

## Bridge on the Bay

*V.S. Ranade\**

Look East/Act East Policy rides on the regional cooperation in the Southeast Asian region and our northeast region is the engine to further our cause.

At present, India is a member of several trans-regional, regional and sub-regional groupings. To establish itself as a power to reckon with, India needs regional cooperation. It is therefore important for India to establish regional linkages to not only further its interests but also to develop and attract outside business players. India has been playing a far greater role in world politics and world groupings, but it gets embroiled in geopolitics and geo-strategic issues closer home. However, lately, India is emerging as a regional power in the South Asian/Southeast Asian region. This new regional approach is driven by strategic interests, with several ideas, concepts, and principles driving and guiding it. The main idea is ‘intertwined destiny’, driven by the logic that India’s immediate neighbourhood is a prerequisite for it to achieve regional and global ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Thus, India is willing to give its immediate neighbours a stake in its prosperity; and this idea has become a priority in its neighbourhood policy for some time.

The views expressed and suggestions made in this commentary are solely of the author and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with the author.

\* Major General VS Ranade, Retd served National Security Guard (NSG) as Inspector General (Operations).

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In the 1990s, India launched its flagship initiative of 'Look East' to focus on the eastern hemisphere, and then remodelled it into 'Act East'. Look East was launched on the engine of regional groupings to promote the idea called 'East'. It was felt that the time had come to utilise this engine and integrate the East. Meanwhile, under 'Act East', India wanted to open the highway to Southeast Asian countries and provide entrepreneurs an avenue for participation and growth. This was possible only by bringing the north-eastern states closer, that is, integrating them with the rest of India, and by encouraging their development. The apparent neglect of this region was also a security threat to our territorial integrity. The region's aspirations needed to be heard and the local dynamics of tribes, communities, and groups could not be ignored any longer.

It is thus evident that the Look East Policy (LEP)/Act East Policy (AEP), aimed at regional groupings in the Southeast Asian region, rides on the participation of the north-eastern states. The northeast region is the fulcrum of the venture as these states are hemmed between a dominant China and needy Myanmar, through which the highway to Southeast Asia runs. Comprising 'the physical and cultural bridge' between India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, the North East assumes immense significance. The region's development also rests on bordering countries, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, China, and Nepal.<sup>2</sup> Several routes are linking India, particularly its North East, with Southeast Asia and East Asia via Myanmar. Some of the projects in the pipeline are the Mekong–India Economic Corridor, the road to Mandalay—a highway project connecting Imphal to Mandalay (Trilateral Highway), and Moreh–New Delhi–Hanoi rail link, which is further expected to formulate into a special economic zone. India–Myanmar relations are key to this LEP/AEP concept.<sup>3</sup>

#### GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

The North East is connected to mainland India through a 22 kilometre (km) narrow piece of land, termed 'Siliguri Corridor' or the 'Chicken Neck'.<sup>4</sup> The region shares borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, and Bhutan. It is home to more than 400 ethnic tribes, following a variety of languages and dialects. Geographically, the north-eastern states lie 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',<sup>5</sup> through which he highlighted the strategic

importance of land areas surrounded by powerful nations. Taking a cue from this concept, Assam and northeast India assume much greater importance than that is laid on them today. Sir Mackinder's theory amply proves the point that the North East is an important landmass that has the potential to become a fulcrum in all the engagements in South Asia/Southeast Asia.

#### REGIONAL GROUPINGS

Regional groups are associations of countries in a particular region, through which the countries come together for bilateral/multilateral cooperation in various fields/capacities, including sharing of competencies and trade. India began reorienting its policy to Look East in the early 1990s, and gave it more strategic dynamics in the mid-2000. The LEP was initially intended to seek regional cooperation with the Southeast Asian region. However, the scope was expanded to include all the strategic partners in the South Asian region, including Japan, Australia and South Korea. The North East, being the central theme in the original framework of the policy, got a major boost with these linkages.<sup>6</sup>

With the turn towards AEP, the strategically located northeast region got a further boost. Thus, for the success of regional groupings, it is important to counter two factors, namely, instability in the neighbourhood and the hegemony of China. For this, the development and participation of the North East is essential. A few regional groupings which have a direct bearing on the development of the northeast region are discussed next.

#### **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)<sup>7</sup>**

The BIMSTEC, founded in 2004, comprises Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal. Its regional spread is among the South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. It aims at improving technological and economic cooperation. In this regard, the grouping has identified 14 priority areas, some of which are: transport and communication; tourism; environment; disaster management; counterterrorism; and transnational crime.

