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India's Act East Policy Amidst Issues in Connectivity

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Abstract

Since the conclusion of super-power rivalry with the end of the Cold War, the gradual shaping and reshaping of connectivity-enhancing initiatives facilitated by economic corridors has been one of the major focus areas in inter-state relations on regional as well as global levels. In the context of South and Southeast Asia the Maritime Silk Route, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, the China Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor are some examples of such endeavors. The ancient Silk Route connecting China with Europe, India and Southeast Asia has also often been referenced in this regard. However, in the globalized world of today, the scenario is somewhat different, in the sense that the manufacturing sector has come to play a more dominant role in economic development, unlike earlier times. This paper attempts to study the recent developments in issues concerning connectivity and trade under the broader lens of India's Southeast Asia Policy, most commonly referred to as the Look East or the Act East Policy. It focuses on the status of the existing linkages between the two regions and how these linkages are being utilized, or under-utilized. In some cases, due to differences in opinion amongst the stakeholders along with rapidly changing regional political complications, important development projects have taken a backseat. However, in today's highly advanced international trading environment, South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan as well as Southeast Asia (through Myanmar) could revive such linkages to further their own economic development.

Keywords: *Connectivity, Development, Common Market, Regionalism, Northeast India, Southeast Asia, Border-Trade.*

Introduction: D. Foray and B.A. Lundvall (Foray and Lundvall, 1996) introduced the concept of a knowledge-based economy. In this regard, they argued that factors determining the success of firms and national economies were becoming more dependent than ever on the capacity to produce and use knowledge, while the other side of this new aspect of economic growth was innovation and technological changes which had become more central to economic performance. Compared to many other existing concepts aimed at understanding international relations better, the term "economic corridor" is a rather fresh

concept. While discussing the different stages of development of such corridors, Srivastava (2011) argues that there are five such stages in the transformation of a transport corridor to an economic corridor. In this regard, the first stage is what may be understood as a 'general' Transport Corridor; the second stage is a Transport and Trade Facilitation Corridor; in the third stage, the formation of a Logistics Corridor takes place; the fourth stage is characterized by an Urban Development Corridor which leads to the final stage of an Economic Corridor. The 'regionality' of such corridors and the extent of their area of influence or width dictate the framework for their development. On this basis, four zones are demarcated with inter-zone sequencing. These are as follows. Zone 1: Narrow National Corridor; Zone 2: Broad National Corridor, including area development and railroads; Zone 3: Narrow Regional Corridor, including trade facilitation and logistics; and Zone 4: Broad Regional Corridor, including cross-border economic zones. The development of a national corridor to a regional one, that is, the movement from Zone 2 to 3, may involve the linking of national corridors. It includes reducing barriers at national boundaries to enable moving people and goods at the least cost possible. The growth of logistics companies has to be supported, while procedures are standardized. The private sector has a critical role in corridor development in Zone 3. And for movement to Zone 4, seamless integration requires regional plans and the coordination of national plans.ⁱ

Efforts aimed at regional integration and economic connectivity have been a recurring theme in India's Southeast Asia policy since the inauguration of the Look East Policy in 1991 which was reciprocated to with the "Look West" Policy by Thailand. During earlier times, especially in the pre-colonial era, there had been significant exchanges in culture, religious values and ideas and there is enough evidence to suggest that even trade among the provinces under the present conceptualization of South and Southeast Asia, had flourished. However, closer home, despite the shared cultural, historical and geographical roots, South Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. It may be argued that historical political tensions, trust deficit and security concerns have largely contributed towards this lack of integration. Along with these factors, the absence of functioning economic corridors, border related conflict territories, high non-tariff barriers including travel restrictions and a lack of political will to strengthen and implement agreements like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), SAARC Agreement on Trade In Services (SATIS) and bilateral free trade and investment agreements have hampered the attempts at regional economic integration in South Asia.ⁱⁱ As mentioned earlier, the lack of support towards the growth of logistics companies has played a major role in limiting trade in the region. This is especially true in the case of India's connectivity projects with Southeast Asia through the north-eastern states. The trade between India and ASEAN is mostly in manufacturing products and is restrictive towards agricultural products. The north-eastern states do not possess the comparative advantage in India's export to ASEAN. In order to take the advantages of the growing trade alliances, efforts should be focused on improving inter-state connectivity and market integration.ⁱⁱⁱ It has often been pointed out that due to limited transport connectivity, onerous logistics and regulatory impediments along with a lack of trust, it costs more to trade within South Asia than between South Asia

