

REASSESSING INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY: INSURGENCY, STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Dr. Kangujam Sanatomba Meitei ¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science Manipur University Imphal, Manipur, India



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ABSTRACT

Ever since India initiated its Look East Policy in the early 1990s, the concern to engage with Southeast Asia had significantly increased. The end of cold war and globalization were the twin factors that informed the Indian policy makers to look eastward. India's policy shift towards Southeast Asia is guided by political, economic, strategic and security interests. Politically, India had to re-define her neighbourhood in search for an alliance after the disintegration of Soviet Union. From economic point of view, ASEAN can serve as a springboard for India's integration with the world economy. Strategically, it is imperative to counter Chinese strategic expansion in Southeast Asia. From security angle, there is a need to secure the sea lanes in order to ensure smooth passage of Indian commercial ships as well as to subdue armed insurgents in the Northeast. The Look East Policy is the outcome of the inter-play of these factors. Nonetheless, it was the failure of India's Look West Policy that proved decisive for the strategic shift in India's foreign policy. Moreover, the Look East Policy represents the crystallization of India's external response to the pressure piled up by global capital while internally India adopted economic liberalization to cope with its financial crises.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Insurgency, Security, Strategic Engagement, Border Trade



1. INTRODUCTION

The post-cold war period witnessed a tectonic shift in India's foreign policy. The pre-dominantly west-oriented policy went through a sudden transformation that resulted in the evolution of the Look East Policy. It represented a grand initiative that seeks to forge closer economic ties with the Southeast Asian countries and the Far East. The new policy was India's outward response to emerging free trade regime triggered by globalisation. Inwardly, India adopted economic liberalization under pressure from international financial institutions. The Look East Policy signalled the opening up of the Indian economy to foreign capital. Although India had long pursued the maritime Look East Policy right after independence, the introduction of a continental dimension to the policy demonstrated a significant paradigm shift.

India's Look East Policy was initiated in the year 1991, when Narasimha Rao came to power. The then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, who later became the Prime Minister was the chief architect of this policy. At that time, a foreign exchange crisis of major proportions, besides a decline in industrial production, had overtaken India. The country faced acute crisis particularly in the Balance of Payments (BoP) position with foreign exchange reserves for only one week of its needs. An urgent and acutely felt need was immediate access to substantial amounts of foreign exchange to tide over the crisis. This assistance was available on less than forbidding terms only from the international financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, with their large American and Japanese presence

respectively. India was literally under pressure from the Bretton Woods institutions to initiate economic reform as pre-condition for investment. It was a crucial factor that conditioned the Indian government to embark upon a programme of free market restructuring at home as it began to seek new markets and economic partners abroad. Such a shift in its economic policy was designed to attract foreign capital. In the process, its foreign policy also underwent drastic changes and more so in its perception towards Southeast Asia. LEP is a calculated move to integrate the Indian economy into the world economy through regional co-operation with ASEAN as the launch pad.

This paper is an attempt to re-examine the inter-play of various factors that cumulatively contributed towards the evolution of the much hyped India's Look East Policy, which under the Modi Government was rechristened as the Act East Policy. The Look East Policy, and not the Act East Policy, shall remain the focus of this paper.

2. REDEFINING NEIGHBOURHOOD AND POLITICAL RE-ALIGNMENT

Political thinkers had foretold that the Pacific Ocean would become the Ocean of the future around which human life would concentrate, like the Mediterranean in the ancient times and the Atlantic during the Industrial Revolution (Chandra, 1994, p. 339). Gorbachev also stated that the Asia Pacific region is currently the place where civilization is stepping up its pace (Chandra, 1994, p. 340). The growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region led analysts and commentators remark that the world's entering the Pacific's century. Anticipation holds the region as the focus of world politics in the 21st century. With the emerging strategic and security configuration in the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of Southeast Asia has increased manifold. The geo-political and strategic importance of the region placed it in a position to play a significant role in the maintenance of Balance of Power in Asia. This understanding led to a realization that the future of India's strategic and economic interests lie in the Asia-Pacific region. As such, India's Look East Policy can be seen as a politics of engagement with the Southeast Asian countries with the long term objective to secure a foothold in South China Sea in order to facilitate further access to the Far East. India wants to evolve a new regional arrangement where it can exercise a major role in the Asia-Pacific region.

