

The Narrative of Events in Neighboring countries and its socio-Economic-Geopolitical impact in North East India

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Abstract— This is a paper that closely examines the turn of events in the neighboring countries with which North East region shares border and its impact on the region. It articulates the region as a melting pot of culture and also the tinder box of sensitive issue of the illegal population against the indigenous inhabitants of the region. This paper is not to justify a policy and its course of action nor to demonize a community. It is also not to condemn or justify the turn events in our neighboring countries but it is the endeavor of this paper to highlight the impact of such events to the social, economic and geo-politics of the region.

Index Terms: International borders, migration, innerline permit, CAB, indigenous Tribes, arms conflict, vote bank.

INTRODUCTION

The strategically located North East region of India comprises of 8 geographically and demographically small states. The region is mini India in diversity and of great strategic importance in achieving the goal of a place among the powerful nations in terms of its proximity to the important South east Asian nations. This is critical to India in terms of the challenges posed by the rising ever expanding Chinese policy.

The region is the melting pot of diverse ethnic groups with rich culture and traditions (Pradeep Kumar Rai) which adds to its rich natural resources and flora and fauna. The region is economically backward and agrarian in nature, demographically it is small, and politically it is unstable and insignificant at the National political arena. Does this mean that the region has no significant role in the spectrum of the National events and policies? Can India ignore the North East issues as regional at the expense of national interest? Had it been ignored, can one size-fit-all policy resolve the imbroglio issues of the region? Will not the repercussions be too expensive

for the nation? Are the burning issues of the region hinged on the events in our neighboring countries?

Can the social conflicts, the numerous insurgent groups, innerline permit, CAB and political instability of the region be not related to the overthrowing of the Tibet government by China and the claim over Arunachal Pradesh, The CAB policy to the millions of migrants from Bangladesh, the insurgent movements in Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya by the ethnic groups as a response to the loss of land and insecurity as minorities to the booming population of migrants? The insurgent groups finding safe haven in Myanmar under the Junta regime and the impact of its success of the ambitious “Act East” policy of India. Understanding of these events and issues in historical perspectives will obviously help the general public and the policy formulators to realize the significance of the regional issues and that a single blanket policy with petty political vested interest will be at the expense of the nation in the long run.

OBJECTIVE

1. To relate the imbrogliosituation of the region to the unfortunate turn of events in the neighboring country
2. To highlight the significance of the region in the larger picture of national integration and greatness.
3. To articulate that regional issue is a national issue.

CHINESE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MANEUVERING AND ITS IMPACT

China and India are neighbors with long history of advanced civilizations divided by the great

Himalayas but not isolated. These two nations are the most important components of the silk route and relationship between these two nations has always been friendly and trade oriented rather than political power struggle. But in 1950's the paradigm of relationship changed drastically with the invasion and occupation of Tibet by China and the eventual escape of 14th Dalai Lama to India on 31st March 1959.

The unexpected invasion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the North and crossing the McMohan Line in NFA on October 20, 1962 caught the Indian Government and the Army unprepared. Thus the Chinese were able to overrun the Indian troops on many fronts within a span of a month but on November 21st, they suddenly called for a ceasefire and withdrew 20 km behind the McMohan line again. This short war in which China won but lost and India lost but gained, enough damage was done in its relationship. It threw the trust and friendship out through the window.

China has been involved in the affairs of the North East by giving logistic support to the NE rebel groups (*Pradeep Kumar Rai*) and it may escalate with the support India extends to Taiwan. The Military, Economic and political policies of government of India towards NE has been China oriented realizing the social and geographical proximity of NE to China.

Can it be denied that Sikkim was annexed as a state of India on 16th May, 1975, the recent Doklam confrontation of China trying to occupy territory close to the Siliguri corridor "The throat" or the "Chicken neck" and India strongly standing up to it, was it not because of the ulterior interest of China and the shrewd understanding of India about the strategic importance the region to both the countries? How is it that when other nationalities are invited and welcome with open arms into the North Eastern states as tourists, the Chinese are restricted, pronouncing the region as restricted or protected area? Is this not a strategy in the India-China equation? Is the construction of hydro-power projects and water diversion by China in its territory not going to impact the economy of NE India and Bangladesh? Is the then "Look East" and now "Act East" policy of India not a response to the "Infrastructure and purse policy" in Bangladesh and Myanmar and "the encircling policy" of China? Is the soft stand of India towards the Military coup of

Myanmar not a diplomatic tactic that the "Act East policy" of reaching out to the South East Asian and East Asian countries and Australia is not scuttled by losing out the most important land route Myanmar to China? But in all these, the NE region is caught and left high and dry for all these decades. It will be in the interest of both the countries to adopt a policy of "Cooperation" where India must selectively open the region to China and China sheds the territorial contestation of Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet. India should stop preventing the unpreventable, and China should stop claiming the unclaimable to make the region an economic hub in the larger interest of both the countries

The geography of northeast India has been posing a major challenge to the policy makers to look at it with great political vision. The political desire of developing this region has been hampered with its geopolitical neglect, isolation and step motherly treatment. One of the major challenge is that this region has no easy access to the other parts of India except by land route through the "chicken neck" or the Siliguri corridor or by flight. Infact its proximity to the neighboring countries geographically and in culture, traditions and lifestyle region has is in itself an inherent challenge. The topographical and social ethnic diversities compounds the issues in this region and the lack of mention of this region in the academic books and ignorance of the people of mainland India does not help in national integration.

