India’s Look East Policy: Domestic Concern or Foreign Apprehension

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Of late, the “Look East” policy has become a catchword not only of the desk for South East Asia and the Pacific of the Ministry of External Affairs, but even for lay persons in Northeast India. The policy gained popularity in the Northeastern region with the launch of the second phase of the policy in 2003. In this new phase the Northeast has been included as an important component of this policy. India is now looking towards partnership with the ASEAN countries integrally linked to economic and security interests of the Northeastern region.

One pertinent question that needs to be raised 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.

On the hand, looking at the Look East policy strictly on the traditional concept of separation between foreign and domestic policy coupled with the decades of rivalry between India and China, there seems to be mixed feeling or even confusion on this policy. This paper discusses India’s foreign policy in brief since independence and looks deeper into the current phase, dominated by the policy of “Looking East”, which is synonymous with globalisation, regionalism and asianism. In this paper a combination of a realist as well as an idealist approach is taken to understand the endeavours of Indian government.

Prologue

The foreign policy of a nation-state is derived from the sum total of its national interests. K.J. Holsti designates foreign policy as “a state’s fundamental strategy for accomplishing its domestic and external objectives. A nation’s general strategy is seldom revealed in any one decision but results in a series of cumulative decisions made in an effort to adjust objectives, values and interests to conditions and characteristics of the domestic and external environments”.

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, domestic politics and foreign policy have inseparably merged into one. 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.

Background of India’s Foreign Policy

(A) From Ideational to Idealism and Internationalism (1947-1962)

The initial stage of the first period in India’s foreign policy marks the explicitly ideational foreign policy to the most idealistic phase under the auspices of India’s first Prime Minister
and the architect of Indian foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru. Even before formal independence, Indian leaders convene Asian Relations Conference from March 23 to April 2, 1947 in New Delhi, which was attended by 25 Asian countries including Egypt. In his inaugural address, Nehru reiterated the need for greater regional cooperation and asserted that, “There was a widespread urge and an awareness that the time had come for us, peoples of Asia, to meet together, hold together and advance together. It was not only a vogue desire but the compulsions of events which forced all of us to think along these lines”. India also organise the Conference on Indonesia held in New Delhi on January 20, 1949 to express support to the Sukarno-led armed struggle against the Dutch attempt to re-impose colonial rule in Indonesia in December 1947. However, these earlier attempts by India towards regional cooperation in Asia failed. A number of reasons were responsible for the failure of these attempts. The interstate disputes, tensions, distrusts and apprehensions among the individual countries were the main factors.

India’s foreign policy during this period was characterised by a sceptical view of the United States, reliance on the Soviet Union and support for other anti-colonial movements. Nehru acknowledged the problems facing weak states in the international system and, consequently, aimed at achieving cooperation where possible and necessary. While concentrating on internationalism India ignores the constraints within the newly liberated state for which an impending disastrous consequence was awaiting India. The pursuit of such a policy left India utterly unprepared to cope with a serious security threat from China and culminated in a disastrous border war in 1962.

(B) The Period of Metamorphosis: From Idealism to Realism (1964-1989/91)

The idealistic approach of India’s foreign policy got a rude jolt in India’s defeat in the 1962 Indo-Chinese border war. Nehru’s approach to foreign policy underwent a series of transformations under his successors, viz., Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964–66), Indira Gandhi (1966–77, 1980–84) and Rajiv Gandhi (1984–89). This period represents a mix of liberal internationalism and a ‘norm-driven’ realism. After 26 years since the India-China war in 1962, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi paid an official visit to China from December 19-23, 1988. This ice-breaking visit starts the new phase of Indo-China relations.

