



CONCEPT NOTE

International Conference
on
“India’s Northeast: The Bridgehead between Myanmar and India”

30 November - 2nd December 2012
Kohima, Nagaland

**Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies
(MAKAIAS), Kolkata**
Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs (GOI)
&
Government of Nagaland

RATIONALE

Myanmar is the bridge between India and Southeast Asia and Northeast India is the bridgehead between India and Myanmar. The recognition of this reality is given high priority by New Delhi in the context of changes taking place at the regional, national and local levels. Northeast India is located at a crossroads between three major economies – East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. This geopolitical location of the region has, however, not really translated into the region’s economic development. Despite the high growth in India’s trade ties with Southeast Asia and China in the recent past, the Northeast’s role has been marginal in terms of its contribution to trade and as a trade route. The Northeast has not been able to integrate and benefit from the various regional and sub-regional initiatives that neighbouring countries have created with the hope that these groupings will transform the landscape of their bordering regions. There are also several connectivity projects being constructed and others being planned to connect the Northeast with Myanmar and beyond. Another dimension is the changes at the national level. Myanmar has witnessed dramatic political changes in the recent years. The country is today in the middle of a major transition from long years of military rule to a democratic system. This has opened up new opportunities for India and Myanmar to strengthen and expand their relationship. The changes in Myanmar and the improving relationship with India will have its implications on the Northeast sooner than later. The Northeast is today in a position to take advantage of these changes taking place around it. It is in this context that the following themes are identified for this conference.

Scholars may approach their papers taking any aspect under the themes provided below. Each paper should aim at making some contribution to theory, empirical knowledge and policy.

THEMES

[I] Understanding the Changing Nature of “Frontier” and Regional Geopolitics

Over the years, particularly in the last two decades, there have been dramatic changes in the border regions. These frontiers can become major gateways in the coming years. The dynamics of change in the border regions have not been adequately understood in terms of what drives the change. There is perhaps a need to re-imagine and reinvent new concepts to define the changing nature of the borders. The enquiry under this theme needs to examine the geopolitical construct of border regions - Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar – and how the historical construct is undergoing changes. The enquiry should also map the socio-cultural-historical construct of the border regions. Northeast India shares a long land boundary with Northwest Myanmar, with the same ethnic communities living on both sides of the border. Much of the problems and issues in the region are the result of the combination of several geographical, historical and identity issues. Dealing with these issues necessarily means looking into governance issues. For too long a period, hostility and tension have characterized relations between countries that surround the Northeast region and coupled with this is also the fact that the regions adjoining the Northeast regions are poor and remote from the power centres and main economic activities of these countries. This seems to be changing rapidly of late. The economic rise of India, China and Southeast Asian countries have led to huge trade among these countries, that in turn has increased economic interdependence. With the huge potential for trade among the regional countries, there are high hopes about the prospects of the Northeast benefiting from it. As Northeast India sits at the crossroads of major economies in Asia – India, China and Southeast Asia, this is possibly true. However, this prospect operates within the larger regional geo-politics where there are questions of strategic competition and rivalry which also impinges on trade ties. The realities are further complicated by history of suspicions and anxieties about security in the regions. The enquiry into this theme should examine the larger regional geopolitics and situate Northeast India within the framework to understand how this will play out in future and what are the implications for economic development, peace and stability in the border regions. Another dimension that needs to be explored is the regional economic integration initiatives in the region including the BISMTEC, the BCIM, the Ganga-Mekong Cooperation and also India-ASEAN FTA.

[II] India-Myanmar Relations

The framework for this theme is in-built. The enquiry will focus on the evolution,

dimensions and assessment of policies in India-Myanmar relations; examine the areas of cooperation; and explore the potential of relations between the two countries. The emphasis needs to be on the current drivers of India's Myanmar policy and Myanmar's India policy. In doing so, the question of how the bordering regions can benefit from the relationship and what role they can play to further strengthen the bilateral ties need to be examined. Another dimension that also should be examined is the perspectives of Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar towards the bilateral relationship between the two countries. A further dimension that needs examination is the prospect for trans-border ties, particularly institutional collaboration between Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar in terms of development of institutional linkages, including civil society, political and academic exchange programmes across borders with the aim to understand common issues that affects border regions and examine how such collaborations can be used as vehicles to strengthening bilateral ties. An important aspect that needs to be studied is the infrastructural projects that are underway including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project (an inland waterway that links eastern ports in India to its Northeast region through Sittwe in Myanmar); the India-Thailand-Myanmar Trilateral Highway (a highway that connects India's border town Moreh with Thailand's Mae Sot through Myanmar). Another dimension that needs to be explored is the tensions between provincial and central governments in terms of conflict of interests and participation in regional diplomacy.

