

CENISEAS PAPERS

4

**BETWEEN SOUTH AND
SOUTHEAST ASIA:
NORTHEAST INDIA
AND
THE LOOK EAST POLICY**

SANJIB BARUAH

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR



**Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast
Asia Studies**

**OMEQ KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT
GUWAHATI, ASSAM, INDIA**

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SERIES EDITOR'S NOTE

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS] (briefly described on the back cover of this publication). The Look East policy — India's efforts to improve bi-lateral and multi-lateral ties with the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) — and its implications for Northeast India, is a major area of CENISEAS's research and public educational programming.

This paper by Sanjib Baruah, head of CENISEAS, outlines the opportunities and challenges of the Look East policy from a Northeast Indian vantage point. Baruah argues that the policy holds promises of historic proportions for the region. It could give Northeast India access to global markets and technology and help the region overcome the handicaps of its landlocked condition. There are potential benefits in other areas as well. A number of Northeast Indian ethnic groups have roots in Southeast Asia. The region's history and culture, Baruah argues, can be a valuable soft power resource in the Look East policy. On the model of the European Union's accommodation to paradiplomacy — the international activities of domestic regional entities — he suggests creating a space

in the Look East