The political developments around the globe in the post-cold war era had necessitated a change in India's foreign policy. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union from the international political scenario India had lost its only and time-tested ally. Earlier India had relied upon Soviet economic and political support. India was literally left with no reliable friend after the demise of the Soviet Union. This friendlessness had rendered it imperative for India to look for an alternative alliance and the "Look-East" was the product of the search for an alternative.

Former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral viewed India's Look East Policy as a process of redefining neighbourhood (Pradhan, 2005, pp. 33-35). The colonization of South and Southeast Asia by foreign powers had created an artificial spacio-temporal barrier between India and the East. The Japanese occupation of Myanmar across Northeast India is a critical moment which eventually led to the Indo-Myanmarese border becoming the dividing line between South and Southeast Asia (Sanjib Baruah, 2004, p. 6). The Western powers subsequently placed Myanmar within the geographical ambit of the Southeast Asian Command [SEAC] during the Second World War. Mention may also be made about the decolonization of India that had rendered the North-eastern part of India a land-locked region as a result of the 'partition'. It was the geo-strategic development in the post-War period, which to a great extent, had been responsible for cutting off India from the rest of Asia.

In the post-independence period, many factors like the development of Western led alliance, the growing ties between China and Pakistan and the Indo-Soviet alliance effectively served to cut it off from Southeast Asia for decades. India, on her part, also viewed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with suspicion and perceived it as a disguised instrument of the West. Thus, India remained isolated from Southeast Asian nations except Vietnam from mid 1950s to 1980s. The partition of India and the Cold War had serious implications in India's relations with its neighbours. Indeed, India wanted to redefine its relations with hostile neighbours due to increasing security concerns. The policy may thus be seen as a manifestation of India's desperate need to have friendly neighbours.

With the virtual end of the Cold War and the disintegration of erstwhile Soviet Union, bipolar international system was replaced by a 'New World Order'. In such a changed international situation, the relevance of the Non-aligned movement (NAM) was undermined to a great extent. The Non-aligned movement had been emasculated by the collapse of leadership with a leading country like Yugoslavia embroiled in its own identity crisis. The Gulf War had greatly weakened the movement and the demise of the USSR accentuated the crisis. Robert Mugabe, the President of Zimbabwe once doubted the continuing validity of the movement in the new international situation. The Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohammad of Malaysia even went to the extent of rechristening the NAM and reformulating its principles and objectives. Earlier, NAM was used by India as an alternative to bloc politics to enhance its national interests. However, bilateral disputes as well as the decreasing popularity of the NAM and its relevance in the changing international scenario compelled India to opt for a new political alliance with the Southeast Asian countries that crystallized in the evolution of the Look East Policy as an alternative to NAM.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also created a sort of 'power vacuum' in the Asia-Pacific region. As China made swift attempts to fill in this vacuum, India could not remain a silent spectator. India wanted to check the expanding influence of China in Southeast Asia and East Asia. It is clear that India faces stiff competition from China for influence in Southeast Asia. India looked forward to American support as the United States also sought to impede China's increasing links with ASEAN (Kumara, 2005). As such, India's Look East Policy also evolved partly as a strategy to contain China. Analyst had observed that New Delhi's current interest is in building strong, pragmatic partnerships born out of growing economic interdependence and a possible Indian role in a US led containment of China. At the moment, there is convergence of interests between India and the U.S. in so far as the containment of China is concerned.

