

EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE ROLE OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY MAKING WITH REFERENCE TO THE NAGAS IN THE INDO-MYANMAR RELATIONS

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Abstract

The Northeast region has not been a major factor in India's foreign policy calculation since independence instead the region was ignored and marginalized even to the extent of using force and repressive Acts such as AFSPA to suppress the voices of both states and non-state actors. The liberalization of economy in the 90s in the wake of globalization gave India a new outlook and the Look East Policy (LEP) was a paradigm shift in India's engagement with the Southeast Asian nations as it seeks to explore the benefits of the ASEAN. The LEP for long remained a neglected policy without much groundwork but the rechristening of LEP as Act East Policy (AEP) show new enthusiasm and progress with certain elements of continuity and change. The reorienting of India's foreign policy to 'Neighborhood First' is attributed to the present political dispensation which is further expanded to include 'Extended Neighborhood'. As a result, the North eastern states have become key players in India's participation in regional groupings such as SAARC, BIMSTEC and BCIM. With India look towards becoming a global player, the need to expand its trade, diplomacy and security engagement has resets India's foreign policy with north eastern states as a key stakeholder as the region lies in the confluence of South Asia, Southeast and East Asia. The paper will briefly explore the factors for the inclusion of NE in the IFP making with special reference to the role of the ethnic Naga communities in the Indo-Myanmar relations.

Keywords: *Ethnic linkages, security, trade, connectivity, foreign policy*

Introduction

The Northeastern states share international borders with Bangladesh, Nepal, China, Bhutan, Myanmar and most of the borders are porous in nature and left unfenced providing safe passage and location for illegal trade, insurgency, drug trafficking, gun running, vehicle trafficking, human trafficking, etc. The region has a long history of trade and economic transactions between various ethnic communities across the border. The demarcation of territory post-

independence divided many ethnic groups separating the communities in different countries. In addition, the long neglect of the Northeastern states by the central government gave birth to numerous issues in the region which spill over to the neighboring countries and vice versa. The Northeastern states failed to capitalize on the benefit of sharing international borders and instead became the hotbed of separatist movement and militancy. Not only the Northeastern states but also the immediate

neighbors bordering these states except for China and Bhutan have an unstable government and economy. Therefore, the central government viewed the region from a security standpoint and overlooked the region's rich potentials. However, post-1990, there is a renewed interest to develop and integrate the different states and communities of the region physically and emotionally into the Union. Though the government is yet to solve the various issues including insurgency and underdevelopment, the region is slowly gaining attention both at the national and international levels.

Majority of the South Asian countries have close ethnic links and cultural affinities with the states adjacent to them. For instance, the Bengali in West Bengal and Bangladesh, the Punjabi in Punjab and Pakistan, the Tamilian in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, the Nagas in Nagaland and Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar, and Kuki-Chin in Manipur and Mizoram and Myanmar. This is considered a valuable asset to further strengthen the relations with the neighboring countries but “demonstration of these affinities may be construed as an intrusion into the neighbor's affairs; in others, developments in the politics or society of the neighbor's may arouse adverse reactions in the adjacent Indian states” (Raghavan 2017).

This article examines the nature of India's interactions with its neighbors, the various historical contexts and intricate dynamics that have shaped India's approach to formulating foreign policy, as well as strategic concerns with regard to its neighbors, particularly Myanmar, and the formulation of various policies that have been integral in determining India's foreign policy. The paper focuses on the relationship

between policies developed more recently, such as the Look/Act East policy, and the conception of new economic prospects and possibilities, including expediting new developmental interventions and transformations in the region.

Brief Overview of Indian Foreign Policy (IFP)

The Indian foreign policy has gone through different phases with a view to building and maintaining cordial relations between neighbors and beyond. India has sought to advance the concept of peaceful co-existence by pursuing a policy of non-alignment but this in later stage shifted to a more realist stance. Pardeshi and Ganguly (2009, 4-19), identified three distinct phases of IFP, the first phase that starts from 1947-1962, which is referred to as “modified structuralism, or stage of idealism where Non-Alignment and anti-imperialism were pursued and priority was given to development over defense spending”. The second phase is from 1962-1991, a period of both political realism and economic nationalism and the third phase starts from 1991-till date is a “phase of diplomatic pragmatism, where the emphasis is given to trade-oriented growth and maintenance of economic growth, promotion of peaceful neighborhood, investment and spending on defense as well as promotion of secular ideals”. India's dream of building a stable neighborhood was mired by wars with Pakistan (1947-48, 1971 and 1999 and with China in 1962. India had to shift its foreign policy to real politics in the late 20th century due to globalization, growth of information technology, and the threat posed by a resurgent China (Kadakkadan 2011: 28-29).

The Constitution of India enabled the centre a “virtually exclusive” jurisdiction over foreign policy. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

is responsible for supervising and managing the conduct of foreign affairs with little or no role for the state to contribute or interact with external powers (Mattoo et al. 2009, 174). However, in the recent years this system is changing and the state is beginning to play a prominent role as a result of globalization and liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s. The regionalization of party politics soon led to a 'federalization of national politics' (Mitra 2011, 102). The regional political parties began to maneuver and assert themselves in relation to various policies and programs of the government. Besides, the emergence of regional parties gave the people a voice to represent the regional interest and identity (Pattanaik 2014). The emergence of coalition politics at the center has given impetus to the regional parties to draw the attention of the central government to sub-regional issues relating to foreign relations and security (Mattoo & Jacob, 2009, 183–185). The quasi-federal center-state relation as laid down by the constitution allows the state referred to as 'constituent diplomacy' (Kinciad 2010, 3-4) to be involved in the framing of policies. Regional political parties have begun to pose new challenges to India's foreign policy as the domestic politics of the state has a political ramification beyond the national borders. Regional parties like Telugu Desam Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Trinamool Congress have dragged the central government on regional issues in relations to its neighboring countries (Pattanaik 2014). The local politics and dynamics have the potential to affect India's relations with its immediate neighbors like the Teesta water issue between West Bengal and Bangladesh. Ethnic relations have affected or impacted India's foreign policymaking to a large extent.

