home to substantial populations of non-Bodo minorities like Muslims and Hindus of East Bengali origin, Assamese Hindus and tribes people of Central Indian origin, popularly called “Adivasis”, whose ancestors were brought to Assam from the states of Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa as cheap labour for the tea gardens. These tribes people, Santhals, Mundas and Oraons, have been at odds with the Bodos as

much as the Bengali Hindus and Muslims or the Assamese Hindus over the Bodo demand for a separate state.

From 1979 to 1985, Assam witnessed a powerful nativist movement aimed at expelling “foreigners” from the state. The Assamese regional groups say the state has seen the flooding of huge populations of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal whom they want expelled from the state. Hundreds died during the movement in police firings and ethnic riots that escalated after a controversial state election in February 1983. The Muslims of East Bengali origin bore the brunt of the riots and more than 2,000 are said to have died in a central Assam rural outback called Nellie.⁸

An accord between the Indian Central Government and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in 1985 brought an end to the movement. But within two years, Assam was facing a violent agitation, this time by the Bodo tribes people who say they are more indigenous to Assam than the ethnic Assamese, a nationality which has evolved over the centuries by assimilating different ethnic groups and tribes living in and around the river Brahmaputra. In 1987, the All Bodo Students Union said the tribe has suffered enough discrimination in Assam and were now determined to campaign for a separate state of their own. “Divide Assam 50-50” is the slogan that came out of the ABSU's 20th conference in 1987 and the Bodo student-youth groups unleashed violence that included bombing of public transport, both rail and buses, and crowded marketplaces. An accord with the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) in 2003 led to the creation of an autonomous council under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The aim was to pacify the Bodos with some form of self rule, short of creating a separate state.

Between 1996-1998, the entire area now covered by the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council witnessed violent riots between Bodos and non-Bodos. Hundreds died and nearly a quarter of a million people were displaced. Similar riots in the summer of 2012 again displaced more than a quarter of a million people. This time the riots were between the Bodos and the Muslims of East Bengali origin. Bodo groups say they want to push out “illegal migrants” from Bangladesh which the Assam government has failed to do. The Muslims of Bengali origin are also more organised than before, with a party called the All India United Democratic Front (previously Assam United Democratic Front) representing them strongly in the Assam State Assembly, where it now has 16 legislators in a house of 126. The riots of 2012 were not one-sided as before—the Muslims were also found to be hitting back in areas where they already had greater numbers.

The riots pushed to the background the renewed movement for a separate Bodo state which was being revived in early 2012 by the All Bodo Students Union that remains ill at ease with the insurgent-politicians who now control the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council. Suffice to say, the crucial transport corridor (road-rail) that connects India's Northeast to the country's mainland remains a disturbed zone that has not only witnessed long bouts of intense violence affecting resident population groups but also disrupted crucial infrastructure, especially rail and road transport, that has been systematically targeted by Bodo armed groups. On the eve of the Indian Republic Day celebration (26 January, 2013), a bomb explosion barely missed a crowded passenger train near Kokrajhar, the town where the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council (BTAC) is based. After the 2014 parliamentary elections, the area again erupted in violence and more than 40 Bengali speaking Muslims were killed by Bodo separatists in a week.

Since the 'Siliguri corridor' is so narrow, the only way to bypass the turbulent Bodo region is to explore road and rail connectivity through Bangladesh, which has not happened so far. (This shall be discussed in more detail in latter parts of this paper.) Thus, the area of western Assam through which India connects to its Northeast has been for the past three decades a volatile, turbulent region marred by ethnic conflict that has the potential to explode into large scale violence and cause major disruption to the movement of goods and people.

It is not only the Assam side of this narrow corridor that has faced violent disruptions due to ethnic movements. On the West Bengal side of the corridor, the Nepali-speaking Gorkhas have been agitating for a separate state they want to be carved out of the tea-producing district of Darjeeling. In recent years, they have demanded the inclusion into their proposed state of some areas on the foothills called "Dooars". Though the Indian government and the state government of West Bengal have tried to placate the Gorkha groups by giving them an autonomous council to run the Darjeeling region, the groups have periodically resumed their demand for a separate state, the latest being in July 2013 after Delhi announced the formation of a new state of Telangana in southern India. The Gorkha groups now say they will not settle for anything short of a separate Gorkhaland state—the Bengal government says it is also determined not to let this happen. The Gorkhas are asking for the inclusion of some areas of "Dooars" which has upset the non-Gorkha communities living in this area. Clashes between Gorkha and non-Gorkha communities have erupted on a few occasions, threatening movement on the crucial highway.