3. ASEAN AS INDIA'S SPRINGBOARD

India's Look East Policy is an external component of India's economic reforms initiated in 1991. As stated earlier, India came under strong pressure from the international financial institutions and the Western countries to go for economic liberalization as a precondition for investment. India had to make certain compromises with its traditional path of economic development in favour of a more overt capitalist model. Being confronted with acute financial crisis India did not have much option but to succumb to the dictates of the global capital. In this sense, India's economic liberalization is a response to globalization and LEP is a part of India's economic adjustment to the changing international economic order. In this sense, LEP is a capitalist project.

India's engagement with ASEAN as part of the Look East policy began with Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1992 that was upgraded to a Full Dialogue Partnership in 1995 and a membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. India was elevated to the status of strategic partnership in 2012. Apart from this, new initiatives for regional groupings like Mekong-Ganga Co-operation and the BIMSTEC emerged. Pankaj Jha observes that BIMST-EC is an important element in India's "Look East" strategy and adds a new dimension to India's economic co-operation with Southeast Asian countries (Jha, 2005, pp. 49-51). In fact, such a trend towards regional integration is part of the larger process of globalization as Dr. Manmohan Singh stated in the first BIMST-EC Summit held on 1st July 2004 in Bangkok that regional integration is not antithetical to globalization, but can be a useful building block. In order to survive and catch up with the pace of globalization, vigorous engagement with the ASEAN became inevitable. In this regard, an Indian business professional said that if India wanted to truly get into the globalization bus, it should first try and get into the shuttle of ASEAN. Through ASEAN, India wants to get access to the Asia-Pacific region for promoting India's strategic and economic interests. This can be seen in the official declaration made by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1994 during his visit to Singapore. He categorically mentioned that the Asia-Pacific could be the springboard for our leap into the global market place (Jaffrelot, 2003, pp. 35-68). From this, it becomes quite obvious that the policy of looking eastward was pursued with a long term vision of integrating the Indian economy with the international market through the Southeast Asian countries.

Certain positions had maintained that economy has been the prime mover of India's Look East Policy (Oinam, 2005, p. 93). The Look East Policy of India was formulated on account of its own weak economy and the rise of Chinese economic power. In fact, China has overtaken the US in spreading its influence in the ASEAN in political, economic and strategic terms. ASEAN perception has begun to view China less of a threat and more of a partner. In the Asian financial crisis of 1997 China refused to devalue its currency in order to help stabilize the Asian currency market. Such a benevolent attitude of China has increased its leverage in the ASEAN. Many have noted the immense potential of China-ASEAN free trade agreement. If it materializes, it would change the face of Asia and it would be the largest free trade market in the world of about 1.7 billion people. It is a mighty prospect India cannot ignore. (ICWA, 2003, pp. 34-40). Such kinds of economic competition from China also compelled India to pursue its Look East Policy.

Another factor that shaped India's LEP is the failure of SAARC as a regional economic bloc. SAARC has been greatly incapacitated due to the persisting conflict between India and Pakistan. It is a fact that Pakistan always tried to use the SAARC forum to discuss bilateral issues despite India's strong opposition to such moves. Chronic internal political

disputes and wrangling had stalled any meaningful dialogue between the member-countries for evolving prospective regional co-operation and economic integration. Such a failure induced India to find an alternative regional forum and the ASEAN happened to be the most viable option for India. In fact, since the time when India's Look East Policy was first conceived, the total trade between India and ASEAN countries has significantly increased. It emerged as the third largest foreign investor in India after the US and the EU. Presently ASEAN has as much to offer, perhaps, more to India than India has to offer to ASEAN. Hence, the relationship is seen mutually beneficial in largely economic terms (Sheereen, 2005, pp. 7-15). The results of India's effort to attract East and Southeast Asian capital and to develop financial links have not been negligible.

Southeast Asia is a region with high economic potential. It has a number of export items like rice, tin, rubber, petroleum etc. The region is also rich in vegetation and minerals. The area covering Burma, Thailand and Vietnam is known as the 'rice bowl' of Asia. Today, the Asia-Pacific region has emerged as the fastest growing region. As mentioned above, it is believed that the focus of international trade will shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The region has emerged as the largest repository of raw materials, manpower, market and manufacturing. The region accounts for 40% of global trade and is the market of about 3000 million people and 60% of world's gross national product. Thus, the abundant natural resources and the future prospect of international trade in this region greatly shaped India's Look East Policy.

