

Abstracts

Bangladesh: The Key to India's Look East

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India's Look East policy, now upgraded as 'Act East' by PM Narendra Modi, calls for a double look east. To make it successful and achieve its purpose of situating the countries under-developed and conflict laden Northeastern states at the heart of its robust engagement with South-east Asia and possibly China, India needs to first look east from its mainland to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is crucial to India for connecting its mainland to its Northeast, linked by land through a tenuous 21-kms wide Siliguri corridor, often derided as a "Chicken's Neck". Therefore the Manmohan Singh government, boosted by the establishment of a friendly regime in Dhaka under the leadership of current Pm Sheikh Hasina, undertook a quantum leap in bilateral relationship with Bangladesh. The Modi government has only carried forward the process of developing rail-road-river-cyber connectivity between India and Bangladesh and used it to strengthen such links between the mainland and the northeast through Bangladesh. Dhaka's decision to allow transit of goods through its territory to Northeast from Indian mainland was a game changer. It may take a while to operationalise and stabilize but there is no going back. It is clear that only if India can firm up its access to Northeast through Bangladesh, the next stage of 'Look East' to link up to south-east Asia and China will work. India's 'Look East; I would argue, will work not through the Chicken Neck but through Bangladesh. India is therefore prioritizing linking to Northeast through Bangladesh avoiding the 'Siliguri corridor' much as China is seeking to avoid the Malacca straits (that its strategists see as a chokepoint) and trying to develop multiple land-to-sea access through Yunnan into Myanmar and Pakistan.

This research project will seek to find answers to SEVEN key questions:

- (a) Why and how is connectivity through Bangladesh key to success of India's Look East!
- (b) The possible pitfalls in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations that can threaten the forward movement towards Look East
- (c) The present state of India-Bangladesh relations and the progress in connectivity
- (d) The crucial role of states in promoting this bilateral relations – the key role of Tripura in promoting this relationship and the gains it has faced as against other states who are yet to warm up to Bangladesh
- (e) Finally, it would be great to explore the linkages between security and connectivity in India-Bangladesh relations and its impact on India's Look east
- (f) The quid pro quo factor – how Bangladesh looks to using Indian territory to link up to the Himalayan nations like Nepal and Bhutan, specially for power, in lieu of allowing India to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh

- (g) How can initiatives like ‘border haats’ help strengthen bilateral relations by widening the ambit of stakeholders to frontier regions which provide scope for wider connectivity but often end up as regions of conflict due to myopic security-driven state policies

It will also be explored how the India-Bangladesh relationship that is crucial for Delhi’s Look East policy can also become central to an alternate vision of a South Asian federation minus Pakistan. That will have much implication for the changing geopolitics of Asia that would insulate the rest of South Asia from Pakistan and the terror fulcrum of the AF-Pak region, pushing it into the ambit of Central Asia and Middle East.

The India-Bangladesh relationship is also crucial to undermining the Two Nation theory that led to the partition of the sub-continent and continues to bedevil relations in South Asia. If a Muslim predominant Bangladesh and a Hindu predominant India can have a great relationship, it takes the wind away from the sails of those who advocate the inevitability of conflict between the successor states of British India.

The success of the Look East is key for India’s future. Not only is the East India’s Achilles Heel due to its sustained under-development and proneness to different layers of conflict, but this is also the area where Indian diplomacy has the necessary space to play out. Not in West due to the Pakistan factor that limits possibilities of bilateral ties and that of regional cooperation. In fact, if India and Bangladesh succeed in carrying their relationship to a new heights, it will help dispel fears of ‘Big Brother India’ among its smaller neighbours. An isolated Pakistan may thus feel incentivized to change track and attempt improving relations with India to avoid isolation.

The study will closely focus on (a) connectivity plans (b) integration of economies and infrastructure (c) security (d) regional cooperation in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations and also focus on how the two countries are trying to turn the ‘Chicken Neck’ into an asset rather than a liability by the recent opening of the Banglabandha-Phulbari check post that will help Bangladesh access the Siliguri Corridor to link up to Nepal, Bhutan and Upper Northeast India.

Finally it will explore the potential of this relationship to the wider process of regional integration efforts in the region through groupings like BCIM and BIMSTEC, both of which are prioritized by Bangladesh and may soon be done so by India in view of growing realization that regional cooperation even involving China may actually incentivize the process to tame conflicts by unleashing a win-win dynamics in the region.

The researcher will use both published and unpublished documents and research material as well as conduct field interviews with key officials, trade bodies, local politicians in frontier areas and other stakeholders. Visits to Bangladesh during the project is also on cards. Interviews with top officials and diplomats of both India and Bangladesh will also be lined up.