[III] Border Trade and Economic Cooperation : Problems and Prospects

The enquiry in border trade should squarely address two issues: the socio-economic benefits of border trade and the likely long-term impact of policy on society and environment in the border regions. This will mean that the enquiry should examine state government policies regarding border trade and assess the readiness and preparedness of the state governments in terms of providing necessary facilities, both infrastructure and institutional mechanisms, to promote border trade. A dimension that needs to be examined is the opportunities and challenges for border trade. A major aspect of border trade is the informal/illegal trade. While it is known that gun running, drug trafficking and smuggling of other goods from third countries form a major part of the illegal trade, it may be important to know what other items or goods are traded. This also will necessarily dwell on the question of border management issues. While there is increasing emphasis on opening up of borders for trade, there is also talk about fencing borders to tackle these security-related issues. The enquiry will also have to deal with the practice of "Inner Line permits" in the border regions and examine if there is need for a relook at these laws. How to reconcile these contradictory policies? Another relevant question that can be examined is while one talks of the low volume of formal border trade between India and Myanmar because of poor infrastructure, how come informal trade has not been affected

by the lack of facilities including roads and communication? Among the issues that have to be part of such as study is to assess long-term impact of trade and infrastructure policies. Various projects are currently underway such as the Kaladan transport and transit project. It may be prudent to study both the negative and positive impacts of these projects so that there are mechanisms in place to minimize any negative impact on the society and the environment. Is it time to debate on trade through borders and not just border trade? The study of border trade forms an intrinsic part of the overall prospects for developing and strengthening economic cooperation between Myanmar and India.

[IV] Ethnic Issues

Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar are multi-ethnic regions with the Naga, the Chin, the Kuki, etc. found in both regions. Most of the ethnic groups have been in conflict with their respective central governments for decades. The consequences have been widespread humanitarian issues including displacement, underdevelopment, etc. The enquiry needs to analyze the future of ethnic politics. In the backdrop of the changes taking places at regional and national levels, how will ethnic politics respond to these changes and would these changes impact the nature of ethnic politics which have been based on identity politics? In this context, it may be advisable to examine a critical question: Will the changes aggravate local conflict dynamics or will they resolve the decades-old ethnic issues? Insurgency-related issues including peace agreements and ceasefires in Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar also require to be understood, for future peace and stability. Focus should be given to explore possibilities of how people-to-people contacts could be increased between ethnic groups on both sides of the border, and to understand how ethnic commonalities can be leveraged to strengthen India-Myanmar ties. Security and development is like the chicken and egg puzzle. There is need to better understand the issue because it is often argued by both the central and state governments that there is no development in the Northeast because of the insurgency problems. This argument is based on the assumption that a prerequisite for development is peace and stability. At the same time, insurgency issues are linked to underdevelopment by the same governments. Because the region is violence-prone, it hinders development. While these arguments are not wrong if taken individually, what this argument is saying seems illogical: to end insurgency, development is the key, but development can happen only if insurgency ends. This logic is a neither-here-nor-there sort of argument. The turmoil and violence are surely issues that make the region unattractive for private investors. On the other hand, without the involvement of private players, employment cannot be created for unemployed youths, who may find joining the insurgent-groups more attractive. Can there be new approaches in dealing with such complex issues?

OBJECTIVES

An International Conference on “Myanmar: Bridging South and Southeast Asia” was held in New Delhi on 30-31 January 2012. A follow-up conference was planned to be convened in the Northeast, with the focus on bringing together academicians and scholars, Members of Parliament and regional political party leaders, and civil society activists from the Northeast and adjacent regions of Myanmar, together with adequate representation from other parts of India and Myanmar. This conference on “India’s Northeast: The Bridgehead between Myanmar and India” is a result of that plan with the aim to bring India and Myanmar closer together. The conference aims to provide a platform for scholars/experts from India and Myanmar, particularly from the bordering provinces to promote understanding, friendship, educational cooperation and research for mutual benefit. The Conference organizers propose to publish a book on India Myanmar Relations, including recommendations to help policy makers in both countries.

SCHEDULE

The conference is scheduled for 2nd December, 2012. It is proposed that all delegates arrive in Kohima on 30th November to participate in the inaugural function of the annual “Hornbill Festival” on 1st December. A half-day informal brainstorming will be held on 1st December followed by the formal Conference on 2nd December. Departure from Kohima is on 3rd December.