Another economic factor accounting for India's Look East Policy is the need for alternative energy sources. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent Gulf War immensely affected India in terms of petroleum imports. After the 1991 War in the Persian Gulf, the European Union and particularly the United States began to exercise monopoly over the production and sale of petroleum. India's energy policy could no longer rely upon the Middle East and this changing international situation warranted a radical shift in India's oil diplomacy. In this regard, it may be noted that the Southeast Asian region has huge petroleum reserve. So, it is hoped that Southeast Asia could provide India with energy necessary for its industrial expansion. The most potential sources of oil and gas are Burma and Indonesia. It is pertinent to note that concerns for energy sources also constitute a key factor in shaping India's Look East Policy.

4. STRATEGIC COMPETITION WITH CHINA

India's Look East Policy is guided more by defence and strategic interests and less by economic compulsion. India's desire to extend its influence in a region where China is rapidly increasing its influence and the prospect of access to Northeast for tourism and international markets can be perceived as strategic factors in the formulation of India's Look East Policy. The rise of China as a military power in Asia and its expanding influence in the Asia-Pacific region, more particularly in Southeast Asia is a matter of great concern for India. Therefore, developing strategic ties with the Southeast Asian countries to counter Chinese dominance in the region has become a national priority and a capstone of India's Look East Policy. China's help to the Myanmar government with telecommunication network in Northern Myanmar is seen by India with suspicion (Oinam, 2005, p. 97). There is also a Chinese plan to construct a 1,350 km railway track through Laos, Myanmar and China going up to Thailand. Both the countries have also exchanged high level visits. Ever increasing Chinese presence all along the Myanmar border is perceived as a direct threat to India's security.

Both China and India have ambitions to play more important roles in the region rendering Myanmar an area of contention between the two powers. For China, Myanmar is an important component of its strategy to prevent its encirclement by the US and its allies and to secure vital naval routes to oil supplies from the Middle East (Kangujam, 2005, p. 34). For New Delhi, Chinese influence in Myanmar is a threat to India's plans for naval dominance in the Bay of Bengal and an obstacle to its grander aspirations for economic and strategic influence in Southeast Asia (Kumara, 2005). The Chinese maritime expansion in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea with the logistic support of Myanmar and Pakistan respectively has created a situation of perceived Chinese encirclement of India (Konhoujam, 2005, p. 64). In fact, Chinese maritime expansion and inroads into the Indian Ocean through Myanmar is a cause of serious concern for India mainly in the light of Chinese assertion that the Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean. India finds it hard to tolerate the installation of Chinese monitoring centre in the Coco Island, close to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which is an overt strategic incursion into the Indian maritime zone. China can now monitor Indian naval movements in the eastern Indian Ocean from Beijing's Signal Intelligent (SIGINT) site which is located on the said Island. Besides, the Chinese presence all along the Myanmar's border is perceived as a direct threat to India's security.

The strategic concern caused by Myanmar-Pakistan-China nexus in an attempt to encircle India in the long run entails the need on the part of India to reverse its foreign policy in dealing with the military regime of Myanmar. In order

to check Chinese strategic incursions into the Indian Ocean, India is backing Vietnam and Indonesia to counter Chinese dominance in the region. India is also planning to evolve a long term security alliance with the Southeast Asian nations. To this end, India has initiated a number of high-level political and military visits with Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar as part of India's Look East Policy. India has entered the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a sort of military co-operation among the ASEAN Nations which was given shape in 1994.