#### *Strategic Significance*

It has the potential to develop India's north-eastern region that has low development due to geographical disadvantage. The BIMSTEC acts as

a bridge between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is a classic example of the incremental approach to regionalism. The unique position of the seven-member BIMSTEC presents itself fittingly in New Delhi's diplomatic calculus. Also, it connects three important sub-regions of India: Nepal and Bhutan in the Himalayan sub-region; Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal sub-region; and Myanmar and Thailand in the Mekong sub-region. It is the only forum that brings together India's strategic peripheries (South, East, and North) under one single grouping. Furthermore, it also keeps geopolitical concerns at bay as regional players such as China and Pakistan are not members of BIMSTEC.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC)<sup>9</sup>**

The MGC is an initiative by six countries—India and five ASEAN countries, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam—for cooperation in tourism, culture, education, as well as transport and communications. It was launched in 2000 at Vientiane, Lao PDR. The MGC is also indicative of the cultural and commercial linkages among the member countries of the MGC down the centuries. The grouping emphasises four areas of cooperation: tourism, culture, education and transportation.

It is important for India's LEP/AEP as it can be a game-changer for improving people-to-people contact and exchange of cultural experiences between member countries. It is a diplomatic bridge connecting India to the rest of Southeast Asia. In the recent ministerial meeting of MGC, the need for extending this cooperation with ASEAN countries was discussed.

#### **SAARC**

The SAARC, founded in 1985, has 8 members states and 9 observer states, and is dedicated to economic, technological, social and cultural development, and emphasises collective self-reliance. It is an important part of India's Look East foreign policy. The South Asian Free Trade Area, formed in 2006, has improved trade relations between the member countries. Areas of cooperation under SAARC are broad-based and inclusive of all the current challenges faced by the South Asian region. The SAARC is needed for combating terrorism, improving maritime security and curbing piracy in South Asia.

### **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**

The organisation was first established as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative in Mauritius in March 1995, and formally launched in 1997 as the Charter of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation. It was ratified during the presidential visit of Nelson Mandela to India in January 1995. The IORA has identified six priority areas: maritime security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk reduction; academic and scientific cooperation; and tourism promotion and cultural exchanges.

Strategically, the Indian Ocean holds the key to dominance in the area. The Chinese influence in the area has grown through the development of ports at Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Gwadar (Pakistan). Despite fears that the Kyaukpyu project could eventually be used for Chinese military access, political and legal restrictions in Myanmar make this unlikely. The project is aimed mainly at helping China avoid the vulnerable Strait of Malacca and aid the development of its south-western hinterland. India too is developing a \$484 million Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project to connect Sittwe in Rakhine, Myanmar, with Mizoram in India. This project includes both port development at Sittwe and road construction that gives north-east India an alternative and more direct route to the sea. This route is also meant to provide India with increased access to other ASEAN states as well as Myanmar.

### **ASEAN**

The ASEAN is an intergovernmental organisation of 10 Southeast Asian countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. It is a regional grouping for promoting economic, political and security cooperation among its members. India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992.

The importance of the north-eastern region in the context of ASEAN region lies in its strategic position as the region can become a key player in India's AEP by partnering with ASEAN countries. The North East, due to its critical geographic location, is considered to be the bridge between two sub-regions of Asia, that is, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The northeast region has a special advantage over other parts of the country in trade with India's eastern neighbours through India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

Further, the northeast region can facilitate trade and cooperation in other groupings, like Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, BIMSTEC and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Forum. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, etc., can help in increasing trade and cooperation with ASEAN countries.<sup>10</sup>

#### CHALLENGES

A closer look at the objectives and aims of these regional groupings shows that they align with India's goal of promoting north-eastern states, which will be forming the basic fulcrum of these groupings. A stable and vibrant North East will not only be economically affluent but will also ensure regional security. Non-state actors do have a major role in keeping it destabilised and therefore, a few major challenges facing the north-eastern states are outlined next.

#### **Insurgency**

Manipur and Nagaland are probably the only states with the insurgent situation, with Assam having pockets of resistance. Nagaland is under review with a framework agreement with the government, but this has not yet been fully ratified in certain pockets of disagreement; however, the ceasefire continues. Manipur is a bit complex with three communities fighting it out on a political level, namely, the Manipur Nagas, Kukis, and the majority community, the Meiteis. The Coordination Committee (CORCOM),<sup>11</sup> an umbrella organisation of all valley groups operating from Myanmar, is still holding out. Kukis have signed a Suspension of Operations with the government, while the Nagas are in a flux between Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur. Assam has seen certain thawing of stance with the talk faction talking with the authorities, while non-talk faction of Paresh Barua has now offered to talk and has formed a combined front having established links with Naga factions of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), valley-based groups in Manipur and CORCOM, forming a bigger umbrella group called United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA).<sup>12</sup>

#### **Illegal Trafficking**

The advent of insurgent groups has created a security vulnerability in the last few decades, coupled with an increase in narcotics trafficking. Today, the insurgent groups have lost the basic agenda for their movement. The

movement continues, but the focus has now changed to an industry called narco-trafficking.

### **Lack of Sustainable Development**

Post independence, respective communities in the states were worried about the protection of their ethnic interests. Various tribes and communities tried to gain space—geographical, social and economic—to influence the government of their legal claim over the territory and the right to talk to the authorities for any agreement. In the bargain, when the development commenced in a big way in India, it lacked pace in the North East. Today, the northeast region has an immense potential to grow, but the start has been rather slow.

