

Role of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Act East Policy

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The Look East policy which was transformed into the Act East policy under the present political dispensation led by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for a robust and result-oriented diplomacy to attain India's national interest in its Eastern neighbourhood. The piecemeal approach was supposed to be replaced by a proactive one to steer the course with a renewed spirit to secure tangible results in geostrategic as well as geo-economic term. Contextualised in Arunachal Pradesh, the policy has generated a lot of optimism among the academia, policy-makers and other stakeholders in the state for a relook at the policy with a new paradigm.¹

Arunachal Pradesh: Land Link to South –East /East Asia

Responding to the trends of neo-liberal regime and India's Act East policy, Government of Arunachal Pradesh sought to introduce reforms in various sectors to steer the course of development. Arunachal Pradesh which shares an international border with Bhutan to the west (217km), China to the north and north-east (1,080 km) and Myanmar to the east (520km) is the land link to South-East/East Asia through the Nampong- Pangsau section of the Stilwell road. The Stilwell road, originally known as Ledo road, is named after the American General, Joseph Warren Stilwell, who undertook the responsibility of constructing the project in December 1942 to open communication links for the Allied forces from India to free Burma from the clutches of Japanese forces. During its completion in 1944, the road was used as a major supply route for the transportation of arms, troops and other essential materials for Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang Army of China in its war against Japan. The road covering a distance of 1726 kilometers starts from Ledo in Assam (India) and goes across Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh (India) and

Shindbwiyang, Bhamo and Myitkyina in Kachin (Myanmar) and further links Ledo-Burma roads junction to the city of Kunming in China. The road covers 61 km in India, 1033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China.²



WW II Stilwell Road

Source: britanica.com.



Stilwell Road (Ledo Section)

Source: The Author.

At present the road links India and Myanmar in the eastern most sectors. It starts from Nampong (Arunachal Pradesh) and touches Shindbwiyang, Bhamo and Myitkyina in Kachin (Myanmar) before reaching Kunming (China), Ho Chi Minh city (Vietnam) and Singapore. Myanmar Government has assigned contract to Yunnan Construction Engineering Group of China and the military backed Burmese Yuzana group in 2010 to reconstruct 312 kilometer road from Myitkyina in Myanmar to Pangsau pass at India-Myanmar border. India has renovated its portion through two lane highways, while China has renovated its own segment through six lane Highways. If Myanmar segment is completed, then Nampong corridor can be connected to Muse, Lashio, Mandalay and Yangon (Myanmar) through Asian Highway (AH14), Ruili, Wanding and Kunming (China) through AH3 and Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore (Singapore) through Asian Highway 2 (AH2) and further to Phnom

Penh (Cambodia) and Ho Chi Minh city (Vietnam) of greater Mekong sub-region through Asian highways 1(AH1).It is pertinent to mention here that the road distance calculated in this study between Nampong- Mandalay-Yangon(1428.2km), Nampong-Bangkok (2091.1km), Nampong-Kuala Lumpur(3436.7 km), Nampong- Singapore(3795.2 km), Nampong- Phnom Penh (2737.1 km) and Nampong-Hanoi- Hochi Minh (3066.6 km) is quite a feasible proposition in terms of cost benefit analysis as compared to the trans-shipment of goods to Southeast /East Asia from Northeast via Kolkata port passing through the Siliguri corridor.³

It is further anticipated that such type of transnational-connectivity corridors would help in strengthening free trade architecture eventually pave the way for East Asian economic integration.



Indian Side of the Stilwell Road (Nampong)

Source: The Author



Pangsau Pass

Source: The Author.

Prospects

There are immense prospects which may emerge out of the reopening of the Stilwell road in the Nampong-Pangsau section.

Border Trade

Act East policy through Nampong-Pangsau section would strengthen cross border trade in Arunachal Pradesh. Nampong Land Custom Station notified since 1951 has largely remained non- functional and the border trade was limited to informal channels. At present, Indian nationals are allowed to visit Pangsau market (Myanmar side) on 10th, 20th and 30th of every month. Likewise, Myanmarese nationals living 16 kilometer of its borer are permitted to visit Nampong on every friday to purchase their necessary items. However, with the initiation of Act East policy and emergence of free trade architecture in the region, the Central Government has

underlined the significance of border trade by renovating the Nampong Land Customs Station⁴. It is anticipated that the opening up of this trade route would restore the cross- border trade links and augment the economic capabilities of the borderlanders through formal trade mechanisms.

Cross- Border Trade

Border trade would strengthen the pace for cross border trade involving India and Myanmar for the benefit of all the stakeholders in the region. Myanmar is also rich mineral deposits. Granites produced in Myanmar can find a market in Northeast India where house construction has become a thriving activity. The supply of granites from Myanmar has transport cost advantage in the markets of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides this, such stones can be imported to the other regions of India through Arunachal Pradesh to meet the booming demands of the construction sector. On the other, Arunachal Pradesh can provide electricity to the neighbouring cross border regions, once the hydro power projects are fully commissioned and the national power grid is connected to the Southeast Asian grid for energy trading with the ASEAN. It near future, energy trading with Myanmar is quite a feasible proposition.