The Southeast Asian countries were actually apprehensive about the expansion of Indian naval power and possible growing influence of India in the region. It is important to note that India's regional engagement with the Southeast Asian countries has been undertaken to ensure military security for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in addition to the safeguarding of India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. In its maritime doctrine released in April 2004, the Indian Navy shifted its doctrine from defending the country's coastline from rival Pakistan to monitoring the entire Indian Ocean region (IOR), from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits which it perceives to be its legitimate area of interest. It may be stated that while the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are 800 miles away from the Indian Coast, it is only 20 miles from Myanmar, 90 miles from Indonesia and 250 miles from Thailand and Malaysia. Threats like religious extremism, drug trafficking, money laundering and terrorism that had cast a dark shadow over South and Southeast Asia constitute major security concerns for India. Combating such threats are essential ingredients of India's Look East Policy.

More covertly, India's interest is guided by internal security. The existence of various armed insurgent groups in the North-eastern part of India having base camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh poses a strong security challenge to India. Fighting these insurgents without the co-operation from Bangladesh and Myanmar governments is not going to produce any tangible outcome. Therefore, India wanted both Burma and Bangladesh to act against these insurgents operating on their soils. Viewed thus, the Look East Policy is partly conceived as a strategy to rein in the Northeast insurgent groups operating from their bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

It had been observed that India demonstrated keen interest in establishing security and strategic co-operation with ASEAN because of its population, geography, maritime sea-lanes and natural resources. The ASEAN is a gateway to the Asia-Pacific region where lies the focus of global security in the Twenty-first century. All these security and strategic considerations drove India to seek closer relations with Southeast Asian countries.

5. MYANMAR IN REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER

Active interest exhibited by India towards Myanmar can be gauged from the unfolding security configuration in Southeast Asia. India had staunchly supported the movement for democracy in Myanmar prompting many pro-democracy activists and student leaders to take refuge in India following the military take-over of Myanmar in 1988. Besides, India had maintained an isolationist policy vis-à-vis Myanmar while simultaneously extending all sorts of logistic support to the dissident groups fighting for restoration of democracy. India also joined the international community in criticizing human rights violation by the military junta and endorsed all the United Nations resolutions demanding restoration of democracy in Myanmar. The conferment of the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, the most prestigious international award conferred by India, to Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the dissident National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1995 marked the zenith of New Delhi's support for democracy movement in Myanmar. Such diplomatic postures adopted by India widened the gulf existing between the two countries. It gave impressions of mutually irreconcilable differences between the two neighbours.

Thereafter, a gradual shift could be seen in the Indian attitude towards the military rulers in Yangon. Observation made by expert indicates that the twin factors of Chinese expansion and containment of insurgency in Northeast India made it imperative for India to reassess its policy towards Myanmar (Konsam, 2005a, p. 288). In fact, the growing expansion of Chinese influence in Myanmar which eventually posed a strategic threat to India's national security, coupled with series of armed resistance movements launched by various shades of insurgent groups taking shelter in Myanmar compelled India to review its foreign policy vis-à-vis Myanmar. Therefore, India's Look East Policy, which finds its articulation partly in Indo-Myanmar Border Trade, is deeply intertwined with the existing as well as the emerging security configuration in Southeast Asia.

The political vacuum in Myanmar created by international isolation in the wake of the popular 1988 uprising provided China with an opportunity for economic and strategic penetration into Myanmar. Informed sources indicate China's desperate search for markets for its cheap finished consumer goods even as it became more interested in the contracts for extracting Myanmar's rich natural resources (Langpoklakpam, 2005, p. 209). The reciprocal visits between

Chinese and Myanmar officials led to gradual opening of Myanmar economy to China with the latter becoming the first country to establish formal border trade with the former. Separate trade agreements were signed between the two countries in 1989 and 1993 that ultimately resulted in increased trade volume. China extended possible economic assistance to Myanmar in the form of soft loans, technical knowledge and expertise thereby rendering Myanmar a Chinese satellite. Through its economic power China intends to exercise political influence over Myanmar in its bid to enhance its strategic interests in the region especially the Indian Ocean region. In turn, China provided Myanmar with all the diplomatic protection from international pressures against the junta apart from supplying military equipment to Yangon.