and other regions of the world. Reiterating this argument, an article published by the World Bank states that it is 20 per cent cheaper for India to trade with Brazil than with its neighbor Pakistan.^{iv} One way of solving this problem, at least in the context of eastern and north-eastern India is to explore the possibilities of engaging Bangladesh as a transit corridor from the “mainland” to north-east India and consequently, to Southeast Asia through Myanmar. This could be accomplished by allowing Bangladesh similar access to Nepal and Bhutan through Indian territory although this may come at the cost of raising security concerns among the countries involved, especially around the strategically located Siliguri corridor. Here it may be necessary to emphasize that most of the problems in properly integrating the economy of the North-Eastern region with that of the rest of India is due to the fact that the Siliguri Corridor is the only connecting/ linking area between the two geographical spaces. This has, over the years caused immense problems in the proper development of the region as a whole. On a positive note, the inauguration of a waterways transit facility by India and Bangladesh in 2016 is a welcome move. This was made possible by the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade signed by the Prime Ministers of the two nations. According to the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), under the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit & Trade between India and Bangladesh, inland vessels of one country can transit through the specified routes of the other country. The existing protocol routes are: Kolkata-Pandu-Kolkata; Kolkata-Karimganj- Kolkata; Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi and Pandu-Karimganj-Pandu. For inter-country trade, four ports of call have been designated in each country. For India these are Haldia (West Bengal), Kolkata (West Bengal), Pandu (Assam) Karimganj (Assam) and Silghat (Assam). Similarly for Bangladesh, these are Narayanganj, Khulna, Mongla, Sirajganj and Ashuganj.^v Moreover, Bangladesh has agreed to allow transshipment of Indian goods via Chittagong and Mongla sea ports from January 2020 without charging customs duties and transit fees, after Bangladesh shipping secretary Md. Abdus Samad met his Indian counterpart Gopal Krishna at the shipping secretary-level talks in Dhaka in December 2019.^{vi} These recent developments have significantly contributed towards a new hope for enhanced connectivity in the future.

The Case for a South-Southeast Asian Common Market: Replicating the EU Model?

A common market is created when a group is formed by countries within a geographical space with an aim to promote duty-free trade and free movement of labour and capital among its members. The European Economic Community, formed by the Treaty of Rome signed between France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg on the 25th of March, 1957 remains the earliest and largely successful modern example of a common market. An attempt to prevent another war and improve economic conditions amongst European states had been one of the major reasons for this idea. Looking at the European experience of regional integration, one finds that a major factor for its success has been a lack of border-related issues unlike in South Asia; and the absence of insurgent elements operating in its borders, like in the North-Eastern Region of India. For decades, these two issues have been hampering efforts at deeper integration between India and Southeast Asia.

Apart from such issues, the presence of a common culture goes a long way in ultimately creating a common market between two areas. Explaining this, in an article published in 1990, Karlfried Knapp (Knapp 1990, 55-60) writes,

“Everybody is aware of the culture problem in contacts with far-away and exotic countries like those in the Far East or Africa, and tries to be prepared for possible cultural differences. When doing business in Europe, however, people tend to assume that no such problem exists after all, the unspoken argument might go, we Europeans all share a common heritage of Western civilization. And that is why, apart from bureaucratic regulations, it is usually only the language difference that is regarded as the main obstacle to a common market.”^{vii}

In the context of India's Southeast Asia policy (Look/Act East Policy), given the shared culture, historical linkages and languages amongst the people living on either side of the border between Myanmar and India, the idea and prospects of a common market could also generate some interest amongst the stakeholders. Although Moreh in the Indo-Myanmar border has been functioning as a trading/market area, the lack of proper regulations and a limited set of permissible/'trade-able' commodities have highly restricted its potential. In contrast to Moreh, one finds that Tamu, on the other side of the border in the Sagine division of Myanmar is much more developed in terms of logistics and infrastructure and is more organized as a market. Hence, proper regulations and policy implementation on the Indian side of the border have emerged as urgent requirements for enhancing border trade and creation of border markets in the near future. In case of the ongoing efforts at regional economic integration in and between South and Southeast Asia, the role of the Asian Development Bank has been immense. It has been at the forefront of this endeavor overseeing efforts like the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation as well as immensely contributing towards the construction of the road connecting Karaweik to Eindu in Kayin state of Myanmar. It has also devised a set of characteristic features typifying an economic corridor. Hence understanding the ways in which such corridors of development can come into existence and how they can be maintained sustainably and for promotion of closer integration in the region has been the focus of the Asian Development Bank and according to De (2014) the idea here is that “a better infrastructure through economic corridors, would encourage production networks across South Asia, enhance regional and global trade, and help accelerate the region's economic integration.”^{viii} India's efforts at economic integration with the rest of South Asia as well as with Southeast Asia may be understood under the broader policy of formerly 'looking' East and at present, 'acting' East. In some regards this policy also shares India's vision of playing a greater role in East Asia as well as the Asia-Pacific region. According to the Press Information Bureau (PIB),