The rechristening of the Look East Policy to Act East Policy (AEP) has put further impetus to the localization of foreign policy as it positioned the Northeastern states as key stakeholders. The AEP has put major emphasis on investment in the infrastructural projects such as the construction of roads, rail networks, expanding air connectivity, opening and reactivating dormant trade routes, and facilitating trade in the existing routes in the border areas (Mitra et al. 2018). As India lacks a concrete neighborhood policy, there is a visible disconnect between India and the neighboring countries. And in order to augment this gap, certain roles and avenues should be provided to the states to engage with their immediate neighbors especially in socio-cultural sectors. This will in the long run do away with the perception of a security-centric state impression that is attached with India.

Outlining Indo-Myanmar Relations

India and Myanmar relations have long historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. The two countries also share a long land border of over 1643 km with Myanmar and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. India and Burma were under the British Empire and Burma got its independence on 4th January 1948. The relations between the two newly independent nations were nothing but cordial as both Nehru and U Nu led the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the coup in Myanmar in 1962 brought the relations to a standstill as India “ignored its eastern neighbor due to the non-democratic regime's seizure of residing Indian assets in Myanmar” (Zhou 2008). But this stance changed in the early 1990s as leaders like Narasimha Rao took a pragmatic strategic policy towards Myanmar.

The Indo-Myanmar relation is not devoid of tension and differences. The relation for instance was strained in 1993 when the Government of India awarded Aung San Suu Kyi the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. As an immediate response, the Myanmar government suspended counter-insurgency cooperation (see Freedman 2006).

Apart from the Treaty of Friendship signed in 1951, the two nations have signed several bilateral agreements charting ways for facilitating regular dialogue on a range of issues concerning them. India and Myanmar have several institutional mechanisms to ensure regular consultations between the two governments including the Foreign Office Consultations, The National Level Meeting (NLM), Regional Border Committee Meeting (RBCs), Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG), Joint Trade Committee (JTC), etc. (MEA 2012; MEA 2020). The two countries are also involved in various developmental co-operations and humanitarian assistance¹. Major projects include the Trilateral Highway Project, Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, assisting to set up institutions such as Myanmar Institute of Information Technology, Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education, Myanmar-India Centre for Enhancement of IT Skills, India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centers, and assistance in up-gradation of Yangon Children's Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital and the construction of a 200-bed women's hospital at Monywa, etc.(MEA 2020).

The two countries signed the border agreement in 1967 but had limited counter-insurgency operations. However, this situation changed and by the mid-1990s, the two countries agreed to

carry out counter-insurgency operations. This led to the launching of a series of counter-insurgency operations aimed at eliminating militants operating in the border areas. However, the response and cooperation from the Myanmar military were sporadic and lacked effective border security regimes (Sekatkar 2009). India and Myanmar cooperated in tackling insurgency in the late 1940s and early 1950s through counter-insurgency approaches wherein India provided arms and aircraft supplies intending to curb the Naga insurgent movement in the border areas (Sakhuja 2012). The Indian army also provides training to Myanmar's soldiers in counter-insurgency (See IMD n.d). In recent years, defense cooperation has strengthened with a high-level military visit, capacity building, and support (MEA 2020). The two countries agreed to increase a more coordinated security arrangement agreeing to enhanced patrolling coordination and sharing of cross-border intelligence in 2015 (Basit 2018). India and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding to Maintain Border Tranquility in 1994 (Mujtaba 2007) and have two operational border trade points (Moreh-Tamu and Zowkhatar –Rhi on the 1643 km long border (MEA 2012).

The visit of India's PM Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 was regarded as one of the foundations for a stronger relationship between India and Myanmar. In recent years there have been regular high-level visits between the two countries. For instance, the visits of Indian Foreign Secretary, K. Raguath (February 1998); Myanmar's Vice Chairman of SPDC, Maung Aye (November 2000); Indian Vice President, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (November 2003); Myanmar's Head of State, General Than Shwe (October 2004);

and Indian President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Azad (March 2006) (Ashraf 2008). Such regular visit, dialogue and interaction have brought the two neighboring countries closer and have also charted new ways for bilateral and regional cooperation in various spheres.

The bilateral trade between the two countries has grown steadily post the signing of the India-Myanmar trade agreement in 1970 despite some decline in the 1980s. During 2018-19 periods, bilateral trade witnessed a 7.5 percent growth with trade figures standing at the US \$ 1.7 billion (MEA 2020). India has approved an investment of US\$ 771.838 million as of March 2020 whereas Myanmar's investment in India is US\$ 8.97 Million. Currently, there are about 14 Indian Public Sector Undertakings in Myanmar (MEA 2020). India's chief export to Myanmar includes pharmaceuticals, chemical products, electrical appliances, and transport equipment and import agricultural products such as beans, pulses, forest products, etc. from Myanmar. India and Myanmar also conduct trade fair and market promotions such as India Product Show (March 2012), NEFIT's car rally (March 2012), Enterprise India show 2011 (November 2011), India Pharmaceutical Expo 2011 (Yangon), the North East India Conclave September 2010, Yangon and Mandalay), etc. India has offered training to journalists at IIMC, New Delhi (MEA 2012).