Another significant factor accounting for India's strategic shift towards Myanmar is the security threat to India's territorial integrity posed by numerous armed resistance groups of the Northeast with sanctuaries in Myanmar. Constant Myanmar encouragement to the insurgent groups in India's Northeast was largely responsible for the Indian government to reverse its earlier isolationist stand (Langpoklakpam, 2005, p. 213). It became imperative for India to elicit the support of the Myanmar military regime in flushing out the insurgent groups, some of which are of Myanmar origin or having connections with Myanmar insurgents. India had to seek the military junta's co-operation due to growing realization of Myanmar's geo-strategic importance to counter insurgency. Consequently, as revealed by certain informed sources, a number of officials from the foreign office, defence and intelligence establishment had opposed Indian Government support extended to the pro- democracy movement and the "limited support" extended to the Myanmar rebels (Konsam, 2005a, p. 288). The logic behind their argument was that if India did not improve relations with the junta, Myanmar would become a Chinese satellite. This argument was substantiated chiefly by the fact that the junta is there to stay as transition from military rule to democracy in Myanmar is a distant dream then. As a matter of policy, based on real politick, India refrained from lodging a formal protest to the SLORC regime against its policy of dishonouring the electoral verdict of the Myanmar people in 1990 thus paving way for normalizing diplomatic relations with Yangon. In this context, India's security anxiety --- getting Myanmar to act against Northeast Indian insurgent groups taking shelter in Myanmar --- rather than a desire to give the Look East Policy a continental orientation explains India's U-turn vis-à-vis Myanmar. It is pertinent to note that India had all along maintained a maritime outlook towards Southeast Asia (Baruah, 2004, p. 28).

It was against this backdrop that U Ba Swe, Vice Foreign Minister of Myanmar paid a visit to India in 1992 on the invitation of the Indian government. His visit resulted in identification of concrete areas for bilateral co-operation including border trade, prevention of narcotics trafficking and contact between the civilian and military authorities in the border regions of the two countries to prevent illegal activities (Ministry of External Affairs, 1993). Later, the Indian side intensified diplomatic offensives against Myanmar marking an era of "Constructive Engagement", a policy which implies active co-operation with that country in the economic sphere without interference or intervention in its domestic political affairs. Such a policy adopted by India towards the military rulers in Yangon was much to the displeasure of the Myanmar pro-democracy groups. Hence, India gradually deviated from its cherished principles of supporting democracy movement in Myanmar because of the emerging strategic equation in Southeast Asia.

6. INDIA'S SECURITY DILEMMA

The idea of Indo-Myanmar border trade was revived when J.N Dixit, the then Foreign Secretary, led a delegation to Myanmar in 1993. An agreement known as the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement was signed between the two countries on January 21, 1994, which came into operation on April 12, 1995. In addition to the border trade agreement, another security agreement known as the "Memorandum of Understanding on Co-operation between the Civilian Border Authorities" of the two countries to prevent illegal and insurgent activities was also executed on the same day. As a matter of fact, the main area of discussion between the Indian delegation and the Myanmar authorities in all rounds of talks that took place during 1994 had always focused on "better border management" which in turn covered issues like insurgency, terrorism, narcotic trade and boundary issues (Langpoklakpam, 2005, p. 215).

The reasons behind India's security concerns along the Indo-Myanmar border may, however be explained by the existence of drug trafficking, small arms trade and insurgency. Border trade therefore, in India's perception is an institutional device to monitor movement of insurgent groups in the border areas and Chinese incursion into Myanmar. Evidently, a sincere desire on the part of the Indian government to promote a smooth and efficient border trade was absent right from its very inception as India's policy towards Myanmar is guided overwhelmingly by its security concern.

The concept of border trade appears to be a mere design to render an economic facade to the entire diplomatic initiatives which centred predominantly on security issues.