“The Objective of Act East Policy is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the States of North Eastern Region including Arunachal Pradesh with other

countries in our neighborhood. The North East of India has been a priority in our Act East Policy (AEP).”^{ix}

The ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, which was adopted by the ASEAN leaders in November 2015 at the 27th ASEAN Summit is aimed towards achieving the vision of having an ASEAN Economic Community by 2025. They hope to achieve this through enhanced connectivity and sectorial cooperation.^x Given the existing MoUs and treaties between India and Myanmar on sectors like border trade and connectivity, this provides tremendous opportunities for the Indian economy, if the bottlenecks are sorted out in a timely manner. The need for enhanced regional integration among the ASEAN members stems from a host of historical reasons and of late, the member-states are actively engaged in pursuing their vision of a common market and production base, more or less along the lines of the European Union, barring a common currency. However, in academic circles, there is skepticism about the possibility of such a grand vision taking shape in the near future. Closer home, India's Act East Policy has often been dubbed as a springboard to Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. Given the rapidly increasing role of value and supply chains in the global economy, India could be placed more strongly as a prime partner, or an increasingly potential alternative to China in ASEAN.

India-ASEAN Relations: Connectivity prospects through North-East India: Looking into the history between the two regions in a nutshell, an India-ASEAN ‘sectoral dialogue’ was established in 1993. Two years later, India was elevated to the status of a full dialogue partner, and a year later India participated for the first time, in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Born out of a drastically changing global order in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, coupled with crippling financial conditions, the Look East Policy was India's effort to rekindle relations with the members of ASEAN in a bid to promote regional peace, connectivity, stability and work towards its own foreign policy re-orientation involving a shift towards a market-driven economy. In the 21st Century, being the vibrant economy that it has become, Southeast Asia cannot be ignored. Factoring in the Asia Pacific region and the Maritime Silk Route, establishment and maintenance of strong economic linkages with ASEAN member states appears as the only logical conclusion. International trade today is arguably different from that of earlier times. The role and rise of Global Value Chains (GVCs) has been stressed on by many scholars with regard to East Asia as these have allowed the region to improve its trade competitiveness and diversify its production chains. It has also been argued that the realization of a need to explore land connectivity to reach Southeast Asia led to India's push for road and rail links in its northeastern region, particularly with neighbouring Myanmar.^{xi}

The role of Bangladesh in India's North-East vision as well as the broader Act East Policy cannot be stressed enough. During the recent Rohingya crisis, while Beijing played a mediatory role between Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Indian government maintained a rather tight-lipped approach, perhaps with an attempt to keep Myanmar close for coordinating patrols of the southern Indian Ocean. Moreover, Rakhine state is a crucial link for India's hydrocarbon and trade ambitions along with being in line with its vision of

establishing linkages with the Sittwe port. With regard to trade between India and the ASEAN countries, it may also be noted that India has emerged as ASEAN's seventh largest trading partner while ASEAN is India's fourth. India's vision of growth and economic development through external factors have mainly been guided by the policy of 'looking east' whether it is with regard to Southeast Asia, East Asia or even North America. Southeast Asia acts as a natural springboard for India's growth and engagement with the major economies of the world. There is also a growing interest in the possibility of including Bhutan and Nepal in India's Act East Policy in the near future.

With regard to the entry point for India's venture into Southeast Asia, numerous treaties are in place. A Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed between India and Myanmar in 1951 and relations between the two states received a significant boost with the visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1987. A border trade agreement was signed in 1994 leading to the establishment of border trading ports in Moreh (Manipur) and Zokhawthar (Mizoram) on the Indian side and in Tamu (Sagiang region) and Rhi on the Myanmarese side along the 1643 km-long border. As per Lahiri (Lahiri 2017, 72), border trade essentially implies overland trade through exchange of commodities from a bilaterally agreed list by people living along both sides of the international border. As per this agreement, forty items are permitted for trade with a duty fee of 5 percent.^{xii} Moreh belonged to the historic Kawbong Valley civilization and at present, plays an important role as an international trading hub between Myanmar and the north-eastern region of India. However, as mentioned before, its actual potential has been limited by a variety of factors ranging from logistics to security. Tengnoupal is the highest point of the Indo-Myanmar Road and is roughly 20 km from Chandel district.