Apart from the close ethnic linkages with the northeast, India and Myanmar also share close cultural ties with Myanmar especially the Buddhist heritage and the Indian diaspora estimated at around 1.5-2.0 million people. India is taking initiative in restoring the Ananda Temple in Bagan and the repair and conservation

of a large number of damaged pagodas. The ICCR also conducts various cultural programs and events such as International Yoga Day, Gandhi Jayanti, etc. (MEA 2020). India and Myanmar have been organizing cultural exchange programs regularly since 1997. Myanmar attended the SAARC Cultural Festival in India in November 1999, South Asian Theatre Festival in 2010. Likewise, the Indian Embassy in Yangon organized the Indian Film Festival and in May 2010 "Abiogenesis", a popular band from Nagaland performed in Yangon and Mandalay (MEA 2012).

India and Myanmar have cooperated in the regional and sub-regional context through regional organizations such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, MGC, SAARC (observer) etc. India recognized the fact that Myanmar is India's connecting link with the ASEAN countries. However, the two countries are lacking behind in connectivity infrastructures. Currently, there are daily flights between Yangon and Kolkata since September 2019 but the usage of the land route for trade and other activities is still limited. The inauguration of Tamu-Moreh and Rih-Zowkhawthar international entry/ exit points in August 2018 is a positive sign given the lack of progress and attention in that aspect. Moreover, there is an ongoing negotiation on a Motor Vehicle Agreement (MEA 2020).

India is not only concerned with security trepidations but is looking at the rich potential in energy and other mineral resources. Myanmar is also central to the success of the grand Look East Policy and also in countering the rise of China in the region. China and India are both anxious to tap Myanmar's huge oil and natural gas reserves to meet the increasing needs of their domestic

industrialization. China and India are also seeking access, through Myanmar, to the Indian Ocean to help open up their underdeveloped landlocked provinces in their southwest and northeast respectively. India and China are eyeing to tap the rich natural resources such as oil and gas reserves to meet the needs of their domestic industries. China is also seeking access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar to open up the landlocked provinces in the Southwest and Northeast regions of China and Myanmar (Zhou 2008). Competition for resources and control of trade routes between India and China will position Myanmar with more geopolitical significance. In this changing geopolitics, “it is essential to examine these complex relationships along with the three paradigms of security, energy, and economics” (Zhou 2008).

India's Foreign Policy Making in Relation to Northeast (NE)

The Northeastern states cover an area of 2,62,179 sq. km constituting 7.9 per cent of the country's total geographical area with a total population of 45 million which is about 3.76 per cent of India's population (Dikshit et al 2014). Numerous ethnic and sub-ethnic groups inhabit the region sharing similar socio-cultural traits and attributes as well as identical linguistic links. However, imposed political divides and territorial boundaries affected the region's history and politics. The linkages and connections between the socio-cultural groups were severed as a result of disruptive geopolitics dividing the various ethnic communities into different countries. People from mainland India and the northeast have different socio-cultural and physical characteristics, which has been the subject of debate, exclusion and discrimination.

Akshay Mathur Jindal (2011) has succinctly noted that the Northeast may be India's weakest link from geo-strategic positioning due to its contiguous border with unstable neighbors, underdeveloped region and “partial socio-cultural integration with rest of India”.

In the absence of a clear doctrine or policy catering to the Northeast in relation to its neighbors, India is yet to fully access opportunities beyond the national borders. A one-sided development will not be conducive for progress but a cooperative policy across the border will help in harnessing the potential of the region. Though security is crucial to national development, too much emphasis on it hampers the growth of state potential, evident in the Northeast (Bhaumik 2016). E. Hobsbawm (1994) pointed out that the technological and political transformation has curbed the obstacle posed by the national border in social interaction. Even though security concerns remain the highest priority for India's relation with its neighbors, economic engagement and trade like border *haat* business and agenda of tourism, migration, cultural exchange are growing in border states like Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh thereby increasing interaction between the people. Rakhee Bhattacharya (2015, 1) argues that “security threats and development differentials in contemporary India can no longer be examined in isolation” as these issues are interlinked and need contextualization by considering the historical trends and the emerging realities of contemporary India.

India is well aware of the presence of an unstable neighborhood and unreliable neighbors. The

Indo-China war (1962) and the Indo-Pak war (1971) awaken the consciousness of the Indian government about the geostrategic importance of the northeastern states and also the vulnerability of the region from a Chinese security threat. China is yet to recognize the Mc Mahon Line and had even opposed PM Manmohan Singh visit to Tawang and India permitting Dalai Lama to visit Tawang. China also objected to the ADB loan for a project in Arunachal Pradesh and the Chinese ambassador even stated that Arunachal Pradesh is part of China on the eve of the Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India in 2006 (Singh et al, 2012, 60). China is also increasing its trade and military footprint in northeastern India's neighborhood such as Defence Cooperation Agreement, which encompasses defence production and military training, which was signed by China and Bangladesh in 2002 (Samsani 2011).

International border disputes in northeast states remains a challenge for India. But there is no major border conflict between India and Myanmar even though there are nine unresolved Border Pillars along the India-Myanmar Border in the Manipur Sector (MEA n.d). The Government is employing regular dialogues and consultations to solve such unresolved issues. Likewise, during the Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 the boundary issue between India and Bangladesh was pursued leading to the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh of 1974 and it's Protocol of 2011. The maritime boundary between India and Bangladesh is also settled with the award rendered by the Arbitration Tribunal for Delimitation of Maritime Boundary on July 7, 2014 (MEA n.d).

Since the borders in the Northeast are porous in nature this provides easy passage to criminals, illegal traffickers, illegal migrants, and insurgents. This issue is compounded by interstate disputes within India often deterring enhancement of inter-state relations within and without. Smruti Pattanaik (2014) pointed out that the task of engaging with the neighbors on socio-cultural and economic ties has to be delegated to the states and allow the states to play a leading role without undermining the larger foreign policy goals. The success of border *haats* in the Indo-Bangladesh border has prompted the policymakers to create more border *haats* in other feasible locations in the Northeast. Border *haats* have not only provided employment or created economic opportunities but also usher in peace and prosperity to the people in the border areas.

