Essays on the Look East Policy and North-East India

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Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India edited by Dilip Gogoi

From a barely known policy in the 1990s to a buzzword of the media, academicians and bureaucrats of North-East India in recent times, the Look East policy is the paradigm shift in India’s foreign economic policy. Recognising the need to focus the benefits of the Look East policy more sharply on India’s North-Eastern region the second phase of the policy was launched in 2003 by giving a new dimension wherein India is looking towards a partnership with the ASEAN countries, both within BIMSTEC and the India-ASEAN Summit dialogue as, integrally linked to economic and security interests of the North-Eastern region. The new phase of India’s Look East policy is believed to usher in a new era of development for the North-Eastern region. As such, this realignment of the Look East policy in 2003 made people of the region to fancy this policy. With the conceptualisation of the Look East policy vis-à-vis North-East India and its transnational neighbours by Sanjib Baruah, various books have been published which critically assess the prospects, potentials and challenges of this policy in relation to the score.

Dilip Gogoi’s edited book Beyond Borders: Look East Policy and Northeast India is a collection of twelve essays contributed by scholars who have special interests on issues concerning the North-Eastern region vis-à-vis the Look East policy and its transnational neighbourhood. It is the product of ideas deliberated in Cotton Conclave under the banner of National Young Scholars Meet on February 20 and 21, 2008. As the editor spells out in the introduction, the aim of this book is to critically engage with the issues of security, foreign policy, regional economy and sub-regional cooperation, pertaining to the North-Eastern region and its neighborhood which could not only help better the understanding of the region but also help the policy makers to frame a holistic approach toward development of the neglected borderlands and frontier of North-East India.

In the introductory chapter Dilip Gogoi made a right remark that North-East India is “Physically isolated from the rest of India, iron curtained political control and the reluctance to provide research visas to foreign scholars have cast shadows on contemporary research on political relations with its neighbours, along with issues of border trade and transnationalism” (p. 2). In the national imagination the idea of the frontier or borderland still prevails. Logically, India’s Look East policy will have limited value if it does not have any impact on the region. The Look East policy begins with North-East because it shares direct land borders with East and South East Asian neighbours (p. 5).

Mapping the North-East on India’s Foreign Policy Agenda
Jayanta Brahma, in an interesting chapter and emerging field of analysis, deals with the interaction between domestic issues and foreign policy. He regarded foreign policy as “the result of the interplay of a large number of factors that effect the formulation of policy in different ways in different circumstances”, which include “history, geography, politico-economic imperatives, socio-cultural milieu, perceptions of the ruling elite of national interests and ideological consensus”, and is also shaped by domestic, regional and international balance of forces (p. 13).
Holding the view that the linkage between foreign and domestic politics is increasingly becoming significant in international studies, which is primarily due to interdependence of nation-states and globalisation of economy, Brahma argues that in modern times, domestic politics and foreign policy have inseparably merged into one. To him the external and internal threats are obviously not mutually exclusive but feed on each other. As a result, the North-East as a region of strategic location with its external linkages assumes significance in the agenda of India’s foreign policy formulation. He argues that India and its transnational neighbours need to take advantage of their geographical contiguity, even though their relationships are both rivalry and cooperation.

However, Brahma does not go beyond the need of India “to articulate its foreign policy preferences in alignment with the interests of the North-East region as the execution of foreign policy is inevitably influenced by regional considerations within the nation” (p. 32). Instead of the relatively optimistic analysis of the relation between the North-Eastern states and its neighbours, an in-depth micro-analysis relevant for policy decisions in the later part of the essay could have made more interesting and insightful.

Looking East through the North-East

In an interesting chapter Dilip Gogoi explores the factors that led to the evolution of India’s Look East policy and examines the opportunity and potentials of North-East India in the context of the intra-regional arrangement with the South East Asian countries in the light of India’s Look East policy. Putting a positive note, he argues that the future development and stability in North-East India could be possible with the successful implementation of the Look East policy through the North-East.

