

GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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Abstract:

The *paper* covers the geo-strategic importance of North East India and its relevance in the overall gamut of Act East Policy. The strategic importance of the region emanates from its location in close proximity to the sensitive and highly porous frontiers it shares with other countries of the world. It dwells upon the ethnicities in the region and their deep linkages with neighbouring countries. It further covers demography and abundant availability of natural resources in the region which enhances its overall value. It also highlights the strategic vulnerability of the region with Chinese territorial claims and region's geographical isolation. The relevance of this chapter in overall research is to highlight the importance of the region and necessity to ensure security for its overall development.

Key Words: Geo-Strategic, Act East Policy, Look East Policy, North East Region, Inner Line System, Ethnicity, Strategic Vulnerability.

Geography of Northeast Region:

The region of Northeast is a true frontier region located in a corner of Indian Union with natural frontiers on three sides. The strategic importance of the region emanates from its location in close proximity to the sensitive and highly porous frontiers it shares with other countries of the world. This part of India has immense geo-political and geo-strategic importance due to international frontier with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. One of the characteristic features of this region is that it shares just two percent of border with the mainland of the country and more than 98 percent is linked with international border. The North East Region (NER) comprises of eight states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Sikkim is the last state to be added to the list of states in the region for administrative purposes. The region

covers a geographical area of 2,62,189 sq. km.¹ Despite close proximity with the neighbouring countries, the NER has remained underdeveloped for many decades.²

Geographically, the North Eastern Region can be divided into the Eastern Himalayas, the North Eastern hill basins; and the Brahmaputra and Barak Valley plains.³ The North East hills basins constitute 65 per cent of the total area, while the Brahmaputra Valley account for 22 per cent of the region. The Meghalaya Plateau covers 13 percent of the total area.⁴ The hill-forest terrain provides ideal operating space to insurgent groups for guerrilla warfare.

The geography, topography and climate have played a significant role in identity formation in the region. The Northeast region is a place where the Indo-Aryan civilizational influences end with the beginning of Southeast Asian culture and ethos.⁵ It is commonly said that the region of Northeast is tectonically and morphologically part of East Asia, but politically it is part of South Asia. The region by virtue of its geography acts as a physical bridge between South East Asia and mainland India and it is cornerstone to India's Act East Policy. The region shares civilisational and cultural ties with South East Asian countries. The temples in Bali (Indonesia), Angkor Wat (Cambodia), LuangPrabang (Laos) and the imprints of Champa civilization in Vietnam reflect these linkages. Flow of Hinduism and Buddhism through North East region towards Indo-China region led to cultural diffusion. There are other similarities in terms of art, architecture, language, literature, social and cultural festivals. Act East policy is the continuum of these ancient linkages, which seeks to strengthen these civilization and cultural bonds. There exists much diversity in their origins, culture, traditions, customs and languages. Also, the ethnic and linguistic bonds are shared across the borders by people of the region.

¹ "Expansion of North East India's Trade and Investment with Bangladesh and Myanmar: An Assessment of Opportunities and Constraints", Study carried out by *Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries* (RIS), October 2011, p. 18.

² JayantaGogoi, "Look East Policy Potentialities for the North East Region", *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, Vol. 4, No. 5, May 2014, p. 321.

³ "Development and Growth in NorthEast India: The Natural Resources, Water and Environment Nexus", Strategy Report, Sustainable Development Department, Environment and Water Resource Management Unit, Report No. 36397-IN, June 2007, Washington, DC, p. XV.

⁴ N.Ram Singh, *Agriculture and Rural Economy of Northeastern India* (Manipur: Ningshoujam Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1989).

⁵ FalguniRajkumar, *Rainbow People: Reinventing Northeast India* (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2011), pp. 64-6.

There were trade and commercial intercourse between Ava Kingdom (modern Myanmar) and the Kingdoms of Ahom and Manipur in the past.⁶ Cultural connection between India and Southeast Asia dates back to 12th Century when migration of Thai people into the Northeast region of India was reported. A. L. Kroeber, the famous cultural Anthropologist has noted that the entire region across the Bay of Bengal as 'South East Asia ethnic enclaves.'⁷ Close cultural and ethnic links served as a strong motivating factor to promote cooperation between India and South East Asia.

