

Northeast Borders and Geo-Politics of South Asia: a Threat to India's Security and International Relations

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Abstract

The proposed paper is an insight of border and other geo-political issues that exist between North-eastern part of India and neighbouring countries of South Asian region¹. The paper highlights how due to geographical situation of Northeast vis-a vis South Asian region, it was in the interest of British to keep the borders, cut off from hostile South Asian neighbours namely, Bhutan, Nepal, China and Myanmar (earlier called Burma). The paper examines the consequences of political and social unrest arising out of border issues between India and the strategic South East Asian neighbours with the help of three case examples. The neighbours are reluctant to have a focussed problem-solving approach towards border issues and we as a nation are becoming more concerned about reaching a solution so that a concentrated effort can be made in achieving cooperation, peace and solidarity in South Asian region. This concern is also owing to growing Chinese influence and domination over the region. The paper concludes by reflecting on India's Look East Policy, which aimed to foster closer ties with Southeast Asian nations and became one of the most important cornerstones of foreign policy. With Act East Policy of BJP Government taking over Look East policy, geo-politics of South Asian region is increasingly taking more of an economic turn, rendering borders as significant and immaterial, both at the same time. The borders are rendered significant because of the political repercussions and immaterial due to pressing economic needs of overseas market for both labour and goods.

Keywords: Northeast borders, South Asia, Geo-politics, India's security, International relations

1. North-East India borders and geo-politics of South Asian region: An overview

The geographical situation of Northeast states and South Asian region is such that

one part is inevitably linked to the other. North-East is connected with India through a thin "chicken neck corridor" called "*Siliguri Corridor*" which makes it a vulnerable region facing regular threat

from bordering countries. (*Please refer to Map-1 given below where Siliguri corridor is shown and marked in red*). The threat is internal too on account of minimal connectivity, which renders the region isolated and neglected, away from mainstream India. Many tribes of Northeast feel themselves not as part of India and many parts of India consider northeast as a distinct region and are not able to relate to its people and culture. Several secessionist movements, existence of insurgent groups and violent uprisings are a testimony to this fact.

On three sides of the “*Siliguri corridor*” are three independent countries viz, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Left to themselves, these countries will not muster enough courage to invade India. But if on the promptings of China, they make it a common cause and capture this corridor, India will lose seven states in one stroke. This is not an imaginary situation. China is harassing Bhutan on the issue of border between these two countries. The manifested aim of China is to reach this corridor through tactical border alignment with Bhutan. Alternatively, if this is not possible, to secure a foothold in Bhutan, this can be used as a springboard to reach

this corridor. Since the signing of a defence pact in 2002, China has emerged as a key source of weaponry for Bangladesh. China is involved in developing ports, power plants, bridges, and road links between Kunming and Chittagong Hill Tracts through Myanmar.

Pranab Mukherjee, External Affairs Minister of India at a Seminar on Look East Policy organised by the Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, Shillong on 16 June 2007 commented: ***“Geography is no longer a buffer. Events taking place across borders near and far, impact on a much more direct manner on us. In some cases, such developments affect our bilateral relations and regional relations; in other cases, they affect our economic and social fabric..... India is aware of the geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and South-East Asia. I am convinced that by gradually integrating this region through cross-border market access, the North Eastern states can become the bridge between the Indian economy and what is beyond doubt the fastest growing and dynamic region of the world.”***²



Map-1: Siliguri corridor between India and Northeast

(Source: <http://orientalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Chicken-Neck-India.jpg>)

In the age of globalization and liberalization, when borders are becoming meaningless from economic and social standpoints, the region is seemingly becoming interdependent economically and socially. For instance, workforce from Nepal and Bangladesh has a huge demand in India because of the common language and cultural affinities. Dr. Jyoti Prasad Das³ rightly comments, “*The NER is a victim of bad geography. But from a geo-economic standpoint, a difficult geography can spring up commercial surprises with developmental spin-offs. The region is at the crossroads of India and Southeast Asia. It is a bridgehead between India and the vibrant economies of Southeast Asia, including southern China. It shares borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan and makes up close to 40% of India’s land borders with its neighbours.*”

Northeast India’s isolation from its neighborhood has much older roots: that which came about as a result of the advent of Western dominance over sea routes and over global trade and more particularly the British conquest of the region and the decisions to draw lines between the hills and plains, to put barriers on trade between Bhutan and Assam and to treat Myanmar as a strategic frontier-- British India’s buffer against French, Indo-china and China. *While the British colonial rulers built a major new transportation infrastructure, aimed primarily at taking tea and other resources out of Assam, the disruption of old trade routes remained colonialism’s most enduring negative legacy.*⁴