Post-Cold War Period

The early 1990s was a turning point in international politics. This period witnessed the end of Cold War between the two military blocs which brought an end to the bipolar world. It resulted in: (a) growing interdependence between countries and (b), economic and trade issues are gaining vital precedence over the political and military ones. The shift from geopolitics and geostrategic to geoeconomics, the economic dimensions of international politics have become prominent. The world previously polarised by ideological struggle rapidly changed into economic blocs. The “economic reforms” of India in June 1991 put economics in the forefront of its foreign policy resulting in the launch of the Look East policy which aims to promote economic integration with countries of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The launching of the second phase of India’s Look East policy aiming partnership with ASEAN countries integrally linked to economic interests of the Northeastern region. However, this does not mean a dead end to geopolitics.
The Look East Policy

The main thrust of the Look East policy is to take advantage of the historical and cultural contiguities as a foreign policy asset to be exploited in order to facilitate the expansion of regional trade linkage with the economies of East and Southeast Asia. India and ASEAN are natural partners. The geographical proximity between India and ASEAN countries, the presence of a large Indian origin population, the fast growing ASEAN market, their greater openness and a larger role in the global market also provided a rationale for the new policy thrust.\(^9\) In this respect India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1993, a Full Dialogue Partner in 1995, a member of ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 and finally a Summit Level Partner in 2002. India finally signed the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) with the ten members of ASEAN in August 2009. The main objective of this agreement is to strengthen and enhance trade and investment cooperation so as to bridge the development gap among India and ASEAN countries. With this India has formally set up a clear institutional framework for operationalising economic cooperation between India and these countries.

Take 1: Domestic Concern

With an endeavour to reinforce the Look East policy and link the Northeastern region to the dynamic economies of Asia, India joined several sub-regional groupings. India promoted the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) which was formed in 1997 with Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal as members. BIMSTEC seeks to establish economic links with peninsula member countries of ASEAN to boost the development of the Northeastern states.\(^10\)

India is also part of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Project, which includes five riparian counties of the Mekong River viz., Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. The project is an attempt to enhance cooperation in the fields of transport and infrastructure sector with special focus on overland connectivity. Under this cooperation, there is a proposal to set-up a railway line from Delhi to Hanoi. India has proposed to extend India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway to Laos and Cambodia. Once this is done, it will enhance the possibility of setting up special economic zones at borders - India-Myanmar and Myanmar-Thailand.\(^11\) Being land-linked, India’s Northeastern region can serve as a “hub” for trade between Mekong and India.\(^12\)

The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum (BCIM Forum) is a Track II initiative, which advocates integration of these strategically located sub-regional areas, particularly Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and South West China in the areas of trade, investment, energy, transport and tourism. Although BCIM forum is organised at the Track II level, they provided practical suggestions and directions as to how the BCIM initiative can be productive at the official level and can evolve into sub-regional programmes at the government levels. In recent times trade and economic relations have emerged as the trendsetter in the overall India-China relations; which is not a mere coincidence, but rather the result of a conscious effort on both sides to bring bilateral relationship in tune with the present realities by building upon mutual complementarities.\(^13\) The rationale for BCIM cooperation is that integration of these strategically located areas, constituting a natural economic zone, has the potential to generate enormous economic benefits in the areas of trade, investment, energy, transport and tourism. The economic dynamism of India and China could offer wide range of opportunities for growth and development in the region. In its past meetings, the BCIM Forum has come up with ideas for sub-regional cooperation in some important areas such as trade, transport, tourism, energy security, etc.
In the “Dhaka Statement 2007” of the Seventh BCIM Forum on Regional Economic Cooperation held in Dhaka from March 31-April 1, 2007, the participating countries observed that successive BCIM forums have identified enormous potential for cooperation in this sub-region which is rich in natural resources, as well as people, across an area which represents the interface between East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Having about forty percent of the world population, a huge reserve of natural and other resources and two of the world’s fastest growing giant economies such as India and China in the forum, the BCIM sub-regional economic cooperation is perceived to have enormous potentials to generate benefits for the region in general and the weaker parts of the region in particular. Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Northeastern states of India and the Southwestern Chinese provinces could benefit extensively from such regional cooperation.