Similarly, the highways and rail links to Northeast are threatened by renewed statehood movements in Assam state, where Bodo, Karbi and Dimasas tribespeople have started campaigns for the carving out of separate states.

The other major road corridor to connect to Myanmar through the Northeast also passes through an area long devastated by ethnic conflict and separatist violence. The national highway No. 39 that enters Nagaland from Assam, and passes through its main commercial town Dimapur and capital Kohima to end further south to Manipur's capital Imphal and frontier town of Moreh—has been regularly affected by blockades and violence. National Highway No. 53 enters Manipur from Assam's Barak Valley and goes to connect Imphal through Jiribam. The Naga tribes dominate both these highways. Since talks began between the Indian government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1997, the Manipur government has steadfastly opposed the NSCN's demand for inclusion of Naga-dominated areas of the state into a "Greater Naga state". Meitei groups in the Valley have opposed this demand and their violent opposition to the extension of the 1997 Naga ceasefire to Manipur forced Delhi to back off and limit it to Nagaland. The Naga student-youth groups under the United Naga Council which backs the NSCN's "Greater Nagaland" plan have regularly chosen to enforce long-duration road blockades on both National Highway 39 and 53 to cut off Manipur from the rest of the country. This has happened at regular intervals and each time, it goes on for months, not just days.

Other occasions of blockades and strikes on these highways include:

- 2004-2005 - 92 days;
- 2005-2006 - 121 days;
- 2006-2007 - 83 days;
- 2007-2008 - 103 days;
- 2008-2009 - 60 days;
- 2009-2010 - 154 days;
- 2011-2012 - 292 days, with one blockade alone lasting for 90 days.

The strikes were of shorter duration—between one to three days, but some of the blockades were as long as three months. Local media reports in Manipur which report extensively on these strikes and blockades by Naga groups also detailed the damage done to vehicles, bridges and other infrastructure.

The Naga groups have exercised the “highway blockade” option as a weapon to tone down Manipuri resistance to the “Greater Nagaland” demand, but the miseries caused by the paucity of essential commodities during these blockades has only hardened Manipuri opinion against the 'greater Naga state' demand. Since the Naga issue is far from resolved and has apparently hit a roadblock on the “Greater Nagaland” demand, it can be expected that the highway blockades will be used in the future as and when it is seen as essential to mount pressure on the Indian government.

Moreh sits opposite Myanmar's Tamu town from where Indian Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has built a modern highway to Kalewa that goes on to connect Mandalay. On the Myanmar side of the highway, the political situation has not been very disturbed, except for periods that witnessed powerful pro-democracy movements across the country. The

insurgencies in Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine (former Arakan) provinces are far away from this highway.

But on the Indian side, Highway No. 39 passes through Nagaland and Manipur, two of the most disturbed states in India's northeast. In Nagaland, the fighting between the Naga rebels and the Indian security forces has not erupted again since the 1997 ceasefire with the NSCN, but several Naga rebel factions have been fighting among themselves. The delay in finding a solution to the vexed Naga problem has also led to systematic extortion on the national highways on the Nagaland-Manipur stretch by NSCN factions as well as the Kuki and Meitei armed groups, who all seek to tax the trade with Myanmar in order to raise funds for their armed campaign against India. So these highways that connect Northeast India to Myanmar are susceptible not only to blockades that disrupt trade but also to extortion which raises the cost of trade substantially. Only the trading of contraband like narcotics and weapons can manage to sustain such disruptions and extortions because profit margins are very high.