Most of the present boundaries in the region were formed during British colonial times. In the year 1914, Mc Mahon line was drawn delineating the Northern boundary with Tibet, Radcliffe line drawn in 1947 marks the Southern boundary with erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the line that emerged out of Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, as modified later forms the Eastern boundary with Myanmar. Old silk route passed through the region and was major trading route between India and Central Asia. Post-independence, various states came into being based on administrative requirements.

Inner Line System, which came into existence by Bengal East Frontier Regulation, 1873 was in many ways the British administration's answer to tackling the non-state spaces they encountered in the North East Region.⁸ The Inner Line Regulation was the first law promulgated in Assam and was done under the authority of Statute 33 Vict., Chapter 3 which gave to executive Government of India a power of summary legislation for backward areas.⁹ It needs to be understood that this line merely defined the limits of administration area and not the territorial boundaries of British India. This line was necessitated to separate the hill tribes from people residing in plains primarily to protect British interests. In 1870's, the tea gardens were expanding and encroaching upon tribal lands. Along with them timber, coal and rubber merchants were also entering Assam and encroaching into hills, thus coming to be in friction

⁶SanjibBaruah, "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, pp. 5-6.

⁷BiplobGogoi, "Cultural Legacy, Inter-State Relations and Foreign Policy: Context of North East India", in DilipGogoi (ed.), *Beyond Borders: Look East Policy and Northeast India* (Guwahati: Delhi: DVS Publishers, 2010), pp. 263-64.

⁸PradipPhanjoubam, *The North East Question: Conflicts and Frontiers* (Routledge, New York, 2016), pp 78-79.

⁹ Ibid.

with hill tribes.¹⁰ Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1918) considered tribal questions and excluded them from the Provincial Governments. Government of India Act, 1919 categorised the excluded territories into two parts i.e wholly and partially excluded. These rules ensured that the primitive tribes be excluded from political reforms process and be administered directly by the Governor of the Province. Government of India Act, 1935 treated the scheduled districts as wholly or partially excluded.

After independence these areas were notified as Schedule V and Schedule VI areas as per provisions of the Constitution. No criteria seem to have been followed while declaring Schedule V and VI areas. Most of the areas notified as partially excluded areas under 1935 Act were declared as V Schedule, and wholly excluded areas were declared as VI Schedule areas. However, Government of India decided on four conditions for declaring an area as Schedule V or VI and these are, preponderance of tribal population, compactness and reasonable size of areas, under developed nature of areas and marked disparity in economic standard of people.

The man-made political boundaries and divisions in the course of political history of the region not only isolated the people from the rest of the country but also changed the character of once physically accessible and homogenous region. The disruption of lives of people resultant of these political divisions are some of the main causes for rise of assertive ethnic identity politics in Northeast.

Table 1.1
Nature of Border of the North East India and Neighbouring Countries¹¹

Area	Nature of Borders
Assam and Bhutan	Brahmaputra Plains to Himalaya Mountains
Assam and Bangladesh	Plains to Plains (part of the Brahmaputra plains)
Meghalaya and Bangladesh	Hills to Plains (Meghalaya Plateau with the Surma Plains)
Mizoram and Bangladesh	Hills to Hills and Hills to Plains both
Mizoram and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
Manipur and Myanmar	Hills to Hills and Hills to Plains both
Nagaland and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, Tibet and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
Tripura and Bangladesh	Hills and Plains to Plains

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zahid Hussain, "The Nature of Border and Border Trade of Northeast India", in Gurudas Das and R. K. Purkayastha (eds.), *Border Trade: North-East India and Neighbouring Countries* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2000), p. 138.

The region is strategically located at the centre of three giant markets of China, ASEAN and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region. Lying at the cross roads of South, East and Southeast Asia, the region is geographically and culturally remote from the mainland India.¹²

There are four aspects of **understanding the role of geography in context of Northeast**. Firstly, the unique location, topography and climate of the region; secondly, the imposition of man-made divisions during pre/post-independence era; thirdly, the tendency to oversimplify the problems of various groups of people without according adequate considerations to individual ethnicities and fourthly, the tendency to deal with problems of the region essentially from geomorphological perspective rather than ethnocentrically.¹³ Therefore, it is imperative that the aspect of ethnicity is understood in right context along with geography.