The ethnic division caused by the demarcation of national boundaries by the Britishers has continued to affect the relations between India and its immediate neighbors. And in the Indian context, the ethnic linkages have led to more issues than it solves. Since borders “restrict the flow of communication and the formation of social and psychological association with and population beyond boundary” it brings about tension and conflicts which is apparent in India's Northeast (Bhattacharya 2015, 5). The socio-cultural ties are active at the local level but much is to be seen at the policy administrative level. The ethno-linguistic groups often create support structures and use the lobby to garner the attention of the center to further their geopolitical interests. These groups provided supports to each other in the form of hosting refugees, migrants, creating awareness of their plight, and pressuring the central government to

take up such issues with the neighbor's concern thereby India's neighborhood policy (Pattanaik 2014; see Rajat Ganguly 1998, 9-19). Even though the historical, cultural, and linguistic continuity across the border provides for a unique opportunity to pursue and strengthen the foreign relations between the immediate neighbors by involving the people of the region there is no proper mechanism to pursue this opportunity in order to augment the relations. The socio-cultural linkages can be harnessed through “robust connectivity and trade” (Behuria et al. 2012).

The questions of migration have been a big concern in the Northeast *vis-à-vis* the illegal migrations from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Tripura is a living testimony where the Bengali-speaking population from the erstwhile Bengal surpassed the indigenous people. So States like Assam and Meghalaya are apprehensive of the increasing contact with Bangladesh as the issue of illegal migration is yet to be resolved. Due to deep prejudice over contested identity in domestic politics, an anti-Bangladesh sentiment is pervasive so policy initiatives or proposals for visa relaxations, granting of work permit, or implementation of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) were met with protest (Purkayastha 2016, 52-53). The issue has a spillover effect in other states such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh.

In view of the changing paradigm shift in India's policy towards the east, Dr. Manmohan Singh (2005) is of the opinion that “full advantage may be taken of the LEP of the Government of India. ASEAN markets provide big opportunities for Northeast region, particularly in areas such as promotion of horticulture, floriculture, and medicinal herbs.” If India has to pursue an

inclusive neighborhood policy, the states in Northeast India have to be taken into consideration given the fact that all northeastern states, though small in size, share international borders and acts as a route to connect with Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan (South Asia), China in East Asia and Myanmar in South East Asia. These states are significant in influencing India's diplomatic behavior with its immediate neighbors. The people of the region share its history, culture, and its ethnic linkages with Southeast Asia rather than with the rest of India. In this direction, the Northeast Vision 2020 outlined the need for inclusive governance and rural development and with an immediate priority in establishing connectivity and communication links by building infrastructure right up to the border areas through which trade and economic exchanges can be conducted with the countries neighboring the North Eastern Region (MDoNER 2008, v, vi, vii). It is commonly acknowledged that the region's growth and development depend on improving connectivity between India and Myanmar and opening up access to the Northeastern states through Bangladesh. Southeast Asian country Thailand has identified NE as an important destination for investment, potential for the regional market center within the framework of Bangkok's Look West Policy. Cultural similarities, historical ties, and geographical contiguity between the two regions have further facilitated the economic rationale (Chakraborti 2012, 139).

The emergence of regional and sub-regional cooperation such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC),

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN), South Asian Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), etc. and strategy like Look East Policy (LEP) has given more prominence to the Northeast in the foreign policy calculation. SASEC for instance was instituted to strengthen road, air, and rail links and develop port infrastructure in the region. Regional initiative such as the Bangladesh– China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor aims at improving connectivity, infrastructure, agriculture, trade, and investment by connecting India's Northeast, Bangladesh, Myanmar through roads, railways, waterways, and airways with a primary focus on landlocked Southwestern parts of China and Northeast India (Sahoo et al. 2014; Bhattacharjee 2014). The Narendra Modi Government has also reached out to its immediate neighborhood through its “Neighborhood First” which was further developed into the “Extended Neighborhood”² policy which can be exemplified with the invitation of the head of state from SAARC during the inaugural day in 2014 and ASEAN nations on India's Republic Day celebration (PTI, August 9, 2014; Sharma 2018). Taking this into consideration, a direct flight between Guwahati and Singapore by a Bhutanese Airline, Druk Air was launched marking a step forward in connecting Northeast with ASEAN and South Asian countries (Borah 2018). At the same time, the Global Investors' Summit, held in Assam in February 2018 also opened up new opportunities for the region. Narendra Modi has also termed the Northeast as the “new engine of India's growth” (Kashyap 2017).

The Indian government has acknowledged that the Northeast cannot be neglected while formulating policy, particularly when it comes to issues pertaining to India's foreign policy but there are several challenges that hinder development in the region such as lack of skilled resources, infrastructure deficit, unemployment, and lack of transport and mobile-internet connectivity. Laldinkima Sailo (2016) also noted that the lack of “understanding of the region by officials in New Delhi” and also the inability of the states to raise enough revenue to fund development projects. In the past, security concerns and negative perceptions of the region stood in the way of economic cooperation (Sobhan 2016, 62). All these issues have wider ramifications hurting the socio-economic, security, political and cultural fabric of the region and also threatening India's security and strategic interests with possible spillover effects in India's relations with the countries of South, East, and Southeast Asia (Kiso 2014). The North East Vision 2020 also recognizes the need “to address the challenges of border management, especially with regard to cross border migration, terrorism, drugs and arms supply and other forms of non-conventional security threats for ensuring the rights and traditions of local ethnic groups comprehensively in the context of global forces of change” (MDoNER 2008, vii). In reflection, an increase in trade and commerce between the northeastern states and the neighboring countries will eventually bring economic development and job opportunities to the region and also lessen the dependence of states on the central government.