The highway from Kohima to Imphal and the one from Silchar in Assam to Imphal (Highway No. 53) is dominated by the Nagas because they inhabit these stretches in large numbers. The highway from Imphal to the border town of Moreh is dominated by Kukis who also have rebel groups fighting for a separate homeland. The Kuki groups have also caused disruptions, blocking the highway by calling strikes to back up their demands—though their blockades have been of much shorter duration than that of the Nagas. Of the four Northeast Indian states which have common borders with Myanmar, only the one separating Manipur's Moreh town from Myanmar's Tamu town goes through

relatively easy physical terrain and is seen as viable for substantial cross-border trade and human movement. This is because the highway from Moreh to Kalewa goes on to connect to Mandalay into the heartland of Myanmar. Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh's borders are on the very difficult stretches of Sagaing and only the Stillwell Road that passes through this area has some potential for crossborder trade—but more with China than with Myanmar's mainland. Mizoram borders on the Chin state and is seen as more useful as a connection between Indian mainland and the rest of the Northeast through Myanmar's Rakhine and Chin state up from the port of Sittwe through the Kaladan river. This is where India is pushing ahead with its Kaladan multi-model transport project. It is seen, however, as the alternative access between Indian mainland and the Northeast, an alternative to the Chittagong-Tripura route, rather than one that will allow India to 'look east' to Southeast Asia through Myanmar.

Thus if Manipur is crucial to focus east for India, which is perhaps the case, the trouble is battling ethnicities such as the Nagas that are capable of closing down both the highways that connect the state to the rest of the country. The Siliguri corridor (connecting Assam to India), the Kohima-Imphal highway, and the Silchar-Imphal highway, all pass through sensitive troubled areas which have been prone to violence and disruptions on a fairly regularly basis. These disruptions not only affect the regular movements of cargo and people but also affect and delay any effort to upgrade road and rail networks needed to connect to neighbours like Myanmar.

Bangladesh: Crucial to India's Look-East Policy

Unlike China's Yunnan province which, though remote, is firmly connected to the country's mainland, India's Northeast cannot be properly accessed from the country's mainland without Bangladesh agreeing to facilitate the process by enabling transit and connectivity. A recent example will help emphasize the need for upgradation of these highways and rail networks in India's Northeast and also that Bangladesh is crucial for India to connect its mainland to the Northeast. For nearly five years, the 700MW project at Palatana in the northeast Indian state of Tripura could not be completed as heavy equipment like transformers needed for this project could not be brought in through the national highways (No 31 that connects Northeast to rest of India and No 44 that connects Tripura to Assam) because more than 20 bridges on these highways were considered too weak and unsafe to transport such heavy equipment.

After the Awami League government came to power in Bangladesh in January 2009, both the Indian government and the state government of Tripura started negotiations for use of the Chittagong port to bring in the heavy equipment for the Palatana project. Bangladesh finally permitted the use of the Chittagong port and the river port of Asuganj for bringing in the heavy equipment needed for Palatana, strictly on an one-off basis. The equipment was shipped to Chittagong and then brought up to Asuganj by the river. Later it was moved into Tripura from Asuganj by land over a distance of only 40 kilometres. The project has now been commissioned and the Tripura government has offered 100MW of electricity to Bangladesh which is suffering from a huge power shortfall at the moment. Negotiations for this project have just begun between New Delhi and Dhaka, two years after the Tripura

government made the offer during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Agartala

The efforts to upgrade the highways and convert the railway network in many parts of northeast to broad gauge have fallen much behind schedule after the usual delays in undertaking the projects. Apart from the problem of supply of materials, much of which has to be procured from outside the region, extortion and threats by armed non-state actors have caused these delays. In Tripura, the work for connecting the Capital Agartala by rail to Kumarghat in the north of the state took off only after the state had managed to control the raging tribal insurgency in the state. In the late 1990s, the project was stalled by large-scale extortions by the two major armed rebel groups, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF): Contractors complained they were asked for huge sums of money that would compromise the projects' profitability. The rebels resorted to mass abductions of workers from the construction sites if their financial demands were not met. They were particularly active in the three mountain ranges—Longtarai, Atharamura and Baramura—through which the rail link had to pass and it was not possible to provide static security at all the construction sites over such a difficult hill terrain. But after these rebel groups were decimated by a combination of police action and political initiatives in the mid-2000s, work on linking Agartala to Kumarghat by rail progressed at great speed. Now that peace has returned to Tripura, the government is also pushing for a rail link to Sabroom town in the south of the state from Agartala.

The fact that it has taken 60 years to put Tripura on India's railway map shows how long it can take to plan and implement the upgradation of

transport infrastructure in the Northeast. The inevitable cost and time overruns often end up delaying, sometimes totally derailing, such projects.