*In the context of South Asia, the concept of great nations and little nations has been propounded.*⁵ The “great

nationalism” has been viewed as the assimilation of different groups, communities and regions into a national whole which is considered as the cultural mainstream. The “little nations” refer to the existence of various identities based on religion, language, culture, region, or developmental divides. *These sub-national identities fear their submergence in the great nationalism. Therefore, they tend to assert upon their distinct identity and struggle for its preservation.*⁶ Today, the situation of Northeast in India can be referred to as that of “little nations” struggling for distinct national identities. The end result is culminated in form of transnational migration, thereby making its borders porous. Lack of clearly defined borders results in illegal cross-border migration, drug trafficking, human trafficking smuggling, etc and brings threat to India’s security and proves a hurdle in sound international relations.

From economic point of view, borders tend to distort markets, thanks to tariffs and other rigidities. Producers avoid locating industries near a border since trade barriers limit the market for goods and the area that supplies inputs. It is more rational to locate in an area that is closer to the core of the domestic market. In Northeast India, we have heard arguments based on the logic of the border effect being made during controversies about the location of public enterprises. The ‘border effect’ thus leads producers to locate industries away from international borders. Not just producers but this often leads to tussles between state and central governments like the way it happened in case of oil refinery which was to be set up in Guwahati. Due to geographic proximity with South Asian neighbours and as a

perceived threat, Nehru insisted on setting the refinery at Barauni, Bihar as against the wishes of then Assam government. It would be relevant to quote Nani Gopal Mahanta. He stated, *“Nehru cited defense reasons for not setting refinery in Assam. In a letter to the Assam Chief Minister, he made clear his disapproval of the Assam Congress’s opposition to the Barauni refinery and stated that Defence Ministry cited reasons of national security to have the refinery in Bihar.”*⁷

But if one begins to imagine the economic integration of Northeast India with surrounding areas in neighbouring countries -- going well beyond border trade in a few selected items -- the calculations would obviously be different. Border regions will cease to be border regions in any meaningful economic sense. Economic integration could bring about a spurt of economic activities. The removal of trade barriers and harmonization of tariffs on third country products could make border regions attractive sites for investments once we take into account full access to new cross-border markets. Such effects are, of course, not inevitable. Yet the disappearance of the border effect is bound to open new economic opportunities.

Some of the spectacular examples of the impact of economic integration on border areas can be seen in North America. The border regions of northern Mexico have benefited enormously from the integration of Mexico’s economy with that of the United States as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). There has been manufacturing boom in northern Mexico as a result of NAFTA. It was not only the result of US companies moving south of

the border to take advantage of low labour costs, but many Asian producers have also moved to the region in order to produce for the US market.⁸

2. Ethnic affiliations of Northeast with South Asians: A threat to India's security

India's Northeast is verily a "museum of nationalities" that makes it a truly tribal Diaspora. The mere presence of tribes in a region does not make it any different from other areas of the country. What is of special importance is that tribes living in the seven sisters have ethnic affinity with the countries of South Asia, particularly with Myanmar, Thailand and South China. For instance, Chakma tribes are present in Northeast as well as Chittagong in Bangladesh, Myanmar and other parts of South Asia as well. It is a fact of history that the entire region comprising the seven sister states is inhabited by people of Mongolian stock. The people living in South Asia too are Mongolian by ethnicity and this creates an affinity between the tribes of Northeast India and South Asia. Nani Gopal Mahanta⁹ mentions, "*A majority of the armed rebellion in Northeast region are led by people of Mongoloid origin. In other words, the indigenous Northeastern people of Mongoloid origin whose roots spread out in the Southeast Asian region are yet to feel comfortable with the idioms of the Indian nation-state.*"

Ethnic affiliations with the people of bordering countries makes the people of northeast India in inmate touch with bordering nations. This retards national sentiments amongst them and has given rise to secessionist tendencies and the threat of terrorism looms large on this

region thereby impeding growth trajectory and inviting interference of hostile neighbours which is distressing. This anti-Indian stance in north-east has received full support from India's hostile neighbours China and Pakistan. Since, China's borders meet the Indian borders, the trigger happy Chinese are too glad to supply arms and ammunitions to the India's insurgents. They encourage them to cross the border and receive guerrilla training in China. The idea is to create dissatisfaction against India.

