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INDIA-MYANMAR STRATEGIC CO-OPERATION THROUGH NORTH EAST: BILATERALISM TO SUB-REGIONALISM

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Abstract

North East India shares a long land border with its neighbour Myanmar. Due to its locational advantage, North East region has been of very strategic importance to strengthening of bilateral ties and extending its ties with the South East Asian countries. But so far, the journey from Look East Policy to Act East Policy has mostly been on bilateral talks and a bilateral approach. People-to-people ties have no doubt been on a theoretical level understood, but without a sub-regional approach it is less likely to be achieved. This article will try to give some sub-regional perspectives to various sectors that can be focused for strengthening the relations between the two nations. The article is written using various secondary references and ideas which the author had in mind after various field visits to many places along the India-Myanmar border.

Introduction:

India needs to re-think about the thrust of her relationship with her immediate neighbour Myanmar, in the aftermath of Covid pandemic as well as the

recent coup that took place in Myanmar. In fact, the recent developments also present an apt context to re-visit the earlier forms of cross-border co-operation engagements and its nature. The regional trade figures and economic co-operation among the Southeast Asian countries still remains very low despite of several arrangements like South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic C-operation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation etc. Several analysts have pointed out that one reason of the low turnovers may be that most of these initiatives have adopted a bilateral/multilateral approach, wherein the perspective from the bordering regions has largely been ignored. Now, India's federal structure provides very much space to the states to engage themselves in various cross border co-operation activities. This is very much a boost for regional engagement for a geographically huge and culturally diverse country like India. Also sub-regional level of engagement would help in faster and efficient co-operation process between the countries of South Asia. Thus, this paper through its various examples and arguments, would try to identify and promote various potential co-operation areas across bordering regions of India and Myanmar, which can be further examined in order to enhance regional co-operation.

Although there are several examples of various initiatives and projections about the various means and ways about sub-regional initiatives for trade in South Asia, but none in particular has received enriching research contribution. It is a well known fact India, especially North East share a very unique relationship with its South East Asian counterparts, especially with Myanmar. North East India is one such region that shares its cultural legacy and historical ties on various levels with Myanmar, which cannot be seen overlapping with the rest of India. Given its age old history and cultural linkages and shared ethnicity, this region characterises a familiar landscape throughout. Also due to geographical and cultural advantages, the border between these two countries have remained porous which can be utilised for a more strong economic partnership between the two.

However the most important to any bilateral or sub-regional arrangement between the two countries are the tribal communities and people residing along the border and the bordering region, who are the actual stakeholders and are very fundamental to any smooth functioning of any interactions between the two countries. Talked about the unique relation between the two countries, it is rather wise to look for a sub-regional approach of co-operation, which not only will give India a chance to strengthen its relation with Myanmar but also give a boost to the Act East Policy and its objective to strengthen India's relations with South East Asian countries.

Prospects for sub-regionalism:

Northeast India shares a large part of its border (1643 kms) with Myanmar, spreading over four north eastern states—Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. This geographical proximity provides opportunity for the economically isolated North East states of India to link to economic opportunities and markets in the east, building on their strong historical socio-cultural and economic linkages with Myanmar. Cross border trade, in such a situation seems a good opportunity given the strategic importance and also to explore the untapped potential which is yet to be harnessed in this region. As per the ministry of Commerce, Government of India, border trade is different from trade through air, land or sea ports. Border trade is 'over land trade' by way of 'exchange of commodities' from a bilaterally agreed list by people living along both sides of the international border (De,C., & Khan, 2010). For permitting locally produced commodities, to be traded as per prevailing customary practices on both sides of the India-Myanmar border, an agreement on border trade between both the countries was signed on 21st January, 2021 and was operationalised on 12th April, 2021.