The centrality of Bangladesh to India's effort to 'Look East' through its own Northeast was recently emphasized by the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) car rally which was flagged off at Calcutta on February 22 and ended at Kunming in early March. The 20 participating teams of about 80 people, entered Bangladesh at Petrapole-Benapole crossing and passed through Jessore, capital Dhaka and Sylhet, before entering India's Northeast on the way to Myanmar and China. Though the Bangladesh leg of the rally was less than that in Myanmar, the unmistakable importance of Bangladesh in linking Southeast Asia or south-west China to the Indian mainland was not lost. The distance differential between Calcutta and the Northeast Indian state capitals will help highlight the importance of getting to use Bangladesh for transit from the Indian mainland into northeast India.

Table 1: Distance Differential between Northeastern towns/ state capitals and Calcutta via Chicken's Neck (Siliguri corridor) vis-à-vis through Bangladesh

From	To	Via Chicken's Neck	Via Bangladesh	Distance Differential
Agartala	Calcutta	1680 kms	450 kms	1230 kms
Silchar	Calcutta	1407 kms	600 kms	807 kms
Guwahati	Calcutta	1081 kms	830 kms	261 kms
Shillong	Calcutta	1181 kms	720 kms	461 kms
Imphal	Calcutta	1742 kms	900 kms	842 kms
Aizawl	Calcutta	1657 kms	800 kms	857 kms

(Source: P. 138, Security and Development in India's Northeast, Gurudas Das, OUP, 2012)

Some problems stand in the way of using Bangladesh to connect India's Northeast with the mainland; some of these issues are bilateral in nature and others, internal to Bangladesh. These problems include:

- (a) The bilateral relations seem to improve or deteriorate with regime changes in Bangladesh, possibly also in India. Continuity is important for a bilateral relationship to change the diplomatic landscape but so far, the nature of India-Bangladesh relations has been regime-specific. When the Congress is in power in Delhi and Awami League in Dhaka, relations tend to move into top gear. The relationship goes back to the days of the 1971 civil war, from which Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation, a process in which Indian support and ultimate military intervention played a major role.

But when the BNP-Jamaat coalition is in power in Dhaka, relations with India tend to worsen. Bangladesh has long been a safe sanctuary for rebels from India's Northeast—a fact that the BNP-Jamaat coalition government stridently denied—until Sheikh Hasina's Awami League came to power with a landslide majority in the December 2008 parliament polls. Scores of Northeast Indian separatist leaders and activists were arrested or chased away only to fall into the hands of Indian security forces. Many of them subsequently opened negotiations with Delhi because they were left with little choice. But if the Awami League goes out of power, the situation may change. Since democracy was restored in Bangladesh in 1991, power has changed hands in every parliament elections at five-year intervals. Important policy decisions will be difficult to implement, such as allowing India to use Bangladesh to access its Northeast, in view of likely regime changes. India tried to reach out to the BNP by hosting its chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in Delhi in November 2012. However, the kind of Indian support that one can now see for

Sheikh Hasina on crucial issues like 'war crimes trials' is not likely to enthrone the BNP and surely not its ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami, to seek better relations with India. In fact, Khaleda Zia cancelled her scheduled meeting with Indian President Pranab Mukherjee during his Dhaka visit on 5-7th March 2013, citing 'security concerns'; the BNP and its ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami, called for three days of nationwide strikes covering the entire visit of President Pranab Mukherjee.

- (b) Even with friendly regimes sitting in Delhi and Dhaka, contentious issues are difficult to resolve because of India's federal polity. Indian states bordering Bangladesh are often not kindly disposed to resolving issues like river water sharing and land or maritime boundary disputes. In September 2012, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was on the verge of signing the Teesta river water sharing agreement with the Hasina government during his visit to Dhaka, when West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerji opposed the deal. PM Singh, whose UPA coalition was dependent on Banerji's Trinamul Congress for support to survive as the ruling coalition in Parliament, had to back off at the last minute. Matters may change now with the Narendra Modi-led government taking over in New Delhi. Because the Teesta water sharing deal could not be signed, Bangladesh backed off from providing India the right to use the Chittagong port for shipment of goods to the Northeast. India will be able to use a land-sea corridor for accessing the Northeast through Bangladesh only if Dhaka gets major Indian concessions in sharing waters of common rivers, trade, investments, and boundary disputes.