To Gogoi India’s Look East policy is more of a search for political and economic convergence with the East and South East Asian region by fully exploiting the new opportunities with a pragmatic approach towards regional integration aimed at serving India’s long term national interest. He assesses both economic and cultural relations of North-East ethnic groups with the South East Asian groups which remained untapped.

Acknowledging the challenges posed to development by insurgency and the consequent law and order problem coupled with drugs and arms trafficking in the whole region Gogoi put forward two level parallel strategies at the external and internal fronts to achieve the goals of the Look East policy. External strategies: i) a concrete rational policy choice which could focus beyond the present military regime and remove present anxieties and ambiguity, ii) a more positive engagement with China in a spirit of equality and mutual benefits and remove future potential power rivalry in the region, iii) a better road and communication network for the realisation of better future of the region, iv) effective joint border management supported by institutional mechanism to encourage cross-border trade and discourage illegal border trade, v) India should capitalise on North-East India’s historical and traditional cross-cultural linkages with the South-East Asian region as a soft power resource, and vi) to think of a common house that can ensure free and fair competition, remove tariffs and non-tariff barriers and standardise the trading system among the participant countries. Some of the internal strategies that he suggests are: i) India needs to reorient itself more towards the outward looking approach, ii) ensuring human security and creating better human resources to keep up the pace of development in today’s competitive environment, iii) more mobility of the North-Eastern people to take part in the competitive economic environment, and iv) adopt a sustainable development model and promote green economy in North-East India.
Infrastructural Projects
In another chapter Yogendra Singh assesses the infrastructural projects undertaken by India under the Look East policy and also the prospect and challenges of India’s involvement in such infrastructure projects which aimed at enhancing connectivity between India’s North-East and South-East Asia. India’s interest in infrastructural development is to “extract all the benefits from its Look East policy” (p. 64). Yogendra believes that the shift in this policy was due to “China’s massive engagement to promote the rapid development of strategic infrastructure linkages with Myanmar and Mekong sub-region, facilitation of the sub-regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC and MGC and the acceleration of the development in the Indian North-Eastern region.” He argues that improved connectivity within the region is not only needed to tap the potentials of the North-East but also to prepare the region for enhanced linkages with South East Asia.

Dividing the infrastructure development projects into land routes, energy and telecommunication linkages, Yogendra Singh assesses the detail status of India’s involvement in various ongoing and potential infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar Friendship Road or the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Railways, Kaladan Multimodal project, Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas pipeline, Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project, and the optical fiber network between North-East India and South East Asia.

Yogendra seems to be obsessed equally as the Indian government does with the law and order situation in the region and therefore fails to look the other way around. For instance, the Indian government failed to negotiate with the Bangladesh government on the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas pipeline. However, this is not the dead end to it as gas pipeline can be built till Tripura and from there it can be transported to the mainland through railways. Insurgency in Tripura has receded after tripartite agreement of Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) has been signed between Government of India, Government of Tripura and NLFT (NB) on December 25, 2004, and subsequent surrenders and crackdown of other smaller insurgent groups of the state by police and paramilitary forces. So, there is no excuse on the part of the government of India other than “security phobia” to the region.

Border Disputes and Border Provinces in Foreign Policy
Shubhrajeet Konwer, in chapter five, slightly deviates from the main theme and analyse the border dispute of India and China by dividing the border into three sectors: Kashmir (Western sector), Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (Middle sector) and, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (Eastern Sector). He pays special emphasis on the border dispute in Arunachal Pradesh, government efforts to resolve it and suggest remedial measures as well as identify the major challenge ahead in arriving at a peaceful settlement to the border dispute.

As mentioned by Konwar, the conversion of the Kameng sector as a militarised zone is not a step towards peaceful settlement of dispute between India and China. However, regarding the presence of civilians in this area as a deterrent towards a militarised solution to the border dispute as China cannot afford to have civilian casualties due to fears of worldwide condemnation from the international community (p. 106) is some short of an euphemistic edifice. It indirectly implies the colonial mindset of a North-East frontier where the region as well its people was regarded as a buffer to British India. Konwar regarded the improvement of infrastructure in the eastern sector as key to India’s security. He raises an interesting observation that if large amount of funds are being pumped into Arunachal Pradesh and misutilised and the benefits are denied to the locals, then indigenous Arunachali terror outfits might emerge in the coming years. In addition, if
major insurgent groups of the North-East like ULFA and both factions of NSCN continue to operate freely in the eastern parts of Arunachal, there is also a possibility of forming militant groups by smaller ethnic groups to protect themselves from rampant extortions and intimidations, as seen in many cases in the region.