3. Consequential effects of Northeast Borders on India and South Asian neighbours

Being the most developed of all South Asian countries; India has been the most sought after destination by immigrants from neighbouring countries. Due to this influx of migrants, India has been facing numerous social and political consequences which affects not only India's sovereignty as a nation but changes the dynamics of South Asian region as a whole. Three cases of social and political consequences due to Northeast borders and geo-politics of South Asian region have been picked up and discussed below:

a) Chakma migrants and straining Indo-Bangladesh relations:

Chakmas were majorly inhabited in present day Mizoram (earlier Lushai Hills) of Northeast part of India since, thousands of years even before the independence. Parts of Mizoram together with Chittagong Hill Tracts formed part of Chakma Kingdom. Before independence, Tripura was the neighbouring Kingdom to Chakma Kingdom due to which many Chakmas were found

to be migrating between Tripura, Mizoram and Chittagong. Chakmas are said to be migrating from Arakan also which is still in territory of Myanmar, though there are various other theories related to migration history of Chakmas.

The geography of Chakma kingdom was such that it shared the borders with East Pakistan and Burma both. Pakistan was weary of the fact that Chakmas wanted to be part of Indian Union and they feared Chakma presence in the region. This acted as a big blow to the smooth relationship between newly created Indian and Pakistan unions, later on Bangladesh as well. Obviously, the result was politics at international level where Pakistan used military force to spread its control in the Chittagong region, which was otherwise administered autonomously before independence. At the time of independence, many young Chakma leaders and intellectuals had taken shelter in various parts of Northeast, especially Tripura who later on became Indian citizens.

During 1964, Chakmas were forcefully expelled from Pakistan in lieu of construction of Kaptai Hydrel dam project where lands of many Chakmas got submerged in water including, the Chakma Royal Palace. Many Chakmas again took shelter in various parts of India, like West Bengal, Tripura, Mizoram, Assam, Shillong, etc. Thousands of Chakma families who migrated to India were rehabilitated in NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) by the then Indian Government. This further acted as a big blow to India's

security and hostile relations between India and East Pakistan. There was a large scale religious persecution of Chakmas from East Pakistan and Northeast borders were the most sought after destination for them (due to common borders).

Further, China lays its claims on Arunachal Pradesh, (where Chakmas are being rehabilitated) as South Tibet. There is a fear of border cross over by Chinese anytime in the region as Chinese has started showing Arunachal on their map. Thus, Arunachal has become bone of contention between China and India, again due to geo-politics of the South Asian region. Indian Express¹⁰ statement in the year 2011 is a testimony to this happening contention where Chinese claimed that residents of Arunachal do not need visa for travelling to Arunachal: ***“There is no change in our visa policy for residents of Arunachal Pradesh. China does not issue visas to officials from that state and will still not do it. For non-officials, we only issue stapled visas, the official said.”***

Because of racial and cultural affinities, cross-border migration is a regular affair between many neighbouring South Asian nations. For India, its north-east borderlands which have been convulsed by insurgencies in Nagaland and Assam, and have a restive population in Manipur, remain vulnerable to Bangladesh and even Chinese manipulation. This region (surrounded by Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, China and Bhutan and geographically isolated from the rest

of the country) has been second in importance only to Kashmir, and therefore, has been a persistent thorn in Indo-Bangladesh relations.

At the strategic level, Bangladesh's attitude to India swung from attraction to aversion. This inconsistent policy orientation in large part mirrors its increasingly conflicted geo-political identity in South Asian region. India's security preoccupations in its north-eastern borderlands, abutting Bangladesh and China have not made bilateral relations any easier. Assam with the largest linguistic community in India's north-east, provides good example of how India's sovereignty and identity concerns clash with Bangladesh's changing strategic and identity interests.¹¹

Chakma presence in Mizoram off lately has created domestic disturbance as Mizos see Chakmas as foreigners because of their outgrowing number in the region now. Chakmas are treated as second class citizens in their own land. This has led to secessionist tendencies and again proving a threat to nation's integration and security as well as sound relations with immediate South Asian neighbours like Bangladesh and China.

- b) **ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) insurgency in Northeast and Bangladesh links:** Pakistan through its ISI has operational pockets in Bangladesh where from the assist the Indian insurgents. For that matter, the anti-Indian elements even in Bangladesh are in cohort with the Indian subjects. For long, Paresh Baruah of ULFA had

clandestine headquarters in Bangladesh. The money which ULFA has gathered through extortion rackets in Assam was put into circulation in Bangladesh.

The ULFA and Bodo insurgents were having a privileged sanctuary in Bangladesh, where they have invested their ill-gotten money in building garment factories and star category hotels which not only give employment to Bangladesh labourers but the sons of Bangladeshi politicians and bureaucrats too get cushy jobs in these hotels and factories. For Bangladesh, it was advantage all the way because they got huge investment without any effort. The insurgents were living there at the mercy of Bangladesh government which knew that eventually the investment made by anti-India insurgents has become the property of Bangladesh.