The emerging thaw in the Indo-Myanmar relations lies in convergence of strategic interests between the two countries as the Naga insurgents campaigning for “Nagalim” or Greater Nagaland, which includes a large chunk of Myanmar, poses a security threat to the Myanmar. The Myanmar Government also badly needs Indian help to fight against Myanmar ethnic separatist groups that control several provinces in its North Western parts. The fact that the geographical areas controlled by the ethnic minorities are highly inaccessible requires joint military operations. Similarly, Indian Government greatly expects full diplomatic and military co-operation from Myanmar

The year 2004 witnessed a great improvement in the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar when senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) paid a state visit to India from October 25-29 holding talks with Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India on a wide range of issues. The two sides reiterated their firm determination to maintain peace, tranquility and stability along the entire length of their border as an essential pre-requisite to successful implementation of cross-border projects and to bring about economic prosperity in the area (Ministry of External Affairs, 2004). Both sides have also come up with several other cross-border projects such as the Tamanthi Hydro-electric project, the Rhi-Tiddim and Rhi-Falam roads and the Kaladan Multi-modal Transport project. The Kaladan Multi Modal Transport Project is an artery that will link Calcutta to South Mizoram, through the Arakan Coast of Myanmar. Construction of road through Arakan will also help India check anti-India rebel groups operating from there. In 2006, Indian President Abdul Kalam secured the signing of a framework agreement on the setting up of a ground station in Myanmar for receiving data from the Indian Remote Sensing (IRS) satellite. The Indian space agency was reportedly involved in building the facility, which is now ready for use. Such a facility will definitely help gather information about the locations of the insurgent camps and monitor their movements.

Such projects are apparently meant for ameliorating the economic condition in the border areas and improving connectivity between the two countries. However, it has been widely argued that the implementation of such projects will probably lead to human rights violation, human displacement and environmental problems. Both sides have already reached an understanding on clearing the areas of hostile elements as a necessary pre-condition for smooth and meaningful execution of the projects. In this regard, large-scale deployment of army for maintenance of security in the areas is quite imminent.

Following the understanding between India and Myanmar, a number of military operations have been launched by the Myanmar army busting many camps of the rebel groups from Indian. The Myanmar authorities had time and again assured their Indian counterpart that they had adopted a zero-tolerance approach to militant activity while identifying NSCN (K) as one of the unwanted elements in their territory. Yangon has been specifically targeting the NSCN (K) apparently because of the very fact that it dominates the so-called Eastern Nagaland, which incidentally happens to be within the territorial boundary of Myanmar. The Government of India has also allegedly extended co-operation to the Myanmar in its counter-insurgency operation against the NSCN (K) with a motive to marginalize it into submission. The territorial demand of the NSCN (K) consists of large areas falling on the Burmese side thereby posing a serious problem to India as it is well beyond her jurisdiction to address the issue unilaterally. On the contrary, the NSCN (IM) seems to have scaled down its earlier demand from sovereignty to integration of Naga-inhabited areas of the Northeast under a single political unit within the framework of the Indian Constitution. In other words, India wants Yangon to deal with the NSCN (K) militarily while New Delhi shall take care of the NSCN (IM) through peaceful dialogue. The strategic thinking of Indian political and military establishments is based on the notion that insurgency in the Northeast would come to an end once the Naga insurgency is done away with.

More check posts are coming up in the Indo-Myanmar Border to facilitate meetings between the armies of the two countries as part of India's Look East Policy (The Telegraph, 29 April 2006). A check post which has already been set up near the border gate no.1 at Moreh is said to house office of central and state governments, including land customs, taxation, forest police and para-military forces, and medical as well as food-testing laboratories. Reports indicate that new posts would be opened at Lungwa in Nagaland's Mon district, Bihang in Churachandpur district of Manipur and at Sapi and Lokawather in Mizoram. Pertinent to note in this regard is the nod given by the Union Home Ministry to a scheme to raise the iron fencing equipped with concertina ring, along Mizoram's 404 kilometres border with Myanmar. The 8-ft high iron fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border has been erected to stem the rising trend of cross-border movements. Similarly, about 400 kilometres of Tripura's 856 kilometres long borders with Bangladesh has already been

fenced by the central government to prevent cross-border insurgency. The fencing is primarily intended to curb recent trends of North East insurgent groups' crossing over to training camps in Myanmar (The Telegraph, 17 April 2006).

