



Northeast as an Engine of Growth

Exploring and Expanding Linkages with Southeast Asia

For a long time, India's frontier regions were perceived through a defensive prism vis-à-vis the neighbourhood. Northeast and J&K assumed importance more as border regions that shared boundaries with difficult neighbours, leading to New Delhi's pursuit of caution when developing these border areas and states of India's two frontier regions.

However, in recent years, there has been a change in New Delhi's approach towards these regions. Development of border areas from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh has assumed significance and investments in infrastructure are being made towards this end. More importantly, in J&K, Sikkim and the Northeast, efforts have been made to open the border vis-à-vis Pakistan, China and Southeast Asia.

While critics question the pace of this change, attention also needs to be drawn towards the strengthening and expansion of linkages of frontier regions with their cross-border neighbours. This is especially important because there is a strong regional desire for such integration. In this context, India's Northeast has witnessed numerous strategies for its sub-regional development.

Strategies specifically targeted at improving the Northeast's links with Southeast Asia are vital to the strategic interest of India both in terms of Asian geopolitical balance

and as a hub of regional and international commerce. Public demand on this issue in the Northeast is supplemented by an increasing interest among policy-makers in New Delhi. To realize this objective, and to achieve the objectives of Vision 2020, India will have to improve the governance, infrastructure and improvised economy of these geographically-inclined states.

Externally, during the last two decades, India has been attempting to evolve a 'Look East Policy' towards Southeast Asia. Though painfully slow, this strategy is primarily based on improving trade links with Southeast Asia, mostly sea-based.

While the development of India's Northeast is primarily seen through the prisms of the Home and Defence Ministries, looking east towards Southeast Asia, has been primarily limited to the External Ministry. Can the above two - developing India's Northeast and formulating an effective Look East policy be viewed as an integrated whole? What will be the most effective way to make use of the common cultural, linguistic and social trends between these two regions—India's Northeast and Southeast Asia?

To get even bolder, can Northeast also be linked with the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of China, with whom there was a historical link?

Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP)

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SEARP is supported by the SAEA Group, Singapore

I Primary Objectives

To explore alternative strategies to the above issues, the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies is forming a Task Force consisting of diplomats who have served in Southeast Asian countries, retired military and bureaucratic personnel, and members of the academic and strategic community in Delhi and the Northeast to exchange ideas on issues relating to cultural and infrastructural connectivity, trade, and regional geopolitics.

The Centre for Development and Peace Studies (CDPS) in Guwahati, Assam, will be coordinating this initiative.

This project is supported by the SAEA, Singapore. SAEA has committed to bring two scholars from Southeast Asia, for these interactions.

The objectives of this project are:

- To understand local perspectives on exploring and expanding Northeast's linkages vis-à-vis India's neighbourhood.
- To collect information and alternative ideas on the growth of India's Northeast and the Look East policy as a coordinated effort.

To achieve the above, the Institute aims to pursue the following:

- Release the IPCS edited volume *Alternative Strategy for Southeast Asia: Looking through India's Northeast*, in coordination with the Centre for Development and Peace Studies (CDPS), Guwahati. (The Chief Minister of Assam has kindly agreed to release the book; tentatively his office has booked 4 July 2011)

Focus Questions

- How to make Northeast as an engine of growth? Will the Chinese model, in terms of a more active involvement of local trade bodies in cross-border linkages, along with the development of local trade points, assist in regional development? Also, by what means can tourism and culture be used to strengthen these ties?
- How to Look-east, through India's Northeast? What alternative strategies could be suggested to New Delhi in terms of revising its Look-east policy towards South east Asia, by taking into account Northeast's physical proximity vis-à-vis South east Asia?
- What are the likely challenges and threats in seeing Northeast as a Gateway to South east Asia? Do benefits outweigh the costs, such as such as influxes in refugees/migrant workers, insurgency, drug and human trafficking? What strategies could be adopted to keep the cost low, in order to reap better benefits?
- What areas need to be focused—trade, border trade, tourism, infrastructural connectivity, cultural exchanges etc, in making India's Northeast as an engine of growth? Should there be a priority within these issues?
- How to overcome the problem of 'the last mile' in the implementation of strategies? Have responsible local stakeholders to carry out the process to its eventual end been clearly identified? How sound are the policies that have been implemented thus far for trade and commerce development in the Northeast and do they have an adverse affect on local traders?

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

• Besides, the book release, the IPCS will take a small team within the above mentioned Task Force to Assam; the task force will hold individual meetings in Guwahati, on the above issues, with the strategic community, media, business community and the military.

II Project Outputs

The following outputs are envisaged:

- **Policy Document** on alternative approaches to develop India's Northeast in terms of expanding its linkages with Southeast Asia. This policy document will be discussed in an IPCS meeting among the strategic community in New Delhi .
- Finalize an independent report as Policy Brief, based on the above process for submission to DONER, the Ministry of the development of the Northeast region and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

III Road Map

The road map, is as follows, for the above three points.

June 2011: Finalization of the Task Force

July 2011: Discussions in Guwahati

August 2011: **Preparation of a Draft Report**
Based on the interactions in Guwahati, the Institute will prepare a draft report titled "Exploring and Expanding Northeast's Linkages with Southeast Asia." This report will be discussed in a meeting jointly organized with the India International Center during July 2011.

Finalization and Release of the Report titled "Exploring and Expanding Northeast's Linkages with Southeast Asia" (September/October 2011)

Based on the above interaction, the Institute will make the final set of recommendations to the Government of India and the State governments in the Northeast.

The Institute is planning to get this report released by Mr BK Handik, Minister for Development of Northeast Region (DONER).

IV IPCS Task Force on Northeast and Southeast Asia

Towards achieving the above, the Institute is constituting a Working Group, which will help the Institute by taking part in the discussions, framing the questions and guide the IPCS team toward the preparation of final report.

Depending on their acceptability, this Working Group will include the following:

From New Delhi

Maj Gen Dipankar Banerjee

Mr Dharendra Singh

PC Haldar

BG Vergheese

Amb AN Ram

Amb Leela Ponnappa

Amb Navrekha Sharma

Prof Baladas Ghoshal

C Raja Mohan

D. Suba Chandran

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From Northeast

(Names are yet to be confirmed)

PP Shrivastav.

Wasbir Hussain

Dr Jayanta Madhab.

Madan Prasad Bezbaruah.

Haren N Das.

MK Saharia

Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa

Maloy Krishna Dhar

Dhirendranath Bezbaruah

From IPCS

Panchali Saikia

Ruhee Neog

From Southeast Asia

Mr Ravindran, SAEA

Sue Chan, SAEA

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