

Connectivity as defining future of India's Look East policy

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India's northeast region that shares over 5,400 km long borders with neighbour nations shares just about 25 km wide corridor (chickens neck) with mainland India. What makes matters complex is their difficult physical terrain and enormous diversity that has resulted in multiple states being formed and several other successions simmering all over. Complex history of British colonialism ending with peaceful transfer of power implying continuation of same institutions and policy orientations has kept this entire region on the boil deepening their sense of alienation. This is what make this region the critical axis around which India's 'Look East' policy was envisioned during 1990s which was aimed at making prosperity as panacea for this region and this was to be done by enhancing its 'connectivity' with the tiger economies of Southeast Asia. Meanwhile rise of China since early 1990s was to both facilitated great focus on India's 'connectivity' by launching initiative like the BCIM Regional Forum as also by impelling New Delhi to take some initiatives with Myanmar and Bangladesh in response to China's rapidly increasing engagement and presence in this region. This was also the period that saw India drifting into a phase of coalition governments where multiparty system in a federation often mean diffident parties ruling in New Delhi and provinces thereby at least providing a pretext for inaction. This was also period of 'China threat theory' making security assessments paranoid of enhancing connectivity that could be exported by Chinese both during peace (traders) and war (soldiers). No doubt, recent past has witnessed some connectivity being build across India's northeastern borders and greater connectivity between the Northeast and mainland India yet it has failed to keep pace with both rapidly progressive conceptualising as also in materialising the logistics where building 'economic corridors' has come to be the buzzword. Economic corridor basically seeks to connect investors, entrepreneurs and workforce to markets and resources and then make these nodes part of regional or even global supply chains to achieve rapid but sustainable development for all stakeholders. In principle, therefore, India has no qualms with this vision. However, the way rising China has outlined its Belt and Road Initiative -- mother of all connectivity initiatives -- has made India cautious, even reticent to become a junior partner in China's grand vision for future. China unilaterally heralding BRI by appropriating several existing connectivity projects like those that were being taken by the BCIM Regional Forum has made India stay away from BRI. ¹ But this has also resulted in India accelerating some of its own 'connectivity' projects like the Trilateral Expressway (involving India, Bangladesh, Myanmar) or Kaladan Multi Model Transport project connecting ports across Bay of Bengal. India has also revived its BBIN (Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal) transport corridor as also to build rail connectivity amongst all its provincial capitals in the Northeast which is slated to be set in motion by 2020. It is the increasing comparison with China that has since come to be the biggest detriment of connectivity initiatives of India's Look East policy even though it has since been upgraded to Act East policy with hyperactive pace of visits both to India's northeastern region as also between India and Southeast. Presence of national leaders of all the ten members of Association of South East Asian National as chief guests for the 2018 Republic Day celebrations this January no doubt reflects this new enthusiasm for connecting people and

processes from both sides and these, to broad base these covering a whole lot of sectors as also to ground these in their historical connect of culture and commerce. But China's high speed mega projects often make these India-ASEAN projects look small and slow as also have impacted their shine. But reverse is also true. With forever unpredictable president Donald Trump and increasingly assertive Xi Jinping, India and ASEAN have also found added reasons to come together and that reflects increasing focus of New Delhi in integrating Northeast into its Act East policy and most recent elections results have even removed the old disjunction between different ruling parties being in power in New Delhi and northeastern provinces. It is possible to see increasing number of flights connecting northeast to mainland cities as also infrastructure projects across northeastern region. As regards China, India continuing to stay away from BRI has downed upon Beijing of the critical significance of India in bringing both commercial viability as also political legitimacy which has seen greater cultivation of India by various Chinese interlocutors. There are also voices in India that wish New Delhi would be selective in benefiting from China's BRI by participating where it can and not throw baby with the bathwater. Its likely that coming times will see India joining BRI but on its own terms which is expected to provide a further boost to building India's connectivity, especially of its northeastern region, with much of Southeast Asia. But that may also be far in future and a potential not so easy to harness given the track record of China-India relations.