As the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) came under pressure from the security forces, it made a dramatic turn around and instead of demanding the ouster of illegal migrants from Bangladesh; its top leaders sought shelter in Bangladesh. They depend on the aid from the Bangladesh and Pakistan intelligence agencies for the very survival of their separatist movement.¹² Hence, they are advocating recognition of the contribution of the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to Assam's economy. On the other hand, they are demanding that the Hindu speaking migrants from Bihar quit Assam. Thus, they are soft on Muslim immigrants from a foreign

country Bangladesh and seek the ouster of Hindu Bihari migrants.

The ULFA cadres have been expelled from Bangladesh by the government of Sheikh Haseena Wajid and they have now sought sanctuary in Myanmar. Paresh Buruah today, is hiding somewhere in the jungles of Myanmar and is left secluded without any overt assistance from either Bangladesh or Pakistan. The Burmese military government too is chasing this elusive insurgent. This development again is a symptom of how geography of a region is impacting the region politically, socially and economically.

*On a more general plane, a recent classification by Nicholas Van Hear divides literature on migration and refugees into 2 broad categories. At one end of the spectrum are those Van Hear calls "migration paranoics". They take the perspective of the state, see migration, largely as threat to national security, and privilege the rights and concerns of the host country or established communities.*¹³ Weiner is identified with this category or scholars. On the other hand is the category of "migratory romantic". It comprises of liberals who focus exclusively on the rights of migrants and how they are wronged. *In the context of South Asia, a useful example of this category is the Bangladesh intellectuals who, off late, have been vigorously holding the theory of Lebensraum*¹⁴, *albeit in a different context.*¹⁵

If recent happenings are any indication, the ULFA cadres are unrelenting and unrepentant and keep raising their heads again and again. They involve the authorities in peace parleys only to regroup themselves and refurbish and often not only change their tactics but their names also to hoodwink the people.

*One such name is Assam Tiger Force (ATF), which is yet another dummy incarnation of ULFA to divert public attention. AFT's self styled commander Pulin Raidingiya had stated that unlike All Assam Student's Union (AASU) and the ruling Assam Gona Parishad, AGP which regarded only Bangladesh Muslims as foreigners, ATF considers everyone from the Indian sub-continent residing in Assam as foreigner.*¹⁶

- c) **Mizo secessionist movement in Northeast:** The Mizos never fully reconciled to the idea of being part of India and they began nurturing the ambition of being sovereign and independent. The person who had led that secessionist movement was Laldenga, who had formulated the Mizo National Front (MNF) with the avowed aim of severing all ties with India and ushering in total independence. He launched a virulent anti-India campaign, twisting the meaning of India as Hindustan, to mean the abode of Hindus where the minorities such as Christians had no place.

Laldenga used to send out batches of volunteers to Pakistan for training in arms and guerrilla war activities and commando tactics. On October 30, 1965, they submitted a memorandum

to the Government of India, demanding complete independence from India. This, the Mizos said was a non-violent struggle for freedom which being denied, they began hostile activities in 1966. The same year, they made a declaration of independence.

The government of India declared MNF as an unlawful organization. Local support and inhospitable terrain helped the insurgents initially but after sometime, the military response proved decisive and MNF was torn from within. In September, 1970, Laldenga with his foreign minister visited China and was assured of Chinese help. But not all Mizos were in favour of receiving help from a communist country. The emergence of Bangladesh further crippled this movement because the safe sanctuary which East Pakistan provided to Mizo rebels ceased and the Burmese too became hostile to Mizo rebels because of their demand for a greater Mizoram which also included Burmese territory.

Mizos in Mizoram have outnumbered Chakmas which was originally the Chakma land only. Mizos have taken over all the administrative and significant political positions and consider all Chakmas as illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Chakmas are treated as second class citizens and denied from equal rights like Mizos. The complete Chakma villages are evacuated on the orders of Mizo politicians. Even the names of Chakma villages are changed to hide their historical identities. All these insurgent activities are acting as a

big threat to nation's integrity and security. On the other hand, Chakmas consider the Mizos as illegal migrants in their land and historical native place.¹⁷

In the meanwhile, Government of India also played its cards skilfully and by the Constitution (23rd) Amendment Act, 1971 conferred Union territory status on Mizoram which legally came into existence in January 21, 1972. The Congress and MNF formed a coalition government with Laldenga as the new Chief Minister and Rajeev Gandhi signed the Mizoram Accord, 1986.¹⁸