Ethnicities in Northeast:

Anthropologically, the pattern of migration of various ethnic groups into the region is closely associated with geography and topography. Many of the ethnic groups of Northeast India are not Indo-Aryan origin, instead trace their origin to Mongoloid regions. These groups have migrated centuries ago from Mongolia, Tibet, China, Thailand, Burma (rechristened as Myanmar) and other Southeast Asian countries. Peter Kunstadter has underlined the fact that, 'Assam has a large population of tribal and minority peoples whose languages are more closely related to the languages of Southeast Asia than to those of the Indian subcontinent. Their cultures too resemble the cultures of their neighbours in Southeast Asia.' The ethnic group of Tai Ahoms in Assam has their counterparts in Southeast Asia who are called Shan in Myanmar, Thai in Thailand, Lao in Laos, Dai and Zhuang in China and Tay-Thai in Vietnam.¹⁴ The Ahoms in Assam is one of the most prominent ethnic group who came to the region in 13th Century AD under their leader Sukhapa from Burma and established their kingdom at Charaideo. The Naga tribes living in North East states of

¹²MunmumMajumdar, "Northeast India as a Gateway to India's Look East Policy", *International Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July-December 2008, p. 395.

¹³FalguniRajkumar, '*Rainbow People: Reinventing North East India*' (Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2011), pp 65-66.

¹⁴DilipGogoi, "East Through Northeast: India and Southeast Asia in the New Asia", in DilipGogoi (ed.), *Beyond Borders: Look East Policy and Northeast India* (Guwahati: Delhi: DVS Publishers, 2010), p. 46.

Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh have a close connection with the Nagas residing in the Kachin State and Sagaing Region of Myanmar. The Mizos live in Mizoram as also in Chin State of Myanmar. The Kuki tribe residing in Manipur have linkages with the Tamu area of Sagaing Region. The Paite live in the Mizoram-Chin State-Manipur border areas.¹⁵ The ethnic connection between India's North East and Myanmar can be seen from Table 2.2 as shown below. The cultural connectedness between India's Northeast and Southeast Asian countries reflects the tremendous scope for cooperation between India and Southeast Asia.

Table 1.2¹⁶
Ethnic Connection Between India's North East and Myanmar

State	Tribes in North East India	Tribes in Myanmar
Arunachal Pradesh	Konyak, Nocte, Tangsang, Wangcha	Konyak, Nocte, Thangshang, Wangchoo
Manipur	Kuki near Moreh; Paite in Churchandpur district, Tangkhul in Ukhrul district	Kuki-Thadou at Tamu, Paite near Churchandpur, Tangkhul near Ukhrul
Mizoram	Mizo, Paite, 70,000 Chin	Around 30 Chin tribes
Nagaland	Chakesang, Sangtam, Khyaniungam, Konyak	Konyak and other Naga tribes inhabiting four townships

Ethnicity has been one of the main factors in North East which contributed to perpetuation of insurgencies in the region and its impact has been as under¹⁷: -

- (a) Most ethnic groups resent federal control or domination by bigger ethnic groups.
- (b) The preservation and assertion of ethnic identity through aggressive means is seen as the key to winning share of power and resources.
- (c) Most ethnic groups in the region do not have the numbers to make an impact through the legitimate political system, hence the tendency to use armed guerrilla warfare as a force multiplier.

¹⁵Walter Fernandes, "Relations between Divided Tribes: North East India and Western Myanmar", in a Conference Report on *Look East Policy: India and Myanmar Pitching for Greater Connectivity*, Organised by Burma Centre and Institute of Social Science, New Delhi, 4 August 2014, p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.11.

¹⁷SubhirBhaumic, "Insurgencies in India's North East: Conflict, Co-option and Change", Vol 10, July 2007, East West Centre, Washington, pp.7.

- (d) The cross-border support has sustained the insurgencies in the region, and India's response in terms of negotiations with insurgent groups to meet their ethnic aspirations has in turn encouraged groups to proliferate.