Accordingly, two Land Custom Stations were notified for this purpose—Moreh (Manipur) in India and Tamu in Myanmar; and Zokhawthar (Mizoram) and Rhi in Myanmar. As of today, the Nampong Land Custom Station, Pangbau Pass (Arunachal Pradesh) is being notified by the customs but is not functional. In

2008, the Indo-Myanmar Joint Trade Committee agreed to set up another LCS in Avankhu (Nagaland) corresponding to Somara in Myanmar has been bilaterally agreed but hasn't been notified yet. Though there are two functional transit points, but owing to the long delay in the implementation of transport connectivity projects and pre-requisite infrastructure, border trade primarily took place only across Moreh-Tamu route. There was a substantial increase in border trade from 2012-13 till 2014-15, when it rose from 12.96 US\$ million to 24.3 US\$ million. This was majorly due to expansion of trade items that could be traded. But the next couple of years showed decline in the trend- 2015-16 (20.6 US\$), 2016-17 (17.83 US\$), 2017-18(0.02 US\$) (Taneja, Naing, Joshi, Singh, Bimal, Garg, Roy & Sharma, 2019). Many scholars have pointed out various factors for this decline. Such as- high transaction costs, poor connectivity, lack of quality infrastructure at border crossing points, limited financing instruments and rampant extortion of informal/ side payments, etc. (Taneja & Wadhwa, 2018)

Though at bilateral level many initiatives have been taken and high level talks guarantee the success of Act East policy, but given the present scenario, sub regional approach for economic interactions seems a necessity. India's aim of having border engagement by including institutional and capacity building, people to people ties can be successful with a more sub-regional approach. On August 8th, 2018 India and Myanmar officially opened land route in a historic ceremony at the bridge over Mrinal River (Lokchao) near Moreh which allows people living on both sides of the border to pass 16 kms on each side. This opening was meant to enhance border activities, tourism, cultural exchange and people-to-people social-economic interactions. Just after 11 days of this opening, R K Shivachandra, convenor of Act East Policy Committee, Government of Manipur in association with Indo-Myanmar Fraternal Alliance invited delegates from Myanmar for the Citizens Dialogue on the prospects of Manipur and Sagaing region. In it discussions took place about the more cooperation in the fields of educations, trade, commerce, industry, investment and research works (Times of India, 2018). The two regions in both the countries tries to find out ways and means for development by

collaborations and help each other hand in hand in all sectors of human development, skilling, information and knowledge sharing. Sagaing is very rich in mineral resources and agricultural produces while Manipur need such primary products for its industries. Also Manipur can be of help in sharing education and health facilities given the underdevelopment of Sagaing region. Also it was suggested that a Sagaing-Manipur Development Committee should be formed to ease the problems and help the two neighbours grow (ibid).

‘Informalisation’ of economic transactions across the open border between India and Myanmar is another important aspect that has attracted attention to the scholars. The formalisation of trade was done in 2015, by removing the system of barter trade which adversely affected border trade, especially due to increased documentation and custom duties on imports from Myanmar. Studies by Taneja and Wadhwa (2018) and Naing and Nyein (2018) have identified several barriers to trade faced by exporters and importers in both countries. The Land Custom Station at Moreh and Zokhawthar didn’t have basic facilities such as warehousing, cold storage for perishables, laboratories for testing etc; due to which many exporters and importers have taken alternate routes for the trade in small quantities, thus making the formal trade negligible. Here, only if the local populations would have given more channelized instructions and infrastructural facilities, it would have been that both the regions along the border would have benefitted. Also one can suggest that the cross border mechanism which has got enormous potential for sub-regional level co-operation must be expanded to setting up more transit points which provide similar environment and potential. Looking at the positive impact of border ‘*haats*’ between India and Bangladesh in enhancing sub-regional cooperation; similar establishment of border ‘*haats*’ to enhance more people-to-people ties and livelihoods of tribal communities and other marginalised populations along the border should be facilitated.

Religious Tourism:

This is another area of cooperation which deserves a sub-regional perspective. It has a wide and larger goal of developing a regional network on the tourism economy. The role of religious centres for both Indians and Myanmarese, especially Buddhists have been responsible for re-thinking the whole untapped tourism potential of North Eastern and to further develop the social and cultural bonds between the people of both the countries.

The Golden pagoda or 'Kongmu-Kham' as known in Tai Khamti language was built in the year 2010 with the vision and sole initiative of Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Chowna Mein to promote spiritual tourism. As per the official reports in 2019 there was an annual turnover of more than one lakh tourists in the year 2017-2018, including both domestic and international tourists in Golden pagoda (Arunachal24, 2019). The international tourists mostly comprises of Thailand and Myanmar, which is mainly due to shared cultural and religious similarities amongst the people of this region.

Another tourist attraction of cultural significance is Rih Dil Lake in Myanmar. The lake is very sacred for Chins and Mizos, as written by Mizo historian B Lalthangliana in the book History and Culture of Mizo. The lake is associated with death and afterlife. In the pre-Christian Mizo belief system, the soul departed from its body and headed straight to Rih Dil, where it wandered with other souls for a few lonely days before returning to the deceased's village and home. There, relatives would keep a place at the table for the wandering spirit and offer it a plate of food every time they sat for dinner. After three months of this vagabond afterlife, the soul would once again depart for Rih Dil and from there wander towards a mythical mountain called Hring Lang Tlang. After reaching the peak, the soul would pluck a mythical flower, Hawilo Par and would long for past no more. It would then drink the pure and clear waters of a nearby spring; called Lungloh Tui or the water of forgetfulness and the water would quench it of all

desire to gaze back. Only then would the soul proceed towards the land of the dead (Halliday, 2014).

The region not only has potential of religious tourism due to its shared beliefs and culture, but also eco-tourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, agriculture tourism, leisure tourism, international border tourism etc. Also given the porous and accessibility to international boundaries, tourism has so much potential to bring development to the region (WTTC, 2014). The North Eastern states should have a common platform regarding the ease of connectivity for tourists in this whole region. Cuisines, handlooms and indigenous crafts are other sectors which needs a sub-regional effort to be included in the shared bilateral agenda between India and Myanmar.

Though the Indian government and the concerned state government of North East India has begun to consider the various dimension of tourism, a concrete initiative in this direction is yet to take off. The North Eastern region receives a fewer tourists than many other parts of India. One major reason of this is because of the 'Protected Areas' regime that covers the entire states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland; while the state of Sikkim is partially in protect area and partly in Restricted Area. Lack of connectivity and infrastructure and tedious process of obtaining permits leads to less tourists in the region. Promotion of tourist circuits at the regional level entails on improvement in visa procedures and relaxations. It has been found that improvement in visa procedures leads to significant increase in tourist inflows. (WTTC, 2004) In August 2018, a weeklong ceremony was held in Moreh-Tamu border where a large number of people including delegates assembled on Myanmar and Indian side of the Bridge of friendship. It was declared by the Chief Minister of Manipur Biren Singh that the opening of land route was historic. Indian citizens can now travel to Myanmar by road on production of passport and visa. In addition to this, R K Shivachandra Singha, the convenor of Act East Policy Committee, Government of Manipur said that the government would soon open a special visa counter in Imphal, so that

people would not have to travel to Kolkata/New Delhi for the visa (Thomas, 2020). Another area, where sub-regional initiative is most required is in health sector. Improved land and air connectivity would attract patients from Myanmar to speciality hospitals in Mizoram, Manipur and Assam (The Hindu, 2011).

According to Khriezo Yhome, a senior research fellow in Observer Research Foundation, it is important that both the centre and the state ensure early completion of projects. The idea of co-operation between India and Myanmar should begin at the borders is not new. However, the renewed focus towards translating the ideas into reality in recent years needs to be sustained with periodic assessments of cross border projects. And this requires the cooperation of people at all levels- across borders, at state level, inter-state level, state and centre as well as bilateral level between India and Myanmar. India-Myanmar relations of late have been facing challenges due to the coup and pandemic. Though India was seen helping Myanmar with all necessary healthcare equipments, but on economic partnership, the relations must develop with a more regional co-operative framework. After the coup, it was also seen that in spite of sealing the border of the North Eastern states to 'check illegal influx from Myanmar to India', Mizoram in particular has been seen to accept a lot of people fleeing the violence as their brothers. With the rise of Chinese hegemony, India should take the locational advantage of North East and the shift from bilateralism to sub-regionalism.

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