In August 2017, the Government of India sanctioned a Rs. 6,167 crore upgrade of the 352 km Aizawl-Tuipang National Highway (NH) in Mizoram aimed at improving economic connectivity to Myanmar and creating an alternate trade route for mainland traders engaged in business in the north-east. The project is being executed by the National Highway Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL). The main focus of the project is on market access for agro- processing, horticulture, dairy and fisheries, along with availability of raw materials. However, issues like the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and its spillover effects on Mizoram and other parts of the north east have complicated the situation on the ground. The 132 Km. road from Moreh (India) to Tamu (Myanmar) also has about 70 bridges built during World War 2 and hence have weakened over time without proper upgradation efforts. Regarding the issue of the Rohingyas, security has been beefed up and patrolling by the Assam Rifles intensified along the Mizoram - Arakan (Myanmar) border in the state's Lawngtlai district, in view of the possibility of Rohingya Muslim militants and refugees attempting to enter the state.^{xiii} Also in 2016, a study titled "Enhancing India-Myanmar Border Trade: Policy and Implementation" by the Union Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), was released. It warned that trade at Moreh will come to a halt within a year because of significant exodus of traders from the Manipur border town to Mizoram. The study claimed

that Moreh is in a state of economic and absolute emergency. It also lays emphasis on factors such as infrastructure bottlenecks, rent-seeking behaviour of custom officials and security forces and extortion by insurgents which have significantly increased trading cost from Moreh trading point. It may be precisely for this reason that other areas are being considered for carrying forward India's goal of connectivity with ASEAN through Myanmar. According to a task force meeting in 2012, India was entrusted with upgrading the 252 km highway from Moreh (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) border to Yargi. Myanmar took the initiative of upgrading the Yargi-Monywa section and open the existing motorway between Mandalaya-Naw Pyi Taw and Yangon. The new government revisited the issue and withdrew the commitment. India is now expected to upgrade the stretch from Moreh (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) to Monywa.^{xiv} Along with Moreh, as per the Ministry of External Affairs, the Government of India has entered into a Framework Agreement with the Government of Myanmar to facilitate the implementation of the Kaladan Multimodal Project for the development of the Multimodal Transit Transport to the North-Eastern states through Myanmar comprising of the following route: Kolkata to Sittwe Port (Myanmar), a distance of 539 km. by shipping mode; Sittwe to Paletwa (Kaladan River) covering a distance of 158 km by way of Inland Water Transport (IWT); Paletwa to the Indo-Myanmar border covering a distance of 110 km by road and from the border to National Highway 54 (NH.54) covering a distance of 100km by road.^{xv}

In September 2017, following a visit by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Naypyidaw, India and Myanmar released a joint statement in which 'connectivity' was highlighted along with mentions of road construction projects, bridge restorations and work on port infrastructure. The statement also mentioned joint India-Myanmar technical and capacity building initiatives in the sectors of industry, agriculture, English language and Information and Technology (IT). In essence, the idea of an India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway was conceived at an IMT Trilateral Ministerial meeting in Yangon in 2002 centering around the construction of a 1,360 km highway from Moreh-Tamu on the India-Myanmar border to Mae Sot on the Myanmar-Thailand border. This is further based on the shared historical, cultural and economic ties between these three States in the pre-colonial era. In the 21st Century, this relationship could prove to be of immense benefits, mainly in terms of growth opportunities in the economic sector of all the 'actors' involved. At the 13th ASEAN-India Summit held in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, the ASEAN Leaders welcomed India's Act East Policy and "Make in India" and noted that the initiatives could complement ASEAN's community building efforts. However, the trilateral India- Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) highway that was scheduled to open in 2016 is now delayed by at least three years. Such delaying of developmental work can also be seen in the Kaladan Multi-Modal Project which was initially mooted in 2003. Yet in this regard, a framework agreement between India and Myanmar was entered into in 2008 and the construction began only in 2010. A delay in environment clearance by the Myanmar government has been cited as the reason for this, however there are those who do not believe that to be the case. Given the regional politics and strategic calculations of all the individual actors, proper implementation of agreed-upon projects and developmental works

in the region has proven to be difficult. As of February 2020, the Governments of India and Myanmar have signed numerous significant treaties and MoUs which would go a long way in shaping the future direction of projects related to cross border trade and especially the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, which has so far suffered from a lack of connectivity and logistical constraints mainly on the north-eastern side. These deals are mostly centered on the enhancement of bilateral energy cooperation, trade, development, defense and maritime security along with combating terrorism and violent extremism.^{xvi}