Climate and Demography of Northeast:

North East India has a subtropical climate that is influenced by its relief and influences from the South West and North East monsoons. The Himalayas to the North, the Meghalaya plateau to the South and the hills of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur to the East influences the climate. Since monsoon winds originating from the Bay of Bengal move Northeast, these mountains force the moist winds upwards, causing them to cool adiabatically and condense into clouds, releasing heavy precipitation on these slopes. It is the rainiest region in the country, with many places receiving an average annual precipitation of 2,000 mm.¹⁸

The region as a whole has a fairly large market with over 45 million people (2011 Census). Altogether just 10 Indian states have population more than that of this region. It houses 3.76% of total population of the country.¹⁹ North East Region is inhabited by more than 200 ethnic groups of the 635 tribal groups in the country.²⁰ The variety of tribal groups who are ethnically, linguistically and culturally distinct reflects the multi-cultural character of the states. There are variations in the density of population which varies from 13 per sq km in Arunachal Pradesh to 340 per sq km in Assam. With the exception of Assam, all other States of the region have predominantly hilly terrain which is inhabited by an overwhelming proportion of tribal population ranging from 19.3 percent in Assam to 94.5 percent in Mizoram.²¹ The literacy rate of the North East region is 79.64 per cent, which is higher than the national average of 71.04 percent. Mizoram has the highest literacy rate of 94.3% and Arunachal Pradesh has lowest of 65.4%.²²

¹⁸Dr S. Kiran Singh, 'Literacy Rates in North East India: An Analysis', International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, Vol 8, Issue 11, November 2018, pp. 215.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Arvind Kumar, "Regional Connectivity for Shared Prosperity in North-East India: Challenges and Opportunities for South and South East Asia", *Tech Monitor*, January-March 2014, p. 18.

²²Dr S. Kiran Singh, 'Literacy Rates in North East India: An Analysis', International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, Vol 8, Issue 11, November 2018, pp. 221.

The demography of the region has changed sharply, pitting the growing rush of settlers from India mainland and neighbouring countries like Bangladesh against the region's indigenous Mongoloid ethnicities in a competition for scarce resources like arable land.²³

Table 1.3²⁴
Distribution of Tribes in the Seven States of North East India

State	Tribals
Arunachal Pradesh	Aka, Apatani, Deori, Khamti, Khamba, Memba, Mishng, Miri, Khowa, Mishmi, Lisu, Miji, Monpa, Sherdukpen, Sulung, Singpho, Tangsa, Nokte, etc
Assam	Boro, Kachari, Rabha, Dimasa, Karbi, Mising, Koch, Rajbonshi, Tiwa, Garo, Gangte, Hmar, Hajong, Khasi-pnars, Paite, etc
Manipur	Himol, Anal, Angami, Chisu, Chota, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Khoirao, Kom, Lamjong, Lushai, Monsang, Maram, Marim, Mao, Mayon, Paite, Pusum, Ralte, Sema, Simti, Sukte, Thangkul, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Zeliangrong, etc
Meghalaya	Khasi-Jaintia, Garo, Karbi, Lalung, Hajong, Biate, Koch, etc
Nagaland	Ao, Sema, Konyak, Lotha, Angami, Chang, Rengma, Phom, Pochuri, Sangtham, Chakesang, Yimchunger, Zeliangrong, Kuki, etc
Mizoram	Lushai, Hmar, Pawi, Paite, Chawte, Riang, etc
Tripura	Chakma, Hrangkhawl, Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Lushai, Kuki, etc

Natural Resources:

Despite being landlocked and underdeveloped, the region has enormous potential for development based on its rich endowment of natural resources, including hydrocarbons, biodiversity, horticulture and floriculture. The region holds crucial natural resources including natural gas, crude oil, minerals, timber and tea. Mineral resources of the region are

²³SubhirBhaumic, "Insurgencies in India's North East: Conflict, Co-option and Change", Vol 10, July 2007, East West Centre, Washington, pp.5.