- (c) Many Indian border states have a tradition of seeing Bangladesh as a bogey. Assam witnessed a six-year-long agitation for driving out illegal migrants from Bangladesh between 1979 to 1985. For decades, settlers with roots in Bangladesh have been made the target of nativist violence in Assam. Unlike Tripura which is now a Bengali-majority state, politics in neighbouring Assam and Meghalaya has strong anti-settler overtones which can create hurdles for nurturing a long-term relationship with Bangladesh. The Land Boundary Agreement that India wants to push with Bangladesh has faced stiff resistance from regional parties and the Hindu nationalist BJP in Assam and West Bengal.
- (d) Bangladesh itself is in the midst of a developing political crisis that could have long-term effects on its stability. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has started trials of 'war criminals' (those who sided with Pakistan and perpetrated atrocities on innocent civilians during the 1971 civil war) by setting up special tribunals. This is polarizing the nation with Bengali secular nationalists demanding death for all 'war criminals' and the Islamist groups calling for putting an end to the trials. Strikes, street violence, and road blockades have intensified as rival groups decide to settle scores on the streets. Even the four-nation BCIM car rally was grounded in Dhaka for a day on February 24 due to a nationwide 24-hour strike called by Islamist parties. The opposition is also determined not to join Bangladesh's forthcoming parliamentary polls unless the country's erstwhile interim caretaker system for holding the elections is restored. This is adding to the tensions across Bangladesh. More than 100 people have died in violence unleashed by the Islamist groups

since a special tribunal sentenced some leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami to death or life imprisonment for war crimes during the 1971 civil war that led to Bangladesh's painful birth. There were five days of nationwide strikes in the week beginning February 28, 2013, the day the war crimes tribunals sentenced Jamaat-e-Islami's former lawmaker Delwar Hossain Sayadee to death. India's Look-East through its own Northeast needs a stable and peaceful Bangladesh to work, but that may not be easy to expect as the conflict intensifies between the Islamist groups and the secular Bengali nationalists.

Myanmar: Crucial Link by Land

Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a common land border with India. Four northeast Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram—share a 1,643-kms long border with Myanmar. Since Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, India has been encouraged to use its Northeast to open out to Southeast Asia via land. The ambitious road and rail link that India seeks to develop to connect to Southeast Asia passes through Myanmar. Having developed the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo highway, India is now seeking to start work on the Trilateral Highway project that will connect Moreh on India-Myanmar border with Mae Sot on the Myanmar-Thailand border via Bagan. Once this is possible, India can look forward to accessing other ASEAN countries through Myanmar by road.

This may take years to achieve at the present rate of progress and planning, but the ambitious Trans-Asian rail link plan that seeks to

connect Delhi with Hanoi will be much more difficult and time-consuming to implement. India will first have to extend its rail link to Manipur's Jiribam and Moreh towns from Assam's Silchar before it can link up with the Myanmar railway system, which needs substantial modernization before it can shoulder the pressures of being the link in the chain for a trans-Asian railway network from Hanoi to Delhi. The director-general of the Indian Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA) has said recently: "The major lacuna in India's Look East policy has been the absence of deep engagement with Myanmar, which is not only India's neighbour—sharing a land border with India—but also a gateway for India to ASEAN. Closer engagement with Myanmar will give a boost to India's Look East Policy".⁹ Connectivity between the ASEAN countries and India is still poor, primarily because of absence of road and rail linkages through Myanmar.

China is far better entrenched in Myanmar since the 1980s and its 'bridgehead policy' using the frontier province of Yunnan to develop relations with south-east Asian countries is proceeding at a much faster pace. The road, rail and waterways connectivity being planned by China in Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries with which Yunnan shares a land frontier is progressing much faster than India's proposed Trilateral Highway project or the rail link to Hanoi. China enjoys the geopolitical advantage of Yunnan sharing frontiers with not only Myanmar but other ASEAN countries as well, which is not the case with India. Moreover, China is also spending much more funds on these neighbourhood transport infrastructure projects than India can afford or is prepared to invest.

The conversion of the rail track between Lumding and Silchar started 17 years ago; the goal was to complete the project within ten years. Thus the deadline has been exceeded by seven years and the Indian Railways remains unable to say when the conversion will be completed. Only when this track is converted to broad gauge will India be able to concentrate on extending the rail link from Silchar to Jiribam in Manipur and on to Moreh on the Manipur-Myanmar border. Myanmar railways, still very archaic, will also need conversion to broad gauge to be compatible for a trans-Asian rail link. Given the pace of conversion of the Indian railways, this may take long.