The Naga Ethnic Linkages and the Indo-Myanmar Relations

The Naga³ people are found in the Indian states of Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh as well as in Myanmar's Kachin State and Sagaing region. There are other tribes with cross border linkages such as the Mizos who live in Mizoram while more than 30 Chin tribes with close ethnic linkages with the Mizos inhabit the Chin State and the neighboring areas in Myanmar and the Kukis are located in Manipur and in the Tamu area of the Sagaing region in Myanmar. Though divided into different administrative areas these communities have close cultural and economic relations among themselves (Fernandes 2014). India shares a border length of 1643 km with Myanmar. The Naga population in Myanmar is estimated to be around 500,000, (some accounts 700,000) living in 229 villages (Tun 2019). Historically, the Naga Hills was divided by the Anglo-Burmese Yandabo agreement in 1826 and later in 1953 under the Indo-Burmese demarcation in Kohima on the Naga territory by Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu. The unsettled Naga political issue resulted in the continued arm resistance which continues to affect the relationship between the two countries.

According to Pradip Saikia (2009), India had to re-evaluate its policy towards Myanmar in order “to counter-balance the increasing influence of China and also tackle insurgency, drug trafficking, refugees, and take advantage of the emerging possibilities of LEP”. Whereas Walter Fernandes (2014) is of the view that though security and trade are the determinants of Indian engagement with Myanmar and ASEAN, greater importance should be given to people-to-people relations. Cross-border trade can play a major

role in uplifting the lives of the people living in the border areas further “strengthening commercial ties, cultural understanding, and harmonizing community relationships” (Hein 2015, 57). Rajiv Bhatia (2016) argues that the social, cultural, economic, political, and strategic factors and history are essential for understanding and interpreting the relations between two neighbors.

Myanmar is a nation of contested ethnic homelands with 135 recognized ethnic groups (ICG 2020). The countries neighboring Myanmar are key stakeholders in its ethnic politics as the Kachin and Wa are located in Myanmar-China border, Karen in the Thai-Myanmar, and the Nagas and Chin-Mizo in the Myanmar-India border. The country “has struggled to forge a national identity reflective of its ethnic diversity” since its independence in 1948 (ICG 2020). In the early 1990s, insurgency was a major cause of concern in India's relation with Myanmar and in order to tackle this challenge the cooperation with Myanmar military was warranted for the Narasimha Government (Gupta 2013). Subsequently JN Dixit visited Yangon to meet all the Burmese top military chiefs in March 1993 whereby India “officially” agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of Myanmar and vice versa. This meeting led to some major engagement including Myanmar-India Regional Civil Authorities Meeting (Aizawl, Mizoram in 1994, and Chin State, Myanmar in 1995), signing of cross-border trade in 1994, and Myanmar India Joint Drug Control Meeting which brings together the representatives from Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur from India and Chin, and Sagaing division on the Burmese side in Yangon in December 1994 etc., (Egretau 2003).

In the counter-insurgency domain, the two countries conducted its first combined operation between the 57th Mountain Division of the Indian Army and Myanmar security forces. The Operation Golden Bird was conducted on April-May 1995 along the Mizoram border with an aim to flush out NSCN (IM) but the cadres were later found to be comprised of ULFA, Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) from Tripura (Dahiya 2016). Thereafter, the Indian military conducted Operation Leech, an intelligence sting operation with the participation of army, navy, and air force capturing nearly 73 Burmese in Andaman Landfall Island on February 11, 1998, on the charge of gun-running and aiding insurgents from the Northeast but they were later found to be Karen National Union (KNU), National Unity Party of Arakan rebels fighting military junta (Goel 2019). The insurgent groups operating in the NE were also found to have linkage with the ethnic armed organization in Myanmar. For instance, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) found refuge in the Naga areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides this, rebels were employed by both Myanmar and India against one another due to the strained relations - the Indian Intelligence Service RAW financed Kachin Independence Army (KIA) who used to control Ledo (Stillwell) road and provided assistance to Karen National Union (KNU). In response, the Myanmar military supported the Indian Naga rebel allowing major armed oppositions in its area of operation (Egretau 2003). But in the later stage, PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra then decided to utilize military diplomacy to supplement India's foreign policy to tackle the problems of insurgency and ethnic uprising (Malik 2013).

The Myanmar military launched a military operation against the NSCN (K) in close coordination with the Indian army in 2019 by circumventing the cease-fire agreement signed with the group in 2012. This according to Sanjib Baruah will have far-reaching implications as the Sagaing Division is considered as a safe haven for other militant groups from the NE such as the Assam-based ULFA (I) and Manipur-based People Liberation Army (PLA) and UNLF (Baruah 2019). In response to this military operation, CSO like the Naga Students Organization seeks both parties to "leave them alone". They pointed out that they want development, not joint operation (NE Now News, June 3, 2019).

India and Myanmar conduct regular dialogue on defense and security cooperation through diplomatic channels and regular meetings of institutional mechanisms including Foreign Office Consultations, national-level meetings, and Regional Border Committee meetings (Singh 2015). The first meeting of the India-Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission was held in New Delhi on July 16, 2015, where Myanmar reaffirmed its commitment to fighting terrorism and insurgency. A MOU on Border Cooperation was signed on May 8, 2014, "to enhance cooperation between the two security agencies in ensuring peace, stability, and security along with the long international land and maritime border between the two countries" (MEA 2014). India is aware that peace and prosperity in the Northeastern states of India are linked with good neighborly relations with Myanmar. India was part of the countries invited as an international witness (Japan, China, Thailand, UN, and EU) in the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in

October 2015. NSA Ajit Doval had represented India on that occasion (MEA 2018).

