

Two Days National Seminar

India's Act East Policy: Problems and Prospects for North-east India

(12th-13th February 2016)

Sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi

Concept Note

India's Look East Policy was introduced by the Government of India in early nineties and paid handsome dividends to India in the following years. India's Look East Policy was not limited to Southeast Asia, it also involved a conscious effort to improve relations with Japan, South Korea and Australia. India's search for a new economic relationship with Southeast Asian countries was driven by considerations of globalisation and domestic imperatives of developing the North-east India by increasing its connectivity to the outside world. Look East Policy is one of the important strategies of India's foreign policy. Implementation of this policy will certainly impact on the economy of Northeast India. However, with the introduction of Look East Policy, this region has become a focal point in India's policy. It is expected that the successful implementation of Look East Policy will bring certain economic benefits to the North-east region.

India's engagement with South-east Asia and East Asia has become a major feature of its foreign and security policies. The South-east Asia as contiguous geographic region and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a pivotal regional organisation will remain the principal focus of India's foreign policy. The genesis of Look East Policy can be traced back in three different phases. (i) The first phase was pre-independence period when the regions were linked through the decolonisation process. The events are considered important in this period- the Asian Conference of March 1947 and Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian Nations in 1955. (ii) 1960s to early 1990s when international scenario was dominated by Cold War and establishment of ASEAN in 1967. (iii) 1990s till present date- a policy shift occurred in India with regard to its relations with ASEAN and marked by two events- (a) end of Cold War (1991) and (b) announcement of India's Look East Policy in early 1990s.

India's Look East Policy went through two distinct phases. The first phase focussed on renewing political and commercial contacts of India. India's new engagement with the East turned out to be a productive one. India's interaction with the ASEAN dramatically expanded with New Delhi becoming sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1992 and a full dialogue partner in 1995. Later on India became a member of ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) in 1996. The first years of the Look East Policy saw steady expansion of trade and investment with the region. India-ASEAN trade in 2001-02 was about \$7.8 billion over three times the 1993-94 trade figures of \$ 2.5 billion.

The second phase in India's Look East Policy had a new dimension in the development of India's North-east region. India has sought to improve the road connections between the North-east and Myanmar by investing in the transport infrastructure of the neighbour. India and Thailand have planned a trilateral project with Myanmar to link the three nations through a road corridor. Myanmar as a land bridge to South-east Asia, India hopes to transform the North-east region from a security burden to a land of economic opportunity. These can be seen from the introduction of International flights between Imphal and Mandalay and trans-national highways between India and ASEAN countries in the recent years. The visit of Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi to Myanmar and Imphal in November 2014 is a great significant to India's Look East Policy. Modi expressed that Look East Policy will transform into Act East Policy which will be a great benefit for the North-east region.

There are various problems for North-east India with the implementation Act East Policy. First important problem for North-east India is developmental challenges due to the landlocked condition of the region. Due to this landlocked condition, North East region is lagging behind in terms of connectivity and market access to its neighbouring countries. India's policy of strengthening its ties with eastern neighbours has been limited to counter insurgency efforts as seen in Bhutan and Myanmar. The Act East policy is used as a means to convince the neighbouring countries to drive out insurgents taking shelter in these countries. Sincere and political negotiations and not militaristic approach to insurgency will bear lasting solution in the region.

The role of Northeastern states in the Act East policy is negligible till date. So far, it seems to be a dictated policy of the central government. This is in sharp contrast to the role played by Yunnan province of China in search of closer relationship with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Here lies the factor of China in Act East Policy of India. The question of

Myanmar, drug trafficking, illegal migrants, use of small arms etc. becomes other challenges to Look East Policy. It is through concentrated efforts in various thrust areas that Northeast India will be able to stand not only the challenges of the Act East policy but also to fully participate in the new milieu. Only then, Northeast can hope to be a part of the bridge connecting India and Southeast Asia.

The prospects of North-east of India with the implementation of Act East Policy can be seen as follows. Firstly, there is considerable scope of improving trade in certain local products such as tea, spices, handloom and cane handicrafts. Secondly, Look East Policy will help in legalising informal trade along the border and encourage the trading partners to expand their business. Thirdly, there are prospects for North-east India to enjoy the spin off efforts from trade by developing certain sectors like transport and communications, tourism, banking and insurance. Fourthly, another prospect of Act East Policy can be solving of unemployment problems in the North-east region by implementing the above ventures in the region. Lastly, with the introduction of Act East Policy, transport and communication between India and South-east Asia has been improved particularly in the North-east region of India.

From the above points, it can be said that transformation of India's Look East Policy to Act East policy is a significant step for economic development of North-east India in particular the country in general. The implementation of India's Act East Policy has the potential to transform the North-east India to a region of peace and economic prosperity. In this context, the Department of Political Science, IGNTU-RC Manipur proposes a Two Days National Seminar on "**India's Act East Policy: Problems and Prospects for North-east India**" on 12th-13th February 2016.

The tentative sub-themes of the proposed National Seminar are:

1. India and South-east Asian countries
2. Look East Policy to Act East Policy
3. Act East Policy and Problems and Prospects of North-east India
4. Act East Policy and question of Myanmar
5. North-east India: Gateway to South-east Asia
6. Other themes related to the proposed area

Call for Seminar Paper

The Department of Political Science, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Regional Campus, Manipur, is going to organized two Days National Seminar titled **India's Act East Policy: Problems and Prospects for North-east India**, sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi on 12th-13th February 2016. Individuals who have not submitted their abstracts can submit the abstract of 200 words on or before 10th February 2016 and full paper on 12th February 2016.

The tentative sub-themes of the National Seminar are:

1. India and South-east Asian countries and Look East Policy
2. Look East Policy to Act East Policy
3. Act East Policy and Problems and Prospects of North-east India
4. Act East Policy and question of Myanmar
5. North-east India: Gateway to South-east Asia etc.

Dr. N Surjitkumar

Asst. Professor & Head

Department of Political Science

IGNTU, RC Manipur

Phone No: +91 8014915816

Email: nsurjitkumar@gmail.com