

Slender is the Corridor

*V.S. Ranade**

Is 22 kilometres (kms) adequate enough for an emotional connection? The famed Siliguri Corridor is 22 kms wide at its narrowest point, a rectangular box of about 400 sq kms (20x22 kms), and has multi-dimensional aspects connected to it: strategic, economic, emotional and political. Have we recognised the importance of this 22 kms strip? Strategically yes, but what about other issues, which connect a nation? Have we connected with it politically and emotionally? While we have been late in recognising the importance of connecting with the corridor, both politically and emotionally, we have of late, tried to make amends with the Look East Policy (LEP) and thus, are on the right track. The North-East of India is a region of turbulence owing to its unstable political scenarios and strings of localised insurgency movements. The Siliguri Corridor being the only connecting link between India and its turbulent north-eastern region is extremely crucial, as there are major connectivity linkages such as roads and railway networks that run through it.¹

Note: The title of the commentary is inspired by the book *Slender was the Thread* by Lt Gen L.P. Sen.

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Geopolitically, the North-East Region (NER) occupies a strategic position on India's map. Connected to the mainland India through a 22 km narrow piece of land known as the 'Siliguri Corridor' or the 'Chicken's Neck', the NER including the corridor, shares borders with Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan. The corridor therefore, is akin to a *cul-de-sac*. About 400 ethnic tribes inhabit the NER, speaking a variety of languages and dialects. The region, located on one of the greatest migration routes in the world, is a meeting place of diverse races and cultures, which has over centuries produced a conflict over differing perceptions. The NER is considered to be one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, with each individual state boasting a range of cultures and traditions. A global biodiversity hotspot, the NER fosters a unique scenario wherein not just the flora and fauna but the cultures of South, South East, and Far East Asia melt and mingle. Rooted in diversity, the NER is also endowed with huge untapped natural resources and is recognised as the eastern gateway for India's 'Act East Policy'.² However, as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ranking released by NITI Aayog in 2021, two states are graded in the top half, while five states are in the lower half, despite the region being rich in natural resources.³

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is not widely accepted that the NER has been historically neglected by mainland India. The integration of the region in post-independence India was not smooth as the basic requirements, aspirations and the culture of the region was not fully understood. The region was considered to be different demographically, genealogically, in terms of the racial features of its people and was geographically marginalised. It was as if, mainland India had forgotten about its North-East. We must not forget that Manipur and Nagaland are the only states in India to have witnessed the World War (WW) II.

Historically all the states have a rich history of culture and traditions, rivalries among themselves which are part of any community, and fierce affinity to their tribes and community or sub-communities, which is understandable. The unique culture, composition and tribal core of the NER makes it a veritable paradise for anthropologists. While the region was historically and geographically connected with the Indian sub-continent in the pre-partition era as an integrated landmass from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Assam, and Myanmar, in

post-partition India, the connection unfortunately was reduced to a mere 22 kms of land corridor.

The delimitation and division of nations by Radcliff award⁴ partitioned the Bengal province into East Bengal, Bengal and Assam in consideration to the ethnic dimensions of Bengal. With this Assam and Northern Bengal, which were well enmeshed in India got hanging by a 22 kms strip. Such a delimitation was probably necessitated to keep the land connected after its boundaries were demarcated and restrictions placed on those with Nepal and New East Bengal. Assam, for example, got fragmented into states after 1947/1956⁵ when its Union Territory (UT) status was upgraded to statehood, thereby forming seven states. The provinces of Tripura and Manipur were old kingdoms along with Assam with a rich cultural history. Tripura got bifurcated during the partition with Comilla going to East Pakistan, while the rest of the province was totally cut-off, with the only connection being the Siliguri Corridor. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971⁶ conferred statehood to the states and bifurcated Assam into seven sisters. This geographic partition, coinciding with the independence of India, resulted in major economic and infrastructural setbacks for the states in the NER, as road transport between respective states and major cities of India had to now follow a more circuitous route.

The cultural and traditional diversity and economic richness of the region were also eclipsed in the remoteness, both geographically and emotionally. Sub-tribal differences and aspirations of the people were sadly termed as militancy and stamped with terrorism. The tribal differences were there since long and such conflicts used to happen among themselves—the horizontal conflict, however when the authorities stepped in, the conflict took off in a different plane, that is, vertical with the authorities' security forces.