In another chapter Jabin T Jacob compares China’s Western Development Strategy (WDS) and India’s Look East policy (LEP) and looks at the results derived and their implications. Jacob contrasts that while China’s WDS “originated as an internal development programme targeted at the country’s large western region”, India’s LEP “began as a foreign policy strategy to enable New Delhi to reach out to East Asia and in particular, to Southeast Asia” (p. 128). He complains that while the WDS of China “serves as a public and symbolic demonstration of the central government’s concern with national unity, inequality and poverty… India does not yet really have a comparable North-East Development Strategy in place and even the LEP’s inward focus towards the North-East is of recent vintage and is far from being a coherently-articulated strategy” (p. 129). Like Yunnan’s role in China’s foreign policy New Delhi has to pay greater attention to the voices from its North-Eastern states and accept interdependence and cross-border linkages as a means of ensuring development and stability in this region.

North-East India and Myanmar
Ashild Kolås and Camilla Buzzi, while acknowledging the cul-de-sac situation with poor infrastructure as the reason for underdevelopment of the North-Eastern region, they regarded “connectivity” as the mantra of the Look East policy. However, they made self-contradictory observation when they explain from China’s experience of extensive engagement with Myanmar that India’s opening-up to Myanmar is a risky business in which North-East India could be adversely affected by it. They assumed that opening the borders has non-traditional security risks emanating from Myanmar, including drugs trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking and the spread of infectious diseases.

In fact, the Indo-Myanmar border is porous and instead of being apprehensive of an open border, proper border management by both the country can more effectively control the non-traditional security risks. While border crossing cannot be stopped totally by fencing borders, the “concept of border management is undergoing rapid transformation with the increasing acceptance of globalisation. Nations are coming closer. Barriers are being lowered. Trade and commerce are bonding people across the international borders. The restrictions along the borders are no longer as stringent as they were in the past.”

C. Raja Mohan, an analyst on Indian diplomacy, observes that “Borders in the subcontinent need not necessarily remain political barriers. They need to be transformed into zones of economic cooperation among regions that once were part of the same cultural and political space.”

Thailand’s Look West Policy and India’s North-East
Considering India’s Look East policy and Thailand’s Look West policy as a convergence, which not only consolidated the areas of cooperation but also expanded horizontally, bringing new areas within the ambit of cooperation, Vibhanshu Shekhar explores the potential areas of bilateral cooperation which can benefit North-East the most. Even though Mani Shankar Aiyar, the then Minister for the Development of North Eastern Region, identified 35 sectors of cooperation between India’s North-Eastern region and Thailand, Shekhar identifies three key sectors, which offer immense opportunities for Thai investment in the North-East, and which are labour-intensive production activities, thereby, having the potential for large-scale employment generation within the region. They are the agro-based and food processing sectors, energy sector, and development of local transport
networks in the region. He felt that the ability of the region in taking benefits from the market-driven and investment-centric Look West policy depends on “level of infrastructure development in the region, the ability of the provincial and central governments in managing the challenges of insurgency in the region, and the level of government control and bureaucratic entanglement in the region” (p. 180).

The positive note of redeeming an employment starved region turns again into the lexicon of exploitation of raw materials when he says “resources of the region will be exported to production factories located in Thailand, where these resources will be processed for the final products, to be sold in distant market.” Shekhar, however, does not prescribe measures beyond the exploitation of raw materials, to ways to produce final products within the region.

Border State, Look East Policy and Mizoram
Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman and Julien Levesque assesses the two major non-traditional security issues, the inflow of narcotics and a large Burmese (Chin) population, and how Mizo society tends to react in a rather conservative way. Considering that Mizoram has been left out in the overall framework of the conscious incorporation of the North-East in the Look East policy, they felt that “appropriate control and monitoring must be maintained on the inflow of people and narcotics so that Mizo society sees favorably the enhancement of connectivity in the region” (p. 206).