Some transport analysts say India is much more keen to complete the Kaladan Multi-Modal project that envisages modernization of the Sittwe port in the Arakans (Rakhine) province and dredge the Kaladan river upto Mizoram state in northeast India. “When this project is complete, India can not only use the sea-river route to access its Northeast but also use the Sittwe port for trade with Myanmar. It will be much more cost-effective than using the overland route through Northeast India and then the Moreh-Mandalay-Mae Sot highway.”¹⁰

Though the Kaladan project is running behind schedule, partly because of the disruptions caused by the Rakhine-Rohingya ethnic riots in the Arakans (Rakhine) state, it is likely to be completed by 2015-16.

“It makes much more sense for transporters and those in export-import trade to use these relatively peaceful states to send in goods not only to the rest of Northeast but also for onward transshipment to ASEAN countries using the China-developed road-rail network from Arakans

(Rakhine) to elsewhere on Myanmar's borders with its south-east Asian neighbours.”¹¹

From Siliguri on “Chicken's Neck” to Moreh on the Manipur-Myanmar border, the road distance is just over 1,000 kms but travel is cumbersome and expenses are high because of poor highway conditions causing wear and tear, frequent blockades resulting from conflicts that cause delays, and frequent extortions by different rebel groups: all of these add to the regular operating costs. From Moreh to Mae Sot would be another 1,360 kms as and when the Trilateral Highway is complete but even in Myanmar it will pass through conflict zones.

Therefore the success of India's 'Look-East' efforts to access ASEAN countries through Myanmar will depend on four crucial factors, namely:

- (a) An end to Myanmar's internal conflicts with ethnic minorities, some of which are crucially located;
- (b) The state of India's relations with Myanmar;
- (c) The upgradation of Myanmar's road and railway networks and its integration with those in Northeast India; and,
- (d) Stability of Myanmar's democratic polity and continuity of policy on core projects like the Trilateral Highway.

Though Myanmar is moving towards 'limited' democracy', one will have to wait until the 2015 parliament elections to see how free and fair they are and how the Tatmadaw (Military) will react to a possible victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and whether it will accept Aung Sang Suu Kyi as the country's President. The NLD boycott of the last parliament elections made it easy for the Tatmadaw to accept a

transition to democracy because the party that came to power was headed by former generals like Thein Sein. The NLD did sweep the by-elections that followed but that did not influence the final outcome on who controls power in Nayphidaw. The year 2015 will be different: By all indications, the NLD will contest the election. Another repeat of 1990—when the NLD was denied power despite a landslide victory in the parliament polls—will raise serious questions about Myanmar's journey towards democracy and development.

Far from resolving major ethnic conflicts, the quasi-democratic government headed by President Thein Sein seems to have taken a hardline approach on the nationalities issues and the conflicts have sharply escalated in the Kachin state with the Tatmadaw even using air power to crush the Kachin Independence Army's (KIA) resistance. The conflict escalated after the Tatmadaw tried to push the ceasefire groups (ethnic rebel groups who had signed ceasefire deals in the 1990s) to integrate their forces with the Myanmar security establishment as Border Guards. Ethnic riots in the Rakhine state (former Arakans) twice in 2012 have unsettled India's Kaladan Multi-Modal project that involves the modernization of the Sittwe port and dredging the Kaladan river to access Mizoram. It has also caused huge worries in China over their high-value projects like developing the new deep sea port at Kyauk Pyu and an oil-gas pipeline connecting Yunnan with the Arakan coast to facilitate China's energy imports from the Middle East bypassing the Malacca Straits. The Karen areas on the Thai-Myanmar border continue to be volatile and an escalation of conflict cannot be ruled out. That is where Mae Sot, the final point of the Trilateral Highway, is located.