A more mature handling of the issue could have seen a different NER. Nevertheless, now with the Act East policy, reasonable inroads have been made in the hearts and minds of the people. The results of the policy will take time to fructify.

GEO-STRATEGIC CONNECT

The NER shares its borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan. As mentioned earlier, it is home to more than 400 ethnic tribes with a variety of languages and dialects. Geographically, the NER is located at the centre of the triad of India–China–Myanmar

and as such, the region assumes great importance strategically. Sir Halford Mackinder, a prominent British geographer, propounded the 'Heartland Theory', through which he highlighted the strategic importance of land areas surrounded by powerful nations. Taking a cue from this concept, Assam and North-East India assume much greater importance than what is laid on them today. The NER affirms Mackinder's theory to establish that the region is an important landmass having the potential to fulcrum all engagements in South Asia/South-East Asia.

However, this landmass of immense importance is connected by a thin strategic corridor that continues to be vulnerable to disruption, natural or intentional. Geographically, the corridor is vulnerable from Nepal and Bangladesh from the north and south, and in its north-east, the Chinese Chumbi valley is precariously close. The tri-junction to India, Tibet and Bhutan forms at the tip of this valley and is known as the Dokalam region, which had become a standoff point recently. The Dokalam imbroglio is a clear indication of how vulnerable the corridor is. In case of hostilities, there is a possibility of the Chinese moving from Dokalam into the corridor. Suffice to say, there exists a threat, which presents a clear and present danger. The dimensions of the corridor and its extent continue to be a matter of perception and interpretation. Notwithstanding, the threat perception and vulnerability of the corridor continues to be real. Any enemy action (non-state actor or external aggression) will definitely consider cutting off the land route via the corridor to the NER and thereby, rendering the road and the rail route to the region ineffective. Needless to mention how vital such a connectivity is for economic movement of goods and logistics. Before such an eventuality is realised, it is imperative that India initiates a process, whereby a multilateral agreement regarding the movement of civilian and military traffic in the adjacent states is in place.

The corridor is not just an important trade route, but also an important gateway to South East Asia. Economically, the corridor is immensely important for trade between the NER and rest of India. Darjeeling tea and timber trade further increase the importance of this region. The corridor hosts roads, railways and the only freight line near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and as such, all essentials to the NER are supplied through it. Strategically as well, this corridor is the only choke point for any logistics and military movement in the event of hostilities in either

sector, western or eastern, for any cross-country move from east to west or vice versa.

REGIONAL CONNECT

The Siliguri corridor forms a regional connect eastwards and is also a gateway for any regional alliances forged with the NER. The Act East Policy depends heavily on flow of ideas, resources and land connect to the NER and beyond. It is thus evident that the Act East Policy, aimed at regional groupings in South-East Asia, rides on the participation of the North-eastern states. The region is therefore a fulcrum for the venture as the states of the NER are hemmed between a dominant China and needy Myanmar, territories through which the highway to South-East Asia runs.⁷ The importance of the corridor in fuelling all these ventures simply cannot be negated. The regional groupings were also intended to develop our Northeast; the first step however, was to integrate the NER by building a coalition based on mutual trust. The whole process has a feature of reciprocity: on the one hand, the capacities and capabilities are to be maximised and this on the other, facilitates the development of the NER and strengthening of regional groupings.

It is indeed a sad commentary that the strategic and economic potential of the NER was neglected for so long on the basis of tangential vision and pre-conceived perceptions. Why did mainland India not understand the basic aspirations of the people of the NER and their requirements and why did it allow the conflict to persist is in itself an issue of further research. Incidentally, these very issues are being used by the non-state actors to keep their localised politics and the region unstable.

By incorporating the Act East Policy, the government has initiated a process of assimilation, integration and reconciliation, which is slowly achieving its intended results: discordant groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam and the CorCom (Coordination Committee of Seven Valley based militant outfits in Manipur) are already speaking to the Government of India and many other developmental activities have been initiated in the region. It is not the ideology that is seemingly operational in the region, but economic and business considerations. The seven sisters together have adequate potential to further this framework and act as a launch-pad for a variety of activities as regional groupings such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-