India informally exports manufactured items such as bicycles, motor parts, fertilizers, medicines and food products like moltova and horlicks etc. to Myanmar. It has a substantial share in medicines and fertilizers as compared to Chinese dominated manufactured goods in Myanmar. It is argued that if the cross-border trade takes place through the Nampong section of the Stilwell corridor, then the Indian manufacturers will get easy access to enter Myanmar in order to expand their markets in Myanmar. It is pertinent to point out that the Chinese have even set up production centres inside the Myanmar to capture the domestic markets. Thus at this moment, the mainland manufacturers of India along with the local entrepreneurs can set up production bases in Arunachal Pradesh under the New Industrial policy of Arunachal Pradesh 2008 to meet the market demands of Myanmar and beyond.⁵

Potentials of Growth Triangles

Nampong LCS through the Stilwell road would give rise to growth triangles in the region. Growth triangles are formed on the basis of different comparative strengths of contiguous regions by capitalizing their natural resources, technology, finance and human resources for a successful trilateral venture. This concept was unveiled by the first Deputy Prime Minister of

Singapore Goh Chok Tong in 1989 in the form of Singapore–Johor–Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle which combined the technology and finance of Singapore with that of the land, labour and natural resources of Ria Island of Indonesia and Johor of Malaysia.⁶In case of Arunachal Pradesh, there could be possibilities of similar growth triangles such as (a) India, Myanmar and China Growth Triangle, consisting Arunachal Pradesh of India, Yunnan Province of China and Kachin and Sagaing regions of Myanmar, and (b) India, Myanmar and Thailand Forum (IMT) consisting of Arunachal Pradesh of India, Kachin, Sagaing and Mandalay of Myanmar and Mae Sot of Thailand, based on amalgamation of their comparative advantages quite akin to the SIJORI Growth Triangle.⁷

Possibilities of Regional/Sub Regional Cooperation

The development of Nampong LCS would promote regional and sub -regional co-operation in South and South East Asia as well. It would generate opportunities for Arunachal Pradesh to collaborate with the ASEAN(Association of South East Asian Nations), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) forum on trade, transport, technology, automobiles, machineries, electronics, petro-chemicals, gas crackers, pharmaceuticals, herbal, fertilizer, polymer, agro-horticulture, education banking, investment and tourism by harnessing their shared capabilities.

The Way Ahead

Arunachal Pradesh could be the bridgehead to East Asia. In this connection, it would be noteworthy to point out that special economic zones as well as industrial corridors should be developed in Arunachal Pradesh and the potentialities of the state in (5H) hydro, herbal, horticulture, handicraft and handloom + (2T) tradition and tourism should be explored by tapping cross-border synergies. This proposition would remain a mere utopia unless the economy of Arunachal Pradesh undergoes structural reforms with the free play of the market forces. Before finalizing the roadmap of Look/Act East policy, it is highly necessary that Arunachal Pradesh should come up with specific manufacturing products and earn ‘Make in Arunachal’ image to expand its global reach. Thus, the need of the hour is to frame action oriented programmes on Act East policy engaging experts from different fields, and then transform them into practice at the ground level for the benefit of all the stakeholders.

Notes & References

¹. Government of India adopted several policies towards the development of North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) since its independence. In the aftermath of India's independence, Nehru-Elwin paradigm interpreted by many scholars as 'cultural paradigm' was applied to preserve the pristine the cultural milieu of tribal populace of NEFA. The 'security paradigm' emerged in the wake of Chinese invasion of India in 1962 and NEFA was considered strategically significant in the grand geo-politics of India's location in East and South East Asia. See Jairam Ramesh, 'North-East India in New Asia', *Seminar*, <http://www.indiaseminar.com/2005/550/550%20jairam%20ramesh.htm> (accessed on 3 July 2013). Also refer Jajati K. Pattnaik, 'Look East Policy and India's North Eastern Region: Status of Cross Border Trade and Connectivity' in GuruDas Das & C.Joshua Thomas (eds.), *Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India's North East*, Routledge, 2016.

The neoliberal paradigm was thrust in comprehending the geo-economic importance of Arunachal Pradesh in an era of increasing regional and global cooperation. The North East dimension was incorporated in India's Look East policy in a meeting between the External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee and the Chief Ministers of the North Eastern States in October 2007. The policy became an integral part of North Eastern Region Vision 2020 – 'a roadmap for development of the Region' in July 2008. See 'North Eastern Region Vision 2020', Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India, http://www.MDONER.gov.in/sites/default/files/silo2_content/ner_vision/Vision_2020.pdf (accessed on 11 July 2014). Also refer Jajati K. Pattnaik, 'Act East Policy and Development of India's Northeast: Opportunities and Challenges' in Ujjwal K Paul, Gurudas das and C Joshua Thomas (eds.), *ASEAN Calling: Development of India's North-East through Sub-Regional Cooperation*, Pentagon Press, 2017.

². The author visited Ledo -Nampong sector of Stilwell Road on 29 -30 November 2015 and collected data interacting with the eminent public leaders, Government officials and other stakeholders at Jairampur and Nampong towns of Changlang District in Arunachal Pradesh. For

details refer 'Stilwell Road', NIC, Changlang, <http://changlang.nic.in/stilwell.htm> (accessed on 27 November 2015)

³ . Jajati K. Pattnaik, 'Should the Stilwell Road be Reopened'? *Economic & Political Weekly*, 51(15), 2016, pp.1-6.

⁴ . _____, 'Stilwell Road: A Game Changer for Arunachal Pradesh'? *The Arunachal Times*, 16 October 2017.

⁵ . *State Gazetteer of Arunachal Pradesh (Vol.1)*, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 2010.

⁶ . Toh Mun Heng, 'Development in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle', SCAPE Working Paper, National University of Singapore, No.06, 31 March, 2006, pp.5-7, <http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ecs/pub/wp-scape/0606.pdf> (accessed on 10 January 2016).

⁷ . Jajati K. Pattnaik, 'Nampong: Land Bridge to East Asia', *Sangai Express*, 15 December 2016.