²⁴A.K. Nongkynrih, "Privatisation of the Communal Land of the North East India: Sociological Viewpoint", in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora (eds.), *Land, People and Politics: Contest Over Tribal Land in NorthEast India* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre in association with International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs, 2008), pp. 17-18.

mostly concentrated in Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.²⁵ Assam has large reserves of natural resources and it accounts for about 15 per cent India's crude output and about 50 per cent of total onshore natural gas production. Meghalaya and its surrounding areas account for more than 25 per cent of coal deposits. The tourism industry of the eight states in North Eastern India has tremendous potential. There are large number of tourist destination in the region with huge economic activities. The region is one of the major hotspots of bio-diversity in the world. The North East has the largest hydro-electric potential compared to other regions of our country.²⁶

Table 1.4
Natural Resources Found in North East Region²⁷

Agro Forestry	The region accounts for 26 per cent of the forests cover of India. The largest producer of bamboo. The world's single largest tea growing region accounting for 16 per cent share. It is the producer of premium quality jute and silk. Presence of Horticulture and herbal resources.
Minerals	India's oldest and major petroleum and natural gas source, with shares of 16 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of total production. Other major mineral resources include coal, limestone, and dolomite.
Hydel Power	The region is assessed to have the largest hydel power generation potential in the country (60,000 MW).
River/ Waterways	The river network provides cost effective transport for the movement of goods, notably to neighbouring countries and to Indian ports like Kolkata and Haldia.

Strategic Vulnerability of Northeast:

North Eastern region of India remains geographically isolated from rest of the country. It is connected from rest of India with a narrow stretch of Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck which is surrounded by Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, hence it is

²⁵KonsamPadmini Devi, "India's Look East Policy and Its Implications on North East India", *Ph.D Thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science*, School of Social Sciences, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur, 2012, pp. 132-33.

²⁶R. V. Shahi, "Tapping the Hydro-Electric Potential of the North-Eastern Region", *ASCI Journal of Management*, Vol. 37, No. 2, March 2008, p. 81.

²⁷Nishchal N. Pandey, *India's North-Eastern Region: Insurgency, Economic Development and Linkages with South-East Asia* (New Delhi: Institute of South Asian Studies in association with Manohar Publications, 2008), p. 19.

susceptible to interruption during hostilities. Therefore, this region requires military presence in perpetuity to ensure territorial integrity and security.

Arunachal Pradesh from where practically all the tributaries of Brahmaputra River pass through is an important frontline state and China has been claiming the entire state as its territory calling it South Tibet. This unsettled border dispute between India and China in the region makes Arunachal Pradesh a contested geographical area and it is critical to defend the Northern boundaries of the state in order to safeguard the entire North East region.

The protracted violence in the region has a close linkage with the economic underdevelopment, insurgency problem and rising unemployment in the region. Numerous insurgent groups have been formed by different tribal groups and operate in various parts which keep the area in turmoil. These insurgent groups present a sub conventional threat to the region and can be exploited by inimical elements to destabilise the region.

Act East Policy:

Lack of economic development in North-East India can be attributed to its landlocked geography, law and order situation, poor market access, poor infrastructure, lack of connectivity and truncated natural trade routes. The security concerns and the subsequent political developments in this region and its close neighbourhood turned the development process of this region into an endogenous phenomenon.

The abysmally low level of economic development that persists in the North East Region necessitates promotion of Cross Border Trade (CBT) between India's Northeast and its neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. CBT is not only vital to the economies of the bordering countries but in particular it would also pay significant dividend for the underdeveloped region of North East. It can contribute to reducing poverty by way of income generation through the movement of goods.²⁸

Trade as usual is the backbone and life line of economic growth and development for the region. NER can overcome underdevelopment and achieve sustained economic development through trade beyond this region. Owing to close proximity with the neighbouring countries than the mainland India, the region tends to look more to neighbouring countries than to mainland India for trade and commerce to sustain its economy and subsequent economic growth. CBT would open the way to access to a larger market,

²⁸T. Zarenthungezung, "The Politics of Indo-Myanmar Cross Border Trade: A View from Nagaland, India", *Economic Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 3, September 2013, pp. 301-02.

which in turn would create viable conditions for the huge investments needed to develop road and communication facilities in the region of North East.²⁹ India needs to learn from China which has established production centres near the border and even inside Myanmar to penetrate into cross border markets. India will need to set up production base in the Northeast for catering to the markets in Myanmar and beyond which would definitely bring tremendous benefit for the region. The region offers facilities in terms of transportation, hospitality, financial services, health care and education.³⁰