Ganga Cooperation (MGC), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Indian Ocean Region (IOR) get strengthened. The success of these regional groupings will usher in commerce and trade. Apart from the security perspective, the involvement of the North-eastern states will have a social–cultural–strategic angle, which will dissuade non-state actors from interfering in economic affairs as it will turn their own people against them. The basic principles and the charter of these regional groups are also in sync with India's stated aims in the Act East Policy and steps are already being taken to integrate the it with these regional bodies. Building infrastructure, mainly roads and putting up rail links in various locations holds the key. Trading routes through Manipur, being the only land route available, will become an important artery for attracting these forays, with collateral advantages to the region. The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN)⁸ is a major grouping that plays an important role in corridor dynamics. Straddled between Nepal and Bangladesh with the strategic Dokalam plateau in Chumbi valley, mere 130 kms away, the corridor becomes an all-important entity in the group dynamics. In 2015, India signed a Motor Vehicle Agreement, BBINMVA, with member countries to allow each other's vehicles to ply in their respective territories. This agreement has proven to be a game-changer as passenger and cargo vehicles can now pass through member countries. However, this also has security implications and the need to engage with non-state actors is now even more urgent. While it is important to sign a more comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) covering all such aspects, in terms of the present regional dynamics and hegemonistic overtures of the Chinese in Bangladesh and Nepal seems a distant dream. However, such an arrangement will definitely provide us the required flexibility during operational moves by presenting alternative options.

ECONOMIC CONNECT

The NER is a storehouse of natural resources. Important natural resources like land, forest, vegetation, livestock, etc., which are essential for creating employment and generation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the region are either underutilised, unutilised or mismanaged.⁹ The potential of the region was never fully realised until recently. It was probably the unrest in the region that got more attention than necessary, rather than its natural resources and development, which could be used as 'soft power' to propel change in the region. Connection with regional groupings acted

as a catalyst for sure and established the viability of the NER, Attracting industry is a challenge though, due to slender and vulnerable corridor. The NER is rich in natural resources, hydro and solar power, agricultural products, oil, precious metals, flora and fauna and even tourism. However, development is slow and perfunctory and is mired with challenges of militancy and conflict. Industrial development will primarily depend upon on the scale of investment and the marketability of the finished product. Domestically, the need is catered for, but when there is a surplus, there is a need to look outwards and eastwards through land routes and depend upon multilateral engagements forged by connections with regional groupings. One such strategic area, which has the possibility for use as soft power is hydropower. According to the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO), the region has a hydropower potential of about 58,971 Megawatts (MW), out of which only about 1,727 MW (about 2.92% as of 1 July 2020) has been harnessed. Additional projects to the tune of 2,300 MW are under construction. The balance of about 93.17 per cent is yet to be utilised. The contribution of NEEPCO in the development of hydro installed capacity of the NER is about 1,225 MW, that is, about 70.93 per cent.¹⁰ Another example of hydropower potential in the region is the controversy-ridden Tipaimukh Project.¹¹

The crude oil found in oil-rich Assam valley with oil fields concentrated in Upper Assam is refined at Bongaigaon, Noonmati, Numaligarh and Digboi refineries, which is connected to Barauni–Haldia pipeline. This strategic asset also passes through the corridor.

Similarly, the region can be harnessed for other riches, which can be used to engage our regional allies in strategic engagements. However, the logistics to sustain these ventures pass through the corridor. The inter-regional move of the goods from the east is found to be stranded in the corridor due to any natural/manmade reason, thereby delaying the delivery, especially of perishable goods. In such a scenario, the goods corridor gets bogged down and the economy suffers.

WIDENING THE CORRIDOR

Widening and strengthening the Siliguri Corridor is imperative. The first option for India is to enter into a treaty with Bangladesh permitting not only transit of military equipment during times of conflict, but also civilian traffic and trade activities. This would add a layer of strategic depth in the region and alleviate (to some extent) concerns of the possible severance of the North-East from mainland India.¹²