However, they blindly followed national reports considering Mizoram as having a peaceful situation and a highly educated population, and therefore the state should be a perfect recipient of the Look East policy. Literacy to the Mizos means a person who can read and write Mizo or the Duhlian language. In fact, most Mizos cannot read and write the global language English or the Indian national language Hindi. Though Mizoram is a relatively peaceful comparing to some other North-Eastern states like Manipur, Nagaland and Assam after the peace accord of the Mizo National Front and the Indian government in 1987 leading to the formation of Mizoram state, there are still Hmar and Paite militant outfits demanding various level of autonomy within the state albeit in a lesser degree due to the affinity they have with the majority Mizos or the Lushais to be precise.

Strategic Concerns and Asymmetric Conflicts
Olindita Gogoi, in chapter 10, discusses the host of tensions that exists between India and Bangladesh viz. - the immigration of Bangladeshis into North-East India and its outcome, continuous aid, abetment and sheltering insurgent, cross-border criminal activities, the mass inflow of small arms through Bangladesh and the network among the Jehadi groups. Such activities, to her, fuels insurgency and terrorism in North-East India.

The coming into power of the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina on January 6, 2009 in Bangladesh has initiated an accommodating and cooperative relationship with India. Olindita makes a trivial mistake that Sheikh Hasina came to power in January 2010 (p. 226). With the signing of five important agreements on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, transfer of sentenced persons, combating international terrorism, organised crime and illegal drug trafficking, power generation and on a cultural exchange programme between India and Bangladesh in January, 2010 have built up a positive and mutually beneficial linkage. As security is the primary infrastructure of economic activities, social stability and essential prerequisite of investment, Olindita considers that the coming into power of a friendly government in Bangladesh will help in abating the persistent insurgency atmosphere and subsequently reduce economic stagnation of the region.
In another essay, which has less linkage to the Look East policy, Namrata Goswami tries to outline a research framework for understanding the armed ethnic movements in North-East India and also draws attention to important research conducted over the years on internal conflicts within insurgent groups. She selectively choose and analyse the origin and causes, depth of violent ethnic movements, nature of violence, affected societies, and support base of ULFA, NSCN(IM), UNLF and DHD(N). While probing deeper into the antecedent causes of the conflicts in the region Namrata observes that most of the problems have arisen “due to issues of identity, ethnicity, social and cultural assertions, political empowerment, land, and the hill-plains divide” (p. 223).

She says that the demands of the NSCN (IM) for a Greater Nagaland, the UPDS for a Karbi state, the DHD for a Dimasa state and the Kuki Revolutionary Army for a Kuki Regional Council consist of conflicting claims to overlapping territorial space. However, she does not explain in detail the nature and extent of such overlappings.

Inter-State Relations and Foreign Policy
Cultural analysis has emerged as an important but elusive area of analysis in the past two decades. Biplob Gogoi, in an insightful chapter, observes that “Culture forges a potent and unique linkage with the strategic parameters of national foreign policy of a particular state” (p. 262) and attempts to relocate a culture paradigm of the North-East in India’s foreign policy. Due to the ethnic and cultural affinity with South East Asian neighbours North-East India have a special place in the Look East policy. He says “At a time when ethno nationalism has emerged as a subject of contention, deliberation and debate in international politics, the external ethno-nationalist linkages of the North-East Indians deserve a legitimate and a plausible place in the realm of Indian foreign policy” (pp. 267-268).

As the growth priority for North-East India involves the development of cultural and travel corridors in the form of physical infrastructures, activities or exchanges, Biplop opines that these cultural and travel corridors can be linked with larger South East Asia and South West China destinations. As the North-Eastern people live in a region far from the centres of mainstream culture, he argues, they can maintain connectivity in a variety of ways with the near periphery or South East Asian neighbouring countries.