The region of North East has been a latecomer in realising the importance of planned development. Despite the fact that the Look East Policy was introduced in 1990s, development has been lacking in this part of our country. Some momentum has been given with rephrasing of the initiative as Act East Policy. The Government with a view to meet the development need of the North East states has created a new Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region (MDoNER) in September 2001. The government has, indeed, been devoting a huge amount of funds to step up the pace of development in the NER. The Act East Policy (AEP) envisages the NER not as a periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines, crisscrossing the region.

The Northeast region of India can best be described as a gateway to Southeast Asia from India's standpoint and a gateway to South Asia from the ASEAN's point of view. The AEP is the key to prosperity and development in the region. Seemingly, the region can become India's economic and strategic bridgehead to ASEAN and its objectives set out in the AEP can be realized through this region. The stability and development in the Northeast region would strengthen relations between India and ASEAN, to ensure smooth functioning of trade and investment and also attract tourism in the region. Holistic development is possible only when there is an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Violence-torn area where the administrative machinery has to divert a significant amount of resources towards maintenance of law and order does not augur well for trade and investment.

By declaring AEP, the government displayed its interest in strengthening and broadening the level of engagement with the East Asia in general and ASEAN in particular. It reflects the need to act seriously towards the East Asia in general and Southeast Asia in

²⁹Laldinkima Sailo, "Northeast India: Trade and Development Prospects", *ISAS Insights*, National University of Singapore, No. 171, 25 June 2012, pp. 3-5.

³⁰Madhurjya Prasad Bezbaruah, "India's 'Look East' Policy: A Passage to Asian Prosperity or a False Hope for the Northeast?", *Social Science Abstracts*, Vol. 34, 2010.

particular. Under the AEP, the present government sought to give North East India long overdue primary attention as a gateway to ASEAN and East Asia. The AEP, if implemented in a proper manner, will not only hold the key to India's regional development, but can help end the landlocked isolation of her North Eastern States and open up the region to the larger East Asian theatre. Nevertheless, simply declaring AEP will not bring any justice for the Northeast states unless they are prepared to meet the dual challenge of security and development paradigm in the region. Development within the region must be given priority ahead of extracting benefits from the exchange of trade and transits with the neighbouring countries. The development of the North East Region is a prerequisite to ensure the fructification of AEP.

AEP has three broad objectives; firstly, to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with South East Asian countries with a view to firmly establish India as a regional power. Enhanced connectivity, trade, investment and tourism are some of the areas of cooperation. Secondly, development of North East regions, which has remained generally under developed as compared to other parts of the country. Thirdly, to further build bilateral and multilateral relations with immediate Eastern neighbours and nations part of ASEAN, EAS. Due to failure of SAARC to emerge as a viable economic bloc, a shift towards East and South East was necessary

India has two options of engaging with South East Asian countries. One is the land-based route through North East India towards Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore, etc. The other is the sea-based route through Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea and further towards South China sea. The importance of land connectivity with an economically vibrant region cannot be over emphasised.

As part of AEP, several infrastructure projects have been taken up over the years. Some of the projects are in advanced stages of completion, however majority are held up due to diplomatic, bureaucratic or security issues in the region. Few planned projects currently underway are Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Corridor which plans to connect Kolkata to Mizoram through Bay of Bengal and Sittwe Port in Myanmar, 1360 km Trilateral Highway connecting Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Bagan in Myanmar, Asian Highway from Imphal to Tamu and further going towards Mandalay and Kalembo, which is proposed to be extended to Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam subsequently. Development of old Stilwell Road through Pangsau Pass to Myitkina in Myanmar and Ruili in Yunnan Province of China was also considered at one point of time. In addition, the railway line

presently being constructed between Jiribam and Imphal will further be extended to Kalembo in Myanmar.

Better infrastructure facility and strong connectivity holds the key to give impetus to trade and investment in NER. However, stable security in NER is a prerequisite for development of infrastructure and its usage by various stakeholders. Hence, the AEP and security in the region are interlinked.