There are several ancient trade routes in north-east India which have traditionally connected the region with the neighbouring countries like Myanmar and China. However, post India's independence and especially after the Sino-India war of 1962, these routes and passes have been largely abandoned. The state of Arunachal Pradesh has roughly five such passes which have been forsaken on strategy and security-related grounds, the famous Ledo Road, also referred to as the "Stilwell Road" connecting Assam with Myanmar is largely unexplored, especially on the Indian side and the Tea-Horse trade route connecting India with Tibet which also saw the opening of a border trade point in 2007 at Nathu-La (Sikkim) are some examples of such logistical linkages in the region. The portion of the Stilwell Road lying in Myanmar has seen rapid development over the last few years and it is this route which may serve as a vital link connecting Myanmar with Kunming (China) for overland trade under China's Belt and Road Initiative. As pointed out in the *Preparatory Study for North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Phase 2)*, the design and construction technology for mountainous roads in India is still under development as the engineers gain more expertise through various experiences and trials.^{xvii} The National Highway 39, that runs from Numaligarh in Assam through Nagaland into Manipur and ends at Moreh, remains closed for nearly one-third of the year, either due to strikes and law and order problems or due to landslide and other natural calamities. This road was used for the 8,000-kilometer (4,950-mile) mega India-ASEAN Car Rally in November 2004 which kicked off from Guwahati through the 10 nations of ASEAN, first through Myanmar and then Thailand, Brunei, Philippines, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore before crossing the finish line in Batam.^{xviii}

Conclusion: While on the one hand, efforts are still being made regarding the extension of railway links to the capitals of the North Eastern Region which would not only provide strong support to logistics but also make it easier to connect with Myanmar, Thailand and even China, the complications involved with regard to security planning along with stray incidents at the border areas should not hinder the progress made thus far. In this regard, first and foremost, attention needs to be paid to the proper development/upgradation of roads and highways leading up to the border-trading areas. Visitors, traders and tourists going to Moreh for example face a myriad of problems related to check-post formalities. This is not a good sign either for tourism or for the promotion of these border markets as trading hubs in the region. The implementation of a more streamlined process can go a long way in sustaining efforts at economic connectivity between the two regions here. Furthermore, the proper implementation and development of economic corridors in the

North- Eastern region needs to be preceded by acknowledging existing issues related to immigration, unemployment and insurgency along with developing a framework for systematically preaching the benefits of connectivity to its diverse population at the grass-roots level. On the other hand, based on the various agreements and projects signed between India and some countries of the ASEAN, there seems to be a lot of potential in terms of connectivity and trade engagements in the future. The development of the Asian Highway network has made matters much easier although minor issues and hollow security concerns need to be brushed aside.

Apart from this, looking into the prospects of re-developing ancient trade routes as new economic corridors linking Guwahati and Hajo in Assam with southern China would go a long way in the economic development of the surrounding areas as well. There is strong academic evidence to suggest that Bangladesh could also very well benefit from this. Moreover, it has already served as the most viable all-weather route between India and China in the past. So far, these have been the major irritants in matters of development in the region and have contributed to the growth of anti-development forces in some areas. During a seminar on Heart of Asia and Connectivity held in 2016, one of the main points raised was of the role economic cooperation plays in raising the levels of economic activity, which in turn generates employment and helps in diverting the youth to pursue peaceful means of income generation rather than adopting a violent route. This has been one of the recurring ideas when we talk of solving problems related to insurgency in the North-Eastern region of India. Such problems have been born mainly out of historical and colonial policies and can be solved through a positive, goal-oriented approach keeping the economic benefits of connectivity in mind. Engagement with the rebels in the border regions becomes a prerequisite to further speed up the process of economic integration. The North Eastern region has immense potential in terms of sectors like pilgrimage tourism, Buddhist circuit tours, pharmaceutical industry, piggyery, bamboo industry, etc. Various reports published by the Asian Development Bank have also shown growing demand for these sectors in Southeast Asia. Hence, if the bottlenecks in the regional value and supply chains are worked out, the Act East Policy has the potential to benefit not only India, but also South and Southeast Asia as a whole. It may therefore be safe to conclude that the vision of acting East would first require carefully looking towards the north-east.

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