

# ISAS Brief

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## **Northeast India-Myanmar: Search for Cooperation and New Approaches<sup>1</sup>**

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The eager expectations and hopes of the people of Myanmar belie the fragile peace that exists in the country. There is immense desire to take the relationships with neighbouring countries a step further; and India is a country with which there is perceivably tremendous unrealised potential. Developing the infrastructure to enable greater people-to-people connectivity and trade between the Northeast Region (NER) of India and western Myanmar is of particular interest within Myanmar. The Indian Government's own desire to open the NER as a way of creating economic dynamism that would take the region forward into a new development paradigm coincides with the political reforms in Myanmar, giving both countries a larger canvas for their relationship. Yet, this is a complex region with shared security and development challenges; cooperation of both sides can bring windfall benefits to the lesser developed regions in the two countries.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects the views exchanged at the workshop organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, and the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), on the theme of "Connecting India to ASEAN: Opportunities and Challenges in India's Northeast and Myanmar", in Yangon on 18 February 2014.

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At a workshop held recently in Yangon, Myanmar, by the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in collaboration with the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), retired and serving Myanmar officials shared the dais with former dissidents and spoke in unison about their country's role as a land bridge connecting India to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Participants from Myanmar emphasised the cultural proximity of the people in the border regions of their country with those from Northeast India; the need to build on those connections was highlighted.

### **Uneasy History: An Evolving Look East Policy**

In line with the perception about India's slowness and inability to deliver on its promises in time with regard to its engagement with ASEAN, participants conveyed feelings of disappointment over the fact that, despite India having a Look East Policy (LEP), the land connectivity aspect was overlooked and economic development in the India-Myanmar border region has been excruciatingly slow.

However, this needs to be placed in the context of India's own imperatives that led to the LEP which at the time of its initiation had an entirely different basis, mostly in terms of looking for investments from the larger ASEAN region to meet a falling foreign exchange reserve. Secondly, India's own relationship with Myanmar also saw ups and downs in the backdrop of the latter's clampdown on democracy. Thirdly, New Delhi's initial emphasis on security concerns in the NER meant that India's engagement with Myanmar was largely security-centric with an attempt to flush out insurgents with bases on the Myanmar side of the border. Fourthly, for a long time, even after the initiation of the LEP, there was a westward orientation among the Indian establishment.

Today, an evolved LEP places much more emphasis on India's Southeast Asian neighbours and provides for cooperation on a much larger range of issues that includes border area development, trade and development of infrastructure.

## **Leveraging Connectivity**

Much has been written about the type of economic and social development that this region can reap with the development of infrastructure and cooperation on both sides, within a given set of assumptions and based on classical development theories. These were echoed at the workshop; but the underlying assumptions upon which these earlier studies were based, particularly the need to ensure the alignment of domestic efforts, were brought into considerable focus.

On the one hand, even as the development of physical connectivity-infrastructure is being planned for, there is an equal need to ensure that non-physical infrastructures including custom procedures are developed on both sides and that domestic policy on both sides must be aligned with the primary purpose of the larger connectivity plans. Simultaneously, even on the issue of physical infrastructure, there is a need for corresponding developments on both sides of the border to ensure that centres of manufacturing and supply hubs are connected to each other.

At a time when many parts of Asia have developed strong production networks, there is an opportunity for NER and Myanmar to join and build upon a process where a measure of success has already been achieved. Given that both regions have a greater concentration of small and medium enterprises, with largely agricultural-output-based economies, the governments of both sides can play a role in developing industries that can eventually cooperate and reap the benefits of scale.

## **Security and Border Issues**

Yet, to ensure the success and sustainability of the development projects and cooperation initiatives in the region, policies need to be made on the basis of an understanding of the obstacles that have held the region captive. Just as the shared opportunities are enormous, the regions also share many common problems. Factors leading to ethnic-based insurgencies and the politics of identity resonate across both sides of the border; and irredentist movements impact efforts of both central governments. Features of harsh geographical terrain and low economic and social development facilitate similar movements and exploitation of grievances by

insurgents on both sides. Even the 55-or-so types of weapons used by groups in Myanmar and India are similar and reported to be from the same sources.

The insurgency in the entire region has created an economy of its own – the collection of levies, control of drugs- and arms-trade have enabled several groups to run their own ‘governments’ – and they therefore continue to obstruct peace and development. It is important to develop a positive narrative and a discourse backed by government action to wean young people who may be inclined to join the insurgents.

Whether it is in the conduct of a military operation to dismantle camps of the insurgents or in the implementation of development programmes, the cooperation of both countries is necessary. On the ground, it is crucial for border forces to work with development agencies on both sides; and mechanisms to share knowledge of conflict resolution and peace management need to be developed.

India’s own experience of success in fighting insurgents has depended to a large extent on its ability to garner cooperation of neighbouring countries. This can be seen in the case of Bangladesh; and the joint operation with Bhutan has been particularly successful in weakening the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Assam has indeed seen a reduction in violence; and while the Mizo insurgency was resolved through dialogue, Tripura is today considered a peaceful state. Myanmar’s own four-stage strategy to tackle conflict is bearing fruit.

On a bilateral front, India and Myanmar however continue to have issues regarding border; and needless to say, a clear and defined border in the form of an early agreement on the issue is a precursor to building connectivity.

### **Sub-Regionalism: A New Approach**

Despite the fact that much of the strategy for the region has been framed in the larger context of India-ASEAN relations or the India-China geopolitics, many of the issues are transnational but limited to the region. Whereas, for instance, the connectivity projects have been based on the assumption that they will carry goods and people from the rest of India to all parts of ASEAN,

initial research shows that most of those exchanges will happen through existing and upgraded routes such as the Mekong-India Economic Corridor, a freight corridor that will link India to Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and other countries through land- and sea-infrastructure mainly from Chennai in South India and Dawei in Myanmar.

Given this, there is a case to think in terms of connectivity between Northeast India and western Myanmar in the context of a larger sub-region that will include Bangladesh and possibly southwest China, where the issues and opportunities are common and continuous.

Inevitably, a discussion on India's relationship with its Southeast neighbours brings comparison with China, in this case, Yunan, and how the opening through Myanmar has provided the landlocked region a way forward in terms of economic development. While there are different dynamics that underpin the two regions and it might not entirely be fair to make that comparison, perhaps some lessons can be learnt.

The sense in Myanmar is that, for now, there is a tremendous willingness to learn and try what works. There is a discernible realisation that a window of opportunity has opened in Myanmar; and in their own seemingly slow-paced manner there is some urgency with which the people of Myanmar seek to seize that opportunity. The opening up of Myanmar has in turn created a new opportunity for the NER. Both countries need to cooperate on all fronts to get the most out of this situation.

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