### **ROAD ON THE BRIDGE**

The bridge to the East has options and New Delhi has those options to link its LEP/AEP with the initiatives already underway to connect the North East with the South Asian region. The basic principles and the charter of these regional groups are in sync with our slated aim of LEP/AEP. Steps are already underway to integrate the Look East/Act East with these regional bodies. Building infrastructure, mainly roads, and putting up a rail link in place hold the key. Market size is the ultimate manifestation of many problems confronting the north-eastern region. Similar to the experiences of many Southeast Asian countries, market barriers can be overcome with developmental initiatives that focus on engaging and mobilising locally available resources.<sup>13</sup>

An important policy calibration has been to open up the region's frontiers to its neighbours for border trade. With growing concerns over China's rapidly expanding footprints in the Indian Ocean Region and increasing non-traditional security threats, India also launched maritime cooperation with neighbouring Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2011. At the sub-regional level, the Modi government has further strengthened groupings, such as the BIMSTEC and the MGC, as part of the AEP to accelerate the integration process in the region. There is a requirement of looking at all kinds of security, that is, physical, economic, energy, geopolitical and demographic, to safeguard our interests in the region.

Act East encourages homeland participation in a bid to open avenues for trade exchanges through Myanmar and beyond. The LEP/AEP rides on the regional cooperation of these groupings and the northeast region is the engine to further our cause. The success of cooperation

in the regional alliances will be beneficial to the region as we need to develop the state's capacity to handle the groupings requirements. Sir Mackinder's theory aptly puts the north-eastern region as a landlocked area surrounded by strategic partners, which has security implications.

The policy received its initial thrust with India becoming a dialogue-level partner with the ASEAN, while the big push was felt when India became a summit-level partner with the ASEAN in 2002 and engaged itself in regional initiatives like BIMSTEC and the MGC.<sup>14</sup>

All the regional groups have a common framework of security, economic concerns, infrastructure development, connectivity and social and cultural exchanges. The seven sisters have adequate potential to further this framework and act as the launchpad for a variety of activities as they form the entry into the region. The involvement of the north-eastern states will have a social-cultural-strategic angle, apart from the security. It would also dissuade non-state actors from interfering in the economic affairs as it will turn the people against them. The success of these regional groupings will bring in commerce and trade. The route through Manipur, being the only land route available, will become an important artery for attracting these forays, with collateral advantages to the eastern region.

#### NOTES

1. K. Yhome and Tridivesh Singh Maini, 'India's Evolving Approach to Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond', *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2017, pp. 147–65.
2. M. Amarjeet Singh, 'Reimagining India-ASEAN Relations: What does it Mean for Northeast India?', *Jindal Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 2018, available at <https://jgu-dev.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/Article-4>, accessed on 27 December 2020.
3. V.S. Ranade, 'Manipur a Pivot in Look East Act East Policy: Challenges and Way Ahead', Issue Brief, No. 196, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), 20 November 2019.
4. The Siliguri Corridor is a narrow stretch of land of about 22 km (14 miles) width, located in the Indian state of West Bengal, that connects India's north-eastern states to the rest of India, with the countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lying on either side of the corridor. The Kingdom of Bhutan lies on the northern side of the corridor. The Kingdom of Sikkim formerly lay on the northern side of the corridor, until its merger with India in 1975.

5. Sir Halford John Mackinder was a British geographer who wrote a paper titled 'The Geographical Pivot of History' in 1904. Mackinder's paper suggested that the control of Eastern Europe was vital to control of the world. The 'heartland' he also referred to as the 'pivot area' and as the core of Eurasia, and he considered all of Europe and Asia as the World Island. Mackinder postulated the following, which became known as the Heartland Theory:  
'Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the world'.
6. These linkages have been narrated in an article by K.V. Kesavan, 'India's "Act East" Policy and Regional Cooperation', in Raisina Debates, Observer Research Foundation, 14 February 2020. Available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-act-east-policy-and-regional-cooperation-61375/>
7. Ministry of External Affairs, 'Bilateral and Regional Groupings Concerning India', available at [forumias.com/bilateral-and-regional-groupings-concerning-India](http://forumias.com/bilateral-and-regional-groupings-concerning-india), accessed on 25 December 2020.
8. Yhome and Maini, 'India's Evolving Approach to Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond', n. 1.
9. Ministry of External Affairs, 'Bilateral and Regional Groupings Concerning India', n. 7.
10. See <https://neostencil.com/relevance-indias-north-east-asean-connection>, accessed on 26 December 2020.
11. Formed in July 2011, CORCOM is a conglomerate of seven valley-based militant outfits: the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP); Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL); People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK); its progressive faction, PREPAK-Pro; Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), the political wing of the People's Liberation Army (PLA); United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and United Peoples Party of Kangleipak (UPPK).
12. The UNLFWSEA is a united front of armed separatist groups in India formed by the United Liberation Front of Assam, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland. It is also supported by Manipur Valley-based groups under CORCOM.
13. Wasbir Hussain, 'India's Northeast: The Super-highway to Southeast Asia?', IPCS Issue Brief, No. 104, June 2009.
14. Ibid.