The porous international borders with the neighboring countries and its ethnic affinities with the Bhutan, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar complicates in finding lasting solution to the vicious cycle of problems social and political problems.. Bangladesh and Myanmar have been the key transit routes through which small arms made in China reaches the Northeast. The major channels in Myanmar are the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) (*Archana Upadhyay*). These two ethnic insurgent groups have acted as the interlocking chain for the illegal weapons flow from Yunnan in China via Myanmar to Northeast India, but the most effective illegal weapons trader in Myanmar is another armed ethnic group, the United War State 3 Army (UWSA).* These external linkages and the social faultlines in the North East breeds and provides lifeline to the

issues of the people of North East(Archana Upadhyay).

POLITICAL SYSTEM OF MYANMAR AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Myanmar (Burma) and the Northeast regions are neighbors and have had long history of relationship. Before the arrival of the British empire, the kingdom of Asom and Manipur records numerous encounters with the Burmese power. It is 1826, through the Treaty of Yandaboo that the Burmese were finally driven out of the region and it came under the British rule.

Myanmar is geopolitically significant to India as it stands as the center of the India-Southeast Asia geography. Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a land border with northeastern India, stretching some 1,624 km. the neighbors also share a 725kms

maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. Being the only country that sits at the intersection of India's "Neighborhood First" policy and its "Act East" policy, Myanmar is an essential element in India's practice of regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, and serves as a land bridge to connect South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is therefore in India's geostrategic interest to see Myanmar prevail as a stable and autonomous country, thereby making possible greater bilateral engagement in India-Myanmar relations.¹ It is a bridge that India cannot effort to burn or be burnt if the its policy to connect to the South East Asian countries have to come to fruition.

There is no contest in the school of thought that the various tribes of the North East region migrated through Burma over centuries including the recent settlement of the Kuki communities by the British. They were brought in as their portals and settled in areas as a buffer zones between the rudeless Naga raiders and the British subjects. Even today the migration continues due to socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in Myanmar. The origin of insurgency problem of Manipur has its root in the gifting of Kabaw valley to the Prime Minister of Burma U Nu by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru without consulting the Manipuris, the actual owners of the Land.

The bilateral border trade agreement of 1994 provides framework facilities by which trade is

carried out between India and Myanmar. Under the agreement trade is currently carried out through three designated border points one each in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. In Manipur the border trade post is at Moreh, in Mizoram it is at Zowkhathar and in Nagaland it is at Lungwa. Another trading point at Pangsau Pass in Mizoram is currently under discussion

For economic relations to improve, India and Myanmar must boost their security cooperation at the border. The more secure the border is, the greater the economic activity will be. Seeing that Myanmar is critical to its national security interest, India provides military training and conducts joint military exercises with the Myanmar army like the India-Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercise, by which India had trained the Myanmar Army to be able to participate in UN Peacekeeping Operations.

Recent political developments in Myanmar such as the atrocities against the Rohingya, and the military coup have send a ripple effect to the region as its immediate neighbor. India is caught in a catch-22 situation, it does not want to be seen as a neighbour that shake the blood stained hands of the Junta nor behave like a bully, high and mighty because that will turn Myanmar invariably to the hands of the Chinese which is the last thing that India would wish for.

Thus, if the situation is not handled with diplomatic care, the "Act East" policy of reaching out the South East Asian Countries and East Asian countries through Myanmar will fall flat. The long delayed strategically important Kaladan multi-modal project also may never see the light of the day. The government of India and the government of the North Eastern states need to play their card well so that our wrong approach to Myanmar will not become the Trump card of China's policy of encircling India. It needs to be remembered that many tribes and communities of the North Eastern region have strong cultural and social affinities to the people of the Myanmar and South East Asian countries and therefore it is imperative for Delhi to take the people of the NE states in policy matters relating to Myanmar.

BANGLADESH: THE ROOT OF THE TINDER BOX IN NORTHEAST

The inner line permit of 1873, The uproar over CAB 2019, the insurgency in Tripura and the change of religion in Manipur have its origin in East Bengal, East Pakistan and now Bangladesh. Surely 4-5 million of migrant population and a king converting to a new religion will have huge wave of social, economic and political impact in a region inhabited by small diverse ethnic groups.