To develop a robust foreign policy the need to institute a mechanism through which the public is constantly apprised of the implications of a particular foreign policy initiative and the rationale behind it. Thus, the Public Diplomacy Division has been created by the Ministry of External Affairs. Recognising the preeminent role of the northeastern states in the economic and political development of India, the first series of interactive session of the Public Diplomacy Division, a seminar on Look East policy, was held in Shillong on June 16, 2007. Pranab Mukherjee in his address reiterated that, “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 Northeast India and Southeast Asian countries. After this a conclave seminar on Northeast India and its Transnational Neighbourhood was held at IIT Guwahati from 17-18 January 2008. However, after all these there have been no serious attempts to implement the policies.

Gateway to the east or still a cul-de-sac?

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 fenced 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.

Take 2: Foreign Apprehension

Rather than being involved with China multilaterally, official India appears to prefer regional organisations such as the Mekong Ganga Cooperation and BIMSTEC which do not include China (Baruah 2004, 15-16). In the overall scheme of things for Beijing, New Delhi is its only serious rival for influence in Asia in decades to come, Japan’s advanced if stagnant economy notwithstanding. The 1962 border war between the two countries was much easier to overcome in China, which won, than in India, which lost.

Although relations between India and China have improved considerably over the years, long-standing mutual suspicion and animosities continue to persist over a large number of issues. A critical review of India’s Look East strategy as part of her overall foreign policy in
Asia reveals that one of the important objectives behind this strategy is to play a new balancing game against China in the Southeast Asian and the Asia-Pacific region. This argument can be supported by the fact that while the other two subregional cooperations BIMSTEC and MGC has progressed steadily since its formation, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum (BCIM Forum) is yet to take-off. Apprehensive of the inclusion of China in BCIM Forum, India seems to take less interest in this Track-II initiative. The proposal to reopen the Stillwell Road connecting Ledo in Assam to Kunming, the capital city of Yunan in North West China, and passing through North West Myanmar is still far from being put into reality.

The u-turn in India’s policy towards Myanmar since the mid-1990s from a diplomatic standoff to constructive engagement shows India’s realist assessment of economic and strategic calculations than a champion for democracy. Under the guise of economic cooperation India tacitly tries to balance China in Asia.

Conclusion

Apart from balancing China in Asia, the Look East strategy is also motivated by certain specific domestic considerations like developing India’s Northeastern region and curbing insurgent activities along the border with Myanmar. This can be seen in the recent attempts by Myanmar army to crack down various insurgent groups of the Northeast.

There is no easy approach to achieve the goals of any policy pursued which need time and efforts. However, eight years has lapsed since the Northeast is given a special place in the Look East policy. Even though law and order situations is considered to be one of the main obstacles to the implementation of this policy, there seems to be lack of political will to implement the policy. Looking into the decade old Naga peace process, settlement with most of the insurgent groups will take another two-three decades. Therefore, the government of India needs a strong political will in the form of a robust policy which also involves the people of the northeastern region. Without the participation of the people of the region the policy would falter into another failed lexicon of “India’s Northeast policy”.

Notes and References

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11 Mekong Ganga Policy Brief No. 1, Research and Information System for Developing Countries publication on India-Mekong Economic Cooperation, March 2007, p. 4.
13 Address by Mr. Rajiv Sikri, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, at the Sixth Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum, New Delhi. http://www.meaindia.nic.in/speech/2006/03/30ss01.htm
15 Speech by Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of External Affairs at seminar on ‘Look East’ policy, Shillong, June 16, 2007.
20 Various camps of Northeast insurgent groups were raided and overran by the Myanmar army on September 7 and 14. It is reported that Ulfa’s mobile headquarters at Sagaing was destroyed in the first attack. The envoy of NSCN (K), Kughalu Mulatonu accused the government of India of supplying over 60 truckloads of arms and ammunition to Myanmar in June 2011. “NSCN-K, UNLF camps in Myanmar raided”, The Telegraph, September 16, 2011, “Baruah, Khaplang escape unhurt in Myanmar army attack on N-E rebels’ camps”, Imphal Free Press, September 15, 2011.