When the PM of India Manmohan Singh visited Myanmar in 2012, both countries recognized the need for a focus on socio-economic development in the border areas by investing in infrastructure and micro-economic projects including construction and up-gradation of roads, schools, health centers, banks, agriculture, *haats*, bridges, providing training and activating Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP). India has provided assistance for the production of cardamom in the Naga Self-Administered Zone (NSAZ) (Singh 2012). The MOU (Border Development Agreement) signed between India and Myanmar in 2012 stipulated for \$25 million to be provided by India which will be divided into 5 phases. The Government of India has initiated the first phase with 21 schools, 17 health centers, and 8 bridges to be constructed in the NSAZ and the Chin State and the second phase will see 5 road projects each and 3 schools in Chin State be built in Chin state and NSAZ. The second phase will see an investment in 5 road projects each in Chin and NSAZ and 8 schools in NSAZ and 3 schools in Chin state (PTI, November 27, 2018). When the Chief Minister of Nagaland Neiphie Rio visited Myanmar in 2014 he acknowledge the Government of India for giving an aid package of 25 million US dollars to Myanmar meant for border regions especially the Nagas areas. Nagaland has also opened four international trade centers along the Indo-Myanmar border (TOI, February 9, 2014). In the same year, 10 member delegates from Myanmar led by Chief Minister of Sagaing U Tha Aye and Chief Minister of Kachin state U Lazon Ngan Sai visited India from 30 November -7 December

2014 and participated in the Hornbill festivals with an aim at boosting inter-regional cooperation in tourism, education, transportation, and culture (Myanmar Matters 2015).

The creation of nation state with demarcation of sovereign territory in the region without taking into account the wishes and aspiration of the people living in the territory by colonial powers has serious ramification today. States views the traditional linkage as detrimental to the development of healthy state relations and those who contradict the state directives are labeled as anti-national elements despite the fact that the ethnic communities are merely attempting to re-invent their political identity in the context of the neo-colonial era. According to Rahul Bhonsle (2015, 48), “the travesty of borders of the modern Indian nation-state lies in the splitting of age-old ties between communities particularly in the North East thus to a large extent these have become artificial barriers for traditional human interaction.” On 10 March 1967, the Governments of India and Myanmar signed the Indo-Burma boundary agreement. “The ramification of this agreement among the Nagas and other border tribes is such that, the Indo-Myanmar international boundary line pierce through the middle of many border villages. As many as 17 villages in Mon district alone are divided into two nation-states” (Ziipao 2020). The Myanmar and Indian Governments made an attempt in 2016 to fence the border in some parts of Nagaland and Manipur inhabited by the Nagas. For instance, the Dan, Pangsha, and other villages in Tuensang district in Nagaland protested the construction of the border as it threatened to convert about 3,500 hectares of the cultivable area into no man's land and divide the

Khiamniungan Naga families that inhabit these hills (Das 2018). These boundary demarcations were done without the knowledge of the local communities. In August 2018, the Governments of India and Myanmar decided to implement the FMR along a 32-kilometer band — 16 km on either side of the border (Ziipao 2020). The two countries should put in place supporting procedures that would encourage free movement and act as a check on its abuse for illicit purposes in order to ensure that the FMR remains in place and supports the interests of the local residents for whom it was established. Local stakeholders should participate in discussions on the FMR as well so that policies are comprehensive and accommodative of local interests (Basu 2020, 133).

The policymakers are aware of the potentials of the border trade and the socio-cultural benefit that ensue once such opportunities are set in place. The International Trade Centre (ITC) is one such initiative that was initiated in the Indo-Myanmar border under the leadership of SC Jamir in November 1996 and it was further developed by CM Neiphiu Rio by constructing a marketing shed and rest house but the area now falls under the Myanmar territory (Das 2018). The Centre has approved setting up of Border Trade Centres (BTC) in Longwa (Mon), Pangsha (Tuensang), Mim (Kiphire), Mohe, and Avangkhu (Phek) located along the Indo-Myanmar border in Nagaland to promote trade and commercial activities in the state (Economic Times, March 31, 2007).

The interaction at the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) level is far more but it doesn't have the support of the Government. Various CSOs on both sides have engaged and

interacted at various levels such as festivals, education, and assisted in natural calamities. The various CSOs active in Myanmar are Council of Naga Affairs (CNA), Nagas Students and Youth Federation (NSYF), Naga Students' Organization (NSO), Eastern Konyak Union (EKU), etc. whereas on the Indian side Naga Mothers Association (NMA), Naga Students' Federation (NSF), Eastern Nagaland People Organization, Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Eastern Naga Students' Association (ENSA), Eastern Nagaland Students' Federation (ENSF), Naga Hoho and other tribal councils such as Konyak Union, Khiamniungan Tribal Council, etc. actively engage with each other. The ethnic Nagas have been living in harmony with each other even though they are geographically divided into various political demarcations. They come to assist each other during crises and conflicts. On September 3, 1999, more than 1000 Burmese Christian Nagas fled to India due to pressure from the Burmese junta and Buddhist monks to convert to Buddhism (MaR 2010). The Naga Forum Delhi (NFD) in coordination with various other CSOs in Nagaland and Myanmar provided relief materials such as rice, medicine, pulses, milk, tea leaves, and other basic items during the 2016 measles outbreak in Myanmar which killed over 40 children with an objective “to bridge the gap between the Indian Nagas and Nagas living in the border areas and also to sensitize the Nagas in general about the living condition of the people in the international border” (Salle 2016; see also WFP 2019).

During the COVID pandemic, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) clandestinely provided medicines and other materials to the people in Myanmar in 2021.