In many ways, Myanmar is seen as the main impediment for not only India's Look East policy by land but also for the success of the BCIM and BIMSTEC initiatives. Its present quasi-military regime is wary of clearing necessary initiatives on customs, border management, transport movement, and other related issues without which a seamless transport corridor to anchor the economic corridor will not be possible. Both Indian and Chinese diplomats are having difficulty in getting Myanmar to okay these agreements without which the economic corridor can never function. Though the regime is taking peace initiatives, it is wary of allowing a major international corridor to pass through territories still controlled by ethnic rebels and not fully under the control of its army. Stakeholders involved with transport and pipeline projects on this corridor will have to contend with—and will be highly uncomfortable with—the continuing conflicts that can create an impact on the security of the high-value projects.

Thus getting around the problems posed by Myanmar would be the main challenge before those pushing India's Look East policy and the BCIM-BIMSTEC initiatives. Perhaps if the 2015 parliament polls provide for a more stable regime in Myanmar, the situation can change. Otherwise, the problems will continue to fester.

In the last one year, the Myanmar peace process has moved forward with thirteen declarations of ceasefire. The process, however, has been described as “flawed” not only because the present government sees the problem as economic, but also because it is coming up with unacceptable proposals. “The President and various government spokespersons have talked about the ethnic armed groups giving up their arms, forming political parties, contesting the elections, and once in parliament,

amending the constitution. This seems to be the government's idea of a political dialogue to amend the constitution. This is practically impossible and unacceptable to the ethnic groups. To disarm in 2-3 years without any political settlement beforehand is out of the question. Even if an ideal settlement were made, the groups have no guarantee that they will be elected, and once elected, how will they make any amendments in a parliament dominated by the military? A political dialogue, if there is going to be one, has to be extra-parliamentary. It would then be the government's responsibility to amend the constitution accordingly.”¹²

India's relations with Myanmar have improved but much more needs to be done. As one study has observed: “Indo–Myanmar cooperation in the past has been marred by delays and uncertainty. These delays have cost India productive cooperation in the hydrocarbon sector, where China has been the gainer. Undoubtedly, there is far greater potential in Indo–Myanmar relations than the few projects India has undertaken so far. These projects should be completed at the earliest but more needs to be done.”¹³ India will have to invest much more in Myanmar's rail-road-river transport network if 'Look East' through Northeast and Myanmar has to work.

India needs to pursue its Look East policy through Northeast to boost the region's economy by allowing it to leverage the neighbourhood markets. Delhi needs to break out of the strange security mindset that once pushed it to keep the region's road network underdeveloped so that the Chinese would not be able to move speedily in Indian territory in the event of a conventional war. It needs to invest more in transport infrastructure within the Northeast, between Northeast India and Bangladesh, and between Northeast India and Myanmar. Such a strategy

may, in the long run, attract domestic and foreign capital to invest in Northeast India to take locational advantage of substantial neighbourhood markets. Only when such investments are made and competitive products in some quantity roll out of such manufacturing units could there be substantial intra-regional trade between Northeast India and the neighbouring regions of Myanmar, China, and some ASEAN countries.

The first step for India is to develop the Northeast as a manufacturing hub, which it has failed to do so far in spite of transport subsidies and other incentives. Very often, it has not worked. India has been exporting some petroleum products from Assam's Numaligarh refinery to Bangladesh using the Brahmaputra river and is seeking to export similar products to neighbouring Myanmar. But Numaligarh will not have enough of crude within Assam to process, because the state's crude output is falling and many of its refineries may need to get imported crude from Haldia port in West Bengal to process and maintain capacity or near-capacity production. But it would make much more sense to process crude in Haldia refinery and send it to Bangladesh or Myanmar by sea than to send the crude up to Assam for processing and re-export to these neighbouring countries. In this, India will have to follow the Yunnan model. China developed Yunnan as a major manufacturing hub as part of its "Western Development" before it started to use the province as a 'bridgehead' to south-east and South Asia. Northeast India has to become a manufacturing hub before it can be gainfully used as a landbridge to the East.

India's Look East will thus have to operate at different levels. For the mainland states, it will work primarily through the sea. It is not that sea

traffic out of India's east coast to Southeast Asia is free of problems. Much of the container traffic from Calcutta, Paradip, Chennai or Vizag, heads for Singapore from where the cargo branches off to its final destinations elsewhere in the region. That may save cost through bulk handling but causes long time lags in delivery. Thus the better option may be to use a land route to a country like Laos or northern Burma, though not until we have connectivity through the Trilateral Highway and the Asian Railway is successfully established and running efficiently.¹⁴

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