Though physical widening of the corridor may not be possible but alternate route options could be created for operational and peace time moves to and from the NER. The strategic importance of the corridor also cannot be over-emphasised with Chumbi valley in Tibet overlooking the entire stretch from Thakur Ganj to Alipurduar–Cooch Behar in Assam. This is a vulnerable stretch from a strategic and economic point of view as its control can choke the region. It can also cut off the lines of communication and supply into northern Bengal in the Darjeeling region and Sikkim. This route is also important for any movement into south-central Chumbi valley through Nathu La.¹³ The corridor plays out like a cat and mouse game, who gets behind is the question. A game similar to *Wéiqí*, GO, a Chinese game of territory, is being played here with many hidden motives and intentions. Groupings such as BBIN will play an important role in determining the dynamics of the corridor. The corridor and its adjoining areas are also fed by, not only a network of roads but, also that of river systems, which renders this area as lower riparian to the higher reaches of Bengal, Sikkim and Nepal. Rivers like Teesta, Jala Dhaka and Kosi feed this area and can become an obstacle during monsoons. Bridges on these rivers and mountain systems, too have the possibility of becoming choke points. The importance of Bangladesh as an all-important ally for development of any linkages towards Assam, Tripura and beyond through the newly inaugurated Padma Setu cannot be undermined. Nepal can also provide a land route through Bagdogra–Birtamode–Biratnagar–Birpur into India. Though this route presents a hilly terrain, it does provide an alternative.

The following aspects are recommended to create a redundancy:

- (a) Develop alternate road links through Nepal and Bangladesh.
- (b) Develop an eastern Nepal route to Jalpaiguri.
- (c) Develop road and rail connectivity from Howrah to Dacca to Agartala using the Padma Setu.
- (d) Connect National Highway 27 to Jalpaiguri through Bangladesh with an alternate lateral highway connecting Meghalaya through Northern Bangladesh.
- (e) Develop an air corridor through Bangladesh air space for the movement of military aircraft and ancillary military equipment.
- (f) Develop an underground rail road tunnels through the corridor—a costly, but more secure option.

The narrowness of the Siliguri Corridor, geographically speaking, should not restrict our trade and operational options. The NER has

the potential to look outwards and develop inwards. We can use this advantage as a launch-pad for the Act East Policy. India must integrate the region and develop soft power available in the region to its advantage for the development of local as well as regional connectivity. The Chinese have already developed the capability to mobilise forces into the corridor and in the near future may create instability in the region. This aspect needs to be duly considered as it has the possibility of destabilising the entire NER with the potential to spread to the South-East Asian region as well. The Siliguri Corridor therefore, should not restrict our options strategically, economically and more importantly emotionally. However, it will continue to be an ‘Achilles Heel’ of the region.

NOTES

1. Nafiz Farhan, ‘Siliguri Corridor: Geostrategic Importance and Future Challenges’, Commentary, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), September 2021, available at <https://bipss.org.bd/pdf/Siliguri%20Corridor%20Geostrategic%20Importance%20and%20Future%20Challenges.pdf>.
2. ‘NITI Aayog Releases North Eastern Region District SDG Index Report and Dashboard 2021–22’, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Development of North-East Region, Government of India, 26 August 2021, available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1749292>.
3. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index issued as computed by NITI Aayog, Government of India, 2021.
4. Radcliff was the officer commissioned by the British to undertake delimitation exercise for the partition of India–Pakistan–Bengal. Based on his recommendations, the province of Bengal was bifurcated into East Bengal and present state of Bengal and Assam connected by a thin corridor.
5. Two dates indicate post partition era and post reorganisation of States and Union Territories in 1956 whereby many of the NE states were granted UT status.
6. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 was a major reform of the boundaries of India’s North-East region into States and Union Territories.
7. VS Ranade, ‘Bridge on the Bay’, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, January–March 2022, pp. 63–71, available at https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds/jds-16-1-2022-vs-ranade_compressed.pdf.
8. BBIN is a sub-regional architecture of countries conceptualised to formulate, implement and review quadrilateral agreements across areas such as water, resources management, and connectivity of power, transport and infrastructure.

9. Mirinchonme Mahongnao, Noklencyangla and Subhash Kumar, 'Natural Resources and Socio-economic Development in North East India', *Journal of North East India Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 84–99, available at <https://www.jneis.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/7.2.6.pdf>.
10. Report of the NEEPCO on power potential in the NER, August 2020.
11. Tipaimukh Dam is proposed to be constructed in Barak River in Manipur with proposed installed capacity of 1500 MW. It got delayed due to controversies over ecological, environmental and seasonal disruptions of the river system affecting even Bangladesh.
12. Mohinder Pal Singh, 'What if China Wrings India's "Chicken's Neck" – the Siliguri Corridor? Here are Some Countermeasures', *The Times of India*, 9 October 2019, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/what-if-china-wrings-indias-chickens-neck-the-siliguri-corridor-here-are-some-countermeasures/>.
13. Nathu La pass is located 200 km north east of Siliguri.