With the Yandaboo treaty 1826, the Burmese power was driven out of Assam and it came under the control of the British and the history of Northeast region was never to be the same again. The region was considered as a Frontier area or a no man's land or uninhabited. In order to cultivate the land and extract the resources, huge population of cheap labor from East Bengal or Sylhet area and Bihar were brought in to settle in the plains of undivided Assam. These migration of labor continued even in the post independent India due to the porous border, relationship with Bangladesh and events. The war of 1965 and especially the 1971 war of Bangladesh liberation witnessed exponential increase in the Migration of both Hindus and Muslims into Indian territory especially from the Sylhet area. The issue was of less degree in Shillong, Meghalaya but nevertheless there is sizeable Bengali population as the relatively more educated Bengalis came on different professions to the British summer capital. One other major cause of migration was the Sylhet referendum on July 6 & 7 of 1947 which resulted in massive exodus.

Manipur state also has been immensely influenced by the Bengalis as the Meitei community were converted to Hinduism. In the long well recorded history of the Meiteis, they had always followed the traditional "Sanamahi" religion. This all changed with the initiation of King Charairangba (Garibniwaz) and his son King Pamheiba in 1724. King Pamheiba not only converted to Hinduism but made every effort to do away with Sanamahi by making Hinduism as the state religion.

Thus, it can be vividly observed that the major issues and challenges in the turn of events in the Northeast region whether it be culture, religion, social or politics had its root in the turn of events and influence of Bengalis and Bangladesh. It wouldn't be out of place to attribute the following issues and challenges of the region to the export of Bengal and Bangladesh;

1. The insurgent movement and arm struggle in Tripura by the minority indigenous original settlers is due to the huge Bengali migrant population of Bengal that now constitute 70% of the population occupying 90% of the territory and controlling the politics of the state. This is seen as a threat by the minority groups.

2. The contentious Inner line permit introduced by the British Empire in 1873 in the pretext of protecting the Tribal communities through the imaginary line by not allowing the new imported settlers to venture into the tribal land. In reality the imaginary line was a policy that acted as a double edged sword. It was to protect the tribal communities and at the same time to prevent them from incursion and raiding the British territory. Is the ILP not a point of contention and flashpoint in the socio-political scenario of the region even today. We have witnessed demand for imposition of ILP in Manipur, Meghalaya and at times very violent clashes over the issue of "Outsiders".

3. The differences between Vaishnavite Hindu Meitei community and Pangals in the valley and the Christian dominated tribes in the hills of Manipur is always a fault line in the geo-politics of the state.

4. The recent uproar over the CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill) 2019 was over the issue of the 4 – 5 million population supposedly illegal foreigners in the region. The bill has its root and targets the illegal immigrants of Bengal. Does the government really have the teeth and the will to implement it or is it just a political appeasement gimmick of satisfying certain communities, only time will tell.

5. The mushrooming of regional political parties to protect, preserve and promote regional interest and at the same time use it as a platform to bring to light the voice and grievances of the region. This has happened because Delhi has failed to understand the issues, challenges and sentiments of the region believing deliberately or otherwise that the issues of the region is provincial and of little national significance.

6. North East with its rich cultural diversities and ethnic communities is a melting pot of culture. But with the arrival of huge foreign migrants and their continual migration is seen by the indigenous ethnic groups as huge existential, political, economic threat. Therefore, turning the region from incredible

“Melting pot” to horrible “Boiling pot”. Any slight misadventure sparks violent ethnic conflicts.

7. Many of the insurgent groups and its top ranks find safe haven in Bangladesh. They might not be state finance or sponsored but the point is they are able to find shelter in the foreign soil due to the porous 4096 kms international border and exercise their intended mission in India.

Could it be for this reason that India reached out to Bangladesh and introduced a string of new bus services with Northeast India. During Narendra Modi's Dhaka visit in June 2015, Dhaka agreed to open two direct bus services: Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala, and Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati. Previously, a Dhaka-Kolkata bus route was opened in 1999 and a Dhaka-Agartala route in 2003. The new passenger bus services will reduce the travel distance between India's eastern and western states, and give an alternative option to the travelers who often struggle to buy the scarce air tickets.

CONCLUSION

It is without a doubt that a country cannot be devoid of the ripple effect of the neighboring countries. The ripple impact may be positive or negative, direct or indirect etc. Therefore, there is in reality no pure internal affairs since it will have an impact in the neighborhood. No wall or fence can stop the impact being felt, it may delay, reduce or control but it will impact with full force or filter through.

Can India effort to ignore the affairs, designs and policies of the neighboring countries in the North East, never. The strategic importance and the potential of the region need to be protected and promoted. There is a need not only to protect but to reach out. India need to be like a big brother who protects and looks into the interest of the neighbors but not bully for it can in turn hurt the national interest. We should never forget that “David can kill Goliath”. The growth and development and peace of Northeast region can never be achieved unless we have socially, economically, and politically stable friendly neighbors. It is a fact that a country can never be at peace on its own without ensuring peace in the neighborhood nor can it live in isolation. Can the earthquake be contained in the epicenter and not be felt all around? India will be able to further its interest only if she is able to secure, protect and

maintain mutual friendly relationship with these countries.

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