7. CONCLUSION

The United States has been consistently pursuing the policy to contain China through encirclement. In conjunction with this policy, the US is trying to counterpoise India against China, a balancing role that was applied to India with Pakistan as a counter-balance during and after the cold war. Viewed in this context, India's Look East Policy will naturally fit into the US strategy of expanding its influence in the region by restricting China. It is because the strategic interests of the US and India stand complementary as far as China is concerned since the covert intention India's Look East policy is to compete with China. However, it is in India's own interest to redefine its perception towards China and forge an Asian solidarity through structural re-alignment.

A fundamental question coming from analysts and commentators revolve round India's desire to give its Look East Policy a continental orientation. The question assumes critical proportions as India had maintained a maritime outlook vis-à-vis Southeast Asia all along. It is obviously cheaper and less troublesome for India to trade with Southeast Asia by sea rather than by land. In fact, the security anxiety of India due to existence of numerous insurgent outfits in the Northeast has been a major factor in shaping India's LEP. In this context, Sanjib Baruah foregrounds the argument that it is India's security anxiety — getting Myanmar to act against Northeast Indian insurgent groups that take shelter in Myanmar — rather than a desire to give the Look East Policy a continental orientation that explains India's U-turn vis-a-vis Myanmar (Sanjib Baruah, 2004, p. 25). India wants to crush insurgency in the Northeast sooner than later. Therefore, on the pretext of pursuing Look East Policy, India will have to call in more and more military forces which will have serious implications on the state of human rights in the Northeast given the past records of the Indian military and para-military forces.

Despite the claim made by many observers that economy has been the prime mover of India's Look East Policy (LEP), the government has not taken up concrete measures to facilitate the smooth implementation of the said policy. The much hyped LEP remain only on paper. Besides, diplomatic activities and exchange of visits seem heavily confined to strategic and security areas only. India is more interested in persuading both Bangladesh and Myanmar to take action against the Northeast insurgent groups operating from their countries rather than preparing the ground for expediting bilateral trade. Moreover, India has been able to secure Vietnamese co-operation for imparting guerrilla training to the Indian army for counter-insurgency operation in the Northeast. Therefore as long as India remains obsessed with its internal security concerns, no tangible outcome can be expected from the much-publicized Look East Policy.

Observation has been made that despite the rise in the overall volume of trade between India and Myanmar, trade through the Moreh-Tamu route has been declining over the years (Yumnam 2005, 77). The border trade posts on the Indian side is also said to be lacking in infrastructure and supportive structure. Owing to such an absence of appropriate institutional preparedness, border trade has not shown any significant stride even after the signing of border trade agreement about two and a half decades back. This is not unexpected since economic development of the North East did not constitute a significant agenda in the evolution of this policy. Observation coming from commentators indicated that security considerations far outweigh economic considerations as far as the Indo-Myanmar border trade is concerned (Konsam, 2005b, p. 92). Besides, the overarching security implication inherent in any of the projects associated with the Look East Policy seems highly incompatible with the outcome which the policy seeks to deliver.

On the whole, India's Look East Policy is a part of the larger strategy of containing China and capturing the Southeast Asian markets while simultaneously extracting raw-material from the region and exploiting the cheaper labour force. The involvement of huge international financial institutions metropolitan capital in the development of transnational trading infrastructure substantiates this truth. India is a loyal camp follower of the US led imperialism in Southeast Asia. In this context, India needs to reorient its Look East Policy if it wants to survive the onslaught of globalization. India should not miss the opportunity of building a close relationship with the Asian countries, which was earlier stalled due to historical circumstances. It will be in India's own interest to redefine its foreign policies in line with the emerging circumstances.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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