Likewise, the Global Naga Forum (GNF) also initiated the Shilloi Relief and Peace Mission on November 6th-8th, 2021 for Nagas in Myanmar. They noted that many Nagas are living without any basic necessities such as proper housing, food, medicines, and warm clothes. They alleged that Nagas were also made to do forced labor by Myanmar government agents and they live under constant threat from the security forces. The GNF donated blankets, warm clothes, shoes, rice, dal and salt, face masks, medicine, sanitizers, and other basic utilities. But such engagement was always perceived by the security forces as suspicions and the team was held up en route for 45 minutes by the Assam Rifles questioned and phone checked. They were set free only after the intervention of Nagaland Home Minister Y. Patton. But three volunteers who came from Layshi to collect relief materials were apprehended by Assam rifles and were sent back to the border without letting them receive the relief materials (GNF 2021). The Chief Minister of Nagaland Neiphiu Rio concerned with the possible influx of refugees in the aftermath of the military coup of 2021 has called for a humane approach towards the refugees from Myanmar. He stated that there are no reports of refugees' crossing over to Nagaland from Myanmar (Singh 2021). The geopolitical ramifications of the ethnic linkage in the area have the potential to undermine the hard-won Indo-Myanmar relations. In addition to considering security, economy, and trade, it is important to consider the people-to-people connections between India and Myanmar since they have the potential to strengthen ties between the two countries and with ASEAN.

The role of the ethnic communities is immense yet the political scene doesn't permit for a

conducive environment where the communities can interact freely without fear. The trust deficit between India/Myanmar and the ethnic communities residing across the borders need urgent attention as people-to-people connect has the potential to channel goodwill and friendship which can turn to economic and trade dividend. However, the question of security arising from unsettled insurgency issue in the borderland and the domestic political turmoil in Myanmar are major stumbling blocks. Similarly, the infrastructure deficit on both sides of the borders and the securitization of the border give an impression of the region as a conflict zone. While India is preoccupied with the question of security and defense China is making a major inroad in terms of trade and investment in Myanmar thereby threatening India's chance of effective engagement in the region. Likewise, the construction of a village of approximately 4.5 km inside the de facto border in Arunachal Pradesh implies China's expansionist tendency posing a major threat to India (Som 2021).

Political Conditions of the Nagas in Myanmar

The Naga Self-Administered Zone (NSAZ) is located in hilly northwestern Myanmar's Sagaing Region, consisting of three townships; Lahe Township, Leshi Township, and Nanyun Township (WFP 2019). The Nagas like other minor ethnic tribes are yet to completely integrate into mainland Myanmar politically and emotionally. The Nagas did not sign the Panglong Agreement 1947 as they decided to be independent and aspires to unite as one nation with the Nagas of India. The Government of Myanmar recognized the existence of various ethnic communities through its constitution and created six self-administered zones namely

Danu, Kokang, Naga, Palaung/Ta'ang, Pao, and Wa with certain local rights for the ethnic groups. The Myanmar Government and NSCN (Khaplang) has also signed a ceasefire agreement on April 8, 2012, providing further room for its movement and engagement within NSAZ (Keenan 2015).

However, the Nagas are yet to sign the much-publicized landmark Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which was signed on 15 October 2015 between the Government of Myanmar and representatives of various ethnic insurgent groups (Ethnic Armed Organization). The Tatmadaw has accused the NSCN (K) of failing to abide by the agreement signed in 2012 and supporting insurgent groups of Indian origin, including United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (S), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO), Peoples' Democratic Council of Karbi Longri (PDCK), etc. in Myanmar's soil (Deka 2019). The Government Spokesperson U Zaw Htay was quoted saying that a faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) will not be allowed to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) because of its demand for an independent Naga homeland (Bhattacharya 2018). However, the 2008 Constitution⁴ of Myanmar forbids secession from the Union. Though the Constitution of Myanmar outlined the Self-Administered Zone comprising of the townships of Lahe, Leshi, and Nanyun in the Sagaing Region, but the Self-administered Zone is granted with minimal autonomy. The Nagas are not located in the NSAZ alone but significant ethnic Naga populations reside in Khamti and Homalin townships (Zaw 2014). K. Yhome (2020, 176) noted that Myanmar has been unable

to come up with a framework that allows the diverse ethnic groups to live together in peace. According to him, the issue lies with the country's ruling elites who refuse to acknowledge the multiracial, multilingual, and multireligious ethos of the country.

Since the military controls Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs with 25 percent seats reserved for the military in the Parliament and regional legislatures, the political parties are not able to function independently. The people have very limited political space to exercise their freedom and rights. The Nagas formed its first political party Naga Hills Regional Progressive Party and contested the 1990 general elections, winning two seats but the party was abolished by the military Government on March 18, 1992 (Han n.d). In the 2020 general election, a newly formed Naga National Party also contested elections in Kachin state and Sagaing Region but failed to get any seat (Tun 2019).

Though there is a demarcated territory and certain political representation for the Nagas in the domestic politics, the NSAZ is one of the most neglected impoverished zones in Myanmar. The people sustained themselves through subsistence agricultural activities and face various challenges including:

1. Lack of social infrastructures such as health centers, mobile and internet connectivity, educational institutions, etc. The region is prone to natural disasters and diseases.
2. Weak pressure groups/Civil Society Organization (CSOs) in Naga Self-Administered Zones which can be due to strict restriction laid down by the military junta for the establishment and functioning of such civil organizations. CSOs active in the

Naga-dominated areas include the Council of Naga Affairs (CNA), Naga Students' Organization (NSO), Naga Students' and Youth Federation (NSYF), etc.