4. From "Look East" to "Act East Policy": Achieving New Directions in India's security and international relations

India's Look East Policy, which aimed to foster closer ties with Southeast Asian nations, has become one of the most important cornerstones of foreign policy. *The significance and necessity of LEP was generated by myriad by-product factors of Post –Cold War geo-political reconfiguration. It was indeed a foreign policy response of the Indian government to the unfolding power equations of the Post Cold war era. Also, such developments provided the grounds for opening up of India's economy to global capitalism. LEP, in short is a composite policy aimed at accomplishing greater economic and political tie with the countries of South and East Asia.*¹⁹ In the past few years, there has been even greater urgency for India to accelerate economic and security cooperation with South-east Asia. *Apart from the obvious economic benefits, India also wanted to send an unequivocal message to China: it wants*

*to become a key regional power and will achieve this by forging closer ties with countries in Southeast Asia to counter China's increasing dominance in the region.*²⁰

In the early 1990s, India's immediate interest in the Northeast was to foster stability and tackle the insurgency movements in the seven states. It had become well known that the Naga, Assamese and Manipuri armed groups had established clandestine networks of jungle training, camps, arms and drug trafficking routes, and an elaborate extortion system in the neighbouring Saigaing Division and Kachin State in Myanmar. After India's rapprochement with the military regime in 1993, the then Indian Foreign Secretary, J. N. Dixit, visited Rangoon and the two countries conducted a joint counter-insurgency operation called Operation Golden Bird in 1995. While the operation considerably weakened the rebel groups, Rangoon withdrew before the operation could come to a conclusion as India selected Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's pro-democracy leader, for the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. *As many of the armed groups from the Northeast continue to operate from the remote hills of Western Myanmar, much of India's engagement with Myanmar vis-à-vis Northeast was related to tackling insurgency, even to the extent of blocking the connectivity projects for fear that the insurgents may benefit from them.*²¹

Now, India's focus of attention under the LEP vis a vis the Northeast has been Myanmar also because the latter is crucial to the development of infrastructure. This is because all the proposed projects have to pass through Myanmar and India's policy

towards the country is a factor that determines New Delhi's position on the Northeast region. The changing dynamics of the two countries' relationship has an effect on the Northeast as well as New Delhi's objectives in how it should engage Myanmar. Myanmar's own domestic and foreign policies have a high potential to directly impact on several significant components of India's strategic interests. Reported among them include the protection of India's territorial integrity in the Northeast; the economic growth and development of India's remote Northeast states; the ending of long-running insurgencies in the Northeast states; India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal as well as the security of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

In addition to these, are India's energy requirements from Myanmar as it is a rich source of natural gas; Myanmar being the only land bridge between India and Southeast Asian countries; and, China's ambitions in South and South East Asia. *A number of projects have been commenced, the most important of which – the Kaladan Multi-Modal transport project, which will connect Calcutta with Sittwe port, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway.... Infrastructure at border posts like Moreh-Tamu, and the bus service between Imphal and Mandalay...*²²

Myanmar is also important to India because it is a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperative (BIMSTEC), along with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal. Interestingly, both Myanmar and India are also part of the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-

India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation). With China's increased Foreign Direct Investments in Myanmar, India will have taken every step in caution. But India has been less successful in making use of its diaspora in South Asia as compared to China. The reason for this is that historically many of the Indian were taken to these South Asian countries as plantation labourers at a very low level. This has been the case with Indians in Myanmar also.

India's collaboration with South Asia has been very late and in fact as late as collapse of Soviet Union who was India's only strategic international partner. As Thingnam Kishan Singh rightly points out, *"The East remained shut from the collective vision of India's decision makers as it adopted the policy keeping aloof from South East Asian Politics"*²³. Further, it would be relevant to mention here what Konthoujam Indrakumar states

in his essay, 'Mapping India's Look East Policy: Shifting Alignments', *"For many decades, "India thought it was far ahead of all the countries of South east Asia but the superior performance of "ASEAN Tigers" (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia) came as a rude shock to India inflicting great damage to kits image and international status"*.²⁴ After collapse of Soviet Union, India desperately needed an international alliance to maintain its position in world politics. India then looked towards South Asia and this move of India was much welcomed by United States. India has been welcomed as significant South Asian partner against China because of China's communist tendencies. An ICPS special report states, *"We missed a great opportunity to foster ties within our Asian neighbours to the east during a crucial period when the foundation stones of India's foreign policy architecture were being laid."*²⁵

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