Conclusion:

Lying at the cross roads of South, East and Southeast Asia, the North East region of India is geographically and culturally remote from the mainland India, however its geo-strategic location is significant being at the tri-junction of an economically vibrant region i.e. at the centre of three giant markets of China, ASEAN and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It has potential to become economic powerhouse in terms of trade and investment. Its strategic location allows it to act as geographical base for linkages with the neighbouring countries. The region as a whole has a fairly large market with over 45 million people, as also abundant natural resources in terms of minerals, water, oil, forest, etc. The region also assumes importance since India is proactively engaging with world powers to secure a strategic and economic foothold in the vital Indo-Pacific region, the land route to which passes through North East.

By virtue of its location, the region also suffers from few drawbacks. It encompasses number of frontier states, some of which have demarcation issues with neighbouring countries. Few security concerns also emanate from porous borders which have allowed illegal migration, thereby creating frictions within the social space. The region is also considered vulnerable due to its narrow life line passing through the Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck, which is prone to disruption being surrounded by Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China. There are unsettled territorial disputes with China in the region which makes it a potential flash point during any future confrontations. Also, existence of a large number of insurgent groups in the region presents a sub-conventional threat, which can be exploited by inimical elements to destabilise the region during conflict.

The man-made political boundaries and divisions during the course of political history of the region has not only isolated the people from the rest of the country, but also changed the character of once physically accessible and homogenous region. The disruption of lives of

people resultant of these political divisions are some of the main causes for rise of assertive ethnic identity politics in Northeast.

In terms of demographic dividends, the literacy rate of the North East region is higher than the national average with the population possessing some useful skillsets including proficiency in English language, thus the human resource can be harnessed and be gainfully employed. The region is one of the major hotspots of bio-diversity in the world and the tourism industry in North Eastern India has tremendous potential. The region also has the largest hydro-electric potential compared to other parts of our country.

The policy makers for the Northeast region treat the Act East Policy as panacea for all issues facing the region. By just being a gateway to South East Asia will not help the North East region. Economic interests and security concerns both are the drivers of the AEP. The increased trade relations and free markets with South East Asia, as also maximizing the reach and frequency of market economies will result in economic and social freedom. However, getting rid of the problems of insurgency and bringing stability to the region is essential. Security and development are the two sides of the same coin. Security and development should not be viewed as “mutually exclusive” but as intrinsically linked. One can argue that without development there cannot be security and vice-versa.

To summarise, the NER needs to be harnessed to reap the dividends of its strategic location. Following issues which apparently stymie the region from unlocking its full potential needs to be addressed: -

- (a) **Insurgency**. The security situation prevailing in Manipur, Nagaland and parts of Assam due to insurgency which has been accentuated by porous borders and easy availability of arms from across the international border for armed movements and criminal activities needs resolution. The problem of insurgency has become the stumbling block in the course of development. It foundered every development strategy and hampered all the developmental works in the region.
- (b) **Ethnic Differences**. Multiple ethnicities and their respective aspirations pertaining to autonomy, greater political power and an urge to control larger geographical areas disregarding present boundaries have made the region into a tinderbox. Social disconnect and ethnic differences within the region have also hampered fructification of various peace processes initiated in the past.

(c) **Xenophobia**. The issue of migration from across the borders has become a cause of considerable concern and xenophobic sentiments run high especially in states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The indigenous people of the region have failed to reconcile to the current realities wherein demographic composition in various parts of the region have been altered for good. This has resulted in confrontations between various groups in the past and issues of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) are very sensitive and emotional.

(d) **Development**. Lack of infrastructure and connectivity has prevented physical and psychological integration of people of the region with national mainstream. The progress of various projects undertaken within the region and with neighbouring countries has been painfully slow. This reflects the lack of commitment on part of all stakeholders.

(e) **Access Restrictions**. Inner Line Permit system and restricted area permit system applicable to some states of the region viz Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, have not allowed free access to the region and been a barrier to local development, tourism, trade and investment.

Having ascertained the geo-strategic importance of the region, the subsequent chapters focus on the issues of ethnicity and insurgency as relevant to the states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. In the end, possible solutions for peaceful management and eventual conflict resolution in the region have been explored.