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India's "Look East" Policy: Reaching Southeast Asia via Northeast India

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At the start of the 1st India-ASEAN Car Rally at Guwahati in Assam on 22nd November 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh referred to India's Northeast as a gateway to the 'Asian Century'. He expressed his desire to forge deeper engagement with ASEAN through enhanced interaction between India's northeastern states and the South-east Asian grouping in the presence of ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong and several other dignitaries from the ASEAN states. Over 250 participants in over 60 vehicles will cover 8,000 km across India and eight ASEAN countries including Singapore over 20 days before finishing on Indonesia's Batam Island in the first week of December. This inaugural car rally is an important step in India's ambitious plan to link its northeastern region with Southeast Asia.

India's landlocked Northeast comprises the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. They are connected with the rest of India by the 22 kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor and is often seen as India's "Mongoloid fringe". Lying at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, this region is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from the so-called "Aryan-Dravidian mainstream" India. In fact, the 32 million people of this Indian region share more commonalities with their Southeast Asian counterparts than with their fellow men and women in the rest of India. This region is also home to over 200 ethnic and tribal groups who belong to the Southeast Asian culture zone that includes the Assam Valley, northern parts of Myanmar and Thailand, and the Yunnan province of China. Unlike their counterparts in the rest of India who speak languages belonging to the Indo-European and Dravidian family of languages, a large number of people from the northeast speak languages belonging to the Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Myanmar, which is geographically contiguous with parts of northeast India stretching over 1,600km, forms the land bridge that connects India with Southeast Asia.

This region has historically resisted integration with the rest of India. The Ahom kings of Assam fought the Mughals in the valley of the Brahmaputra, the Tripura kings fought the Bengal sultans, and even the British who encountered fierce resistance from the Naga and Mizo tribesmen in the form of guerilla wars agreed to limited administration of the region after the traditional tribal chiefs accepted British suzerainty. Today, New Delhi is up against almost forty armed separatist groups in the region. The recent political storm in Manipur over the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that gives the Indian security forces wide-ranging powers to arrest and detain 'separatists' is only the latest manifestation of an old problem plaguing this region. New Delhi's long-standing quest therefore is to integrate this region

with “mainstream” India.

In 1992, India’s then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao instituted a “Look East Policy” that sought closer economic (and to a lesser extent security) ties with maritime Southeast Asia. However, it is only in more recent times that India has opened up to the potential of economic integration of its northeastern region through joint economic co-operation and development with mainland Southeast Asia. India has finally begun to realise that economic integration of its Northeast with Southeast Asia will foster the region’s political integration with India.

New Delhi now plans to realise the untapped economic potential of its northeastern region that has resources for the development of paper industry, horticulture, agriculture, food processing, hydroelectric power, minerals, and oil and gas. Tourism and its infrastructure is an area of immense untapped business potential in the region that has prompted comparisons like “Scotland of the East”.

India has initiated several transnational and sub-regional fora between parts of India (including its Northeast) and Southeast Asian countries, to promote cooperation between the economically dynamic regions. In 1997, India and Thailand proposed a new organisation called BIMSTEC – Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation – as a vehicle for promoting trade and tourism in the Bay of Bengal region. In its latest avatar, BIMSTEC has become the awkwardly named Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation with the addition of Nepal and Bhutan. The members of this trans-regional grouping have agreed to co-operate on trade and investment, technology, transportation and communication, energy, tourism, and fisheries. In November 2000, India floated the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation scheme with five of its eastern neighbors – Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Through this initiative the six countries agreed to increase cooperation in tourism, culture, and education.

In spite of these fora, no meaningful cooperation with mainland Southeast Asia is possible unless India establishes connectivity between its northeastern states and the rest of India as well as parts of Southeast Asia. India’s land-locked northeast needs to have access to the outside world and this is possible only if it is linked with mainland Southeast Asia just beyond its borders.

The 1st India-ASEAN Car Rally is in fact the precursor to a 1,400km-long highway proposed in April 2002 that will link India, Myanmar, and Thailand. This highway will eventually be connected with Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Although northeastern India, Myanmar, and Thailand are geographically contiguous, poor physical connectivity hinders them from reaping full benefits of cross-border overland trade. So far, the only direct land route between India and ASEAN is the 160km-long road linking Moreh in Manipur with Kalewa in Myanmar that was built in February 2001. Through this rally India aims to convey the message to Southeast Asia that both regions have a very good reason to forge closer ties. India hopes to shed the perception held by many Southeast Asians and Indians alike who view the two regions as being “very far” from one another.

However, New Delhi needs to treat this as the first step in a broader and wider engagement with Southeast Asia. In the next leg of this engagement, India must establish rail, riverine, and air linkages as well as modern telecommunication linkages with mainland Southeast Asia. Apart from being a sports event, this rally hopes to attract commercial interest in the infrastructure along the route and also aims to promote business and developmental activities.

Closer ties with Southeast Asia are a priority for India, a growing economic power that is determined to break out from the South Asian geostrategic bottle it finds itself locked in. India is also keen to deepen ties with Southeast Asia to balance the growing influence of China – its long-term strategic competitor in Asia. Southeast Asia stands to gain by involving India to balance China, as this would give the smaller countries of the region enough strategic space to pursue their own foreign policies. Closer engagement with India will also be economically beneficial to both.

Additionally, India can play a substantial role in the region's "Initiative for ASEAN Integration" which is targeted at helping the lesser developed countries of the grouping – Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam – catch up with the rest of ASEAN. India's engagement with Southeast Asia will be incomplete without the full participation of its northeastern states.

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