Even though dealing with the emergence of culture as an important area of analysis in the post-Cold War globalised world, Biplop made a mistake, if not deliberate, in categorising the Kukis as one sub-tribe of the Nagas, where he mentioned them as “The Kuki Nagas” (p. 265). The term “Kuki” and “Naga” exist even before the coming of British in India, as Majumdar and Bhattasali refer to the Kukis as the earliest people known to have lived in prehistoric India, preceding the “Dravidians.” But they were popularised by the British as a generic term for many tribes settling in North-East India, Burma and Bangladesh. Some of the Kuki and Naga tribes straddle both in India and Burma along the international border.

North-East in India’s Security and Diplomacy
In the last chapter Pradip Saikia discusses the challenges faced by North-East India from its neighbours - China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. With the launch of the outward looking economy under the economic reforms in 1991 the relations between India and countries neighbouring the North-East has steadily changed. Pradip argues that “despite an optimistic attitude, the Look East Policy can be derailed by these security issues” (p. 271). In this light Pradip analyses the various security concerns that can emerge as an impediment to the entire process and tries to find valid explanations and policy alternatives that could avoid strategic pitfalls in implementing the Look East Policy. He feels that there needs to be a re-prioritisation of the issues pertaining to the North-East.
Terming the Look East Policy as “successful”, Pradip considers India’s cooperation with China as vital due to its overwhelming presence in South-East Asia including the huge Chinese business diaspora as well as to re-establish historic trade ties with China. However, as the focus of the present book is on North-East India, the success of the Look East policy has to be measured in terms of how much North-East benefits from this policy.

Concluding Remarks

Dilip Gogoi’s edited book is a diverse group of essays dealing with various aspects of Look East policy and North-East India. Individual chapters in this volume provide useful analyses of specific political, economic and strategic dimensions of India’s Look East policy. However, the main weakness is the inclusion of some essays which has not analysed such issues in relation to the Look East policy. Such essays could better be included in books on security and conflicts in North-East India.

One pertinent question that needs to be raised and analysed at this juncture is how the government of India deals with the issue of security in relation to the borderless world. The international borders in the region are mostly porous and these porous borders absorb the shock that could be produced by the separation of Burma from India in 1937 and the subsequent hardening of borders since 1947. Pranab Mukherjee in his address to the first interaction with the public, organised by the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, says “geography is opportunity and the very geographical location of the North East makes it the doorway to South East and East Asia and vice versa, a doorway to economies into India.”

The Look East policy in principle aims for the creation of an enabling environment so as to end the landlocked situation and isolation of the North-Eastern region by opening up the borders and re-integrating the region’s economy through improved trade and connectivity between the North East India and South East Asian countries.

Despite the enormous potentials of the Look East policy India’s border trade with the countries neighbouring the Northeastern region is declining. Border fencing is followed fervently to check drug trafficking and narco-terrorism along the Indo-Myanmar and Indo-Bangladesh border. Recently, India has sanctioned to raise the iron fencing, along Mizoram’s 404-km border with Myanmar. It has also ordered the fencing of the 14 kilometers of the porous international boundary at Moreh in Manipur. This may insulate the age-old ties existing between the ethnic kins living in the border despite the separation between two different nations and further alienate them.

The contributors in this volume are reputed scholars like Camilla Buzzi, Åshild Kolâs and Julien Levesque along with research scholars from various institutions. The book needs to have another edition correcting some of the grammatical mistakes and typographical errors. Nevertheless, the book is a vast source of information and ideas to those whose interests is on the place of North-East India in New Asia in the context of economic globalisation.

Notes and References

2 One of the first essays on India’s Look East policy and North-east India is Sanjib Baruah’s Between South and Southeast Asia: Northeast India and the Look East Policy. CENISEAS Papers 4, Guwahati, India: Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies, 2004. In this paper Baruah conceptualise the prospects of de-emphasising borders in the north-eastern region under the Look East policy for the region’s development and reduction of alienation.
3 Speech for the Chief Minister’s Conference, April 15, 2005.
8 Speech by Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of External Affairs at seminar on ‘Look East’ policy, Shillong, June 16, 2007.