3. Lack of free and fair press. The people are yet to enjoy the benefit of a free and fair press. State censorship of the press is a common state of affairs. The absence of regional media and the lack of trained professionals in journalism need serious retrospection. In recent years, the educated people have started using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp to connect with one another and raise their issue both within the community and with the outside world. The network of local organizations has been rapidly growing in recent years facilitated by technology, cellular phones, and social media, which are shattering conventional cultural borders (Bhattacharya, 2020, 70).
4. Inadequate road, rail, and air transportation leading to NSAZ continues to be a significant concern. The NSAZ is a rural area where most of the villages are accessible only by foot or motorbike. Mobile and internet connectivity are available but on a limited scale (WFP 2019).
5. The region also has a high rate of poverty, malnutrition as a result of its remoteness, isolation, and mountainous location (WFP 2019).
6. Human rights violation by the military junta. In the NSAZ, the military has engaged in a number of grave violations of human rights, including beatings, rapes, molestation, intimidation, forced labour, murder, etc. (ENDO 2014).

To bring about peace and development in the area, India must leverage the power of the goodwill of the Nagas living in on the border

areas and actively engage with the state elected representatives as well as with leaders of the CSOs. The 2021 military coup and the aftermath have resulted in the migration of the ethnic communities from Myanmar to India which is more evident in the Mizoram side of the border. The Nagas in Myanmar too are facing the brunt of the military coup resulting in shortage of food, medical supplies and other basic necessities. The closing of border as a result of the global pandemic has also limited the scope for interaction and assistance between the two countries.

Conclusion

The geopolitical isolation ushered in by the partition of India in 1947 and the lack of development made the region isolated and neglected for a very long time. With the loss of access to Chittagong port and Calcutta port, NE states have to depend on land and air for accessibility thereby limiting their economic growth and its interaction with other states. The inland waterways (Ganga-Brahmaputra) were closed for a long time which was opened recently in 2018. The Government at various levels has taken up measures to integrate the region politically, economically, and emotionally. However, certain issues become imperative in the making of India's foreign policy such as trade, security communication including unresolved borders, insurgency, arms trafficking, illegal migration, refugees, human trafficking, and other illegal activities. However, conflicts and insurgency should not be a yardstick to condition the flow of investment and build development infrastructures in the region. The realities, perceptions, and contentions of Northeastern states in the foreign policy

framework need a wider discourse as the region has the potential to drive India's diplomatic relations with its neighbors and extended neighbors. Incorporating the region by providing a framework for its involvement will close the gap between the domestic and external compulsions which threaten India's security.

Given that each state in the region has unique characteristics, New Delhi must be careful not to offer generalized policy prescription for the entire region while seeking for an inclusion of northeast in India's foreign policy-making. Subhir Bhaumik (2016) pointed out the role played by a small state like Tripura in influencing the Indian foreign policy towards East Pakistan and Bangladesh for half a century. Likewise, Nagaland, the state with the most complicated issue of ethnic politics and insurgency in the region has the potential to influence India-Myanmar relations with Nagas spread across four Northeastern states (Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam) with three states sharing international borders with Myanmar. But New Delhi faces a significant policy problem in the wake of the military coup on February 1, 2021, the creation of the State Administrative Council (SAC), and the ensuing civil disobedience movement as these concerns can undermine Indo-Myanmar relations. Moreover, the contiguous border area continues to act as a safe haven for militants from northeast who

often collude with the various ethnic armed organizations of Myanmar and even with the military junta.

In conclusion, policymakers should be aware of the issues and requirements of the people living at the periphery and work in conjunction with the state concern in order to successfully execute the Act East Policy. A regulated border with greater emphasis on developing people-to-people contact and cross-border trade initiatives are likely to yield greater benefits as opposed to a closed securitized border. In order to achieve this, the idea of para-diplomacy should be introduced and states should be encouraged to conduct bilateral relations with the adjoining countries. The unresolved Indo-Naga and Naga-Myanmar political issue will continue to hinder cross border trade and people-to-people connect which in turn will undercut peace, security and economic stability in the border areas. In contrast to the interactions of Indian states that share borders with Bangladesh, Nagaland's Government has very little engagement with Myanmar. This is largely a State Government matter rather than one that necessarily involves the Central Government. The success of the Agartala Doctrine can be a case in point given the willingness of the Naga people across the border to further strengthen Indo-Myanmar relations.

Notes

1. India has also responded by providing relief material during natural calamities in Myanmar such as the cyclone Nargis (2008), Cyclone Mora (2017), earthquake in Shan State (2011), the influenza outbreak in Yangon (2017) and also provided medical equipment and medicines worth USD 900,000 on 6 May 2020 during COVID-19 pandemic (MEA 2020).
2. The notion of “Extended Neighborhood” was “conceived to fulfill India need for trade and economy, meet energy requirement, geo-economics, security and military compulsion” (Kadakkadan 2011: 28-29).
3. The Naga Tribes in Myanmar includes Anal, Cheril, Chirr, Heimi, Htangan, Khaklak/Hkaklak, Kengu, Lainung, Laihe, Makury, Konyak, Khiamniugan, Kharam Khaklak, Kayo, Pakang, Phellongri, Phango, Phankem, Pangmi, Pangu, Para, Rangpan, Rasit, Rekho, Malang, Nokho, Nokte, Nolang, Namshik, Saplo, Shangphuri, Sira, Somi, Tangkhul, Tikhir, and Yimchunger inhabiting townships such as Homalin, Lahe, Layshi and Somra sub-township, Hkamti, Nanyun with Pangsau sub-township, Tamu of Sagaing Division and Tanai of Kachin state (Naga Hoho 2008, 123-124).
4. Article 10 of the 2008 Myanmar Constitution states, “No part of the territory constituted in the Union such as Regions, States, Union Territories and Self-Administered Areas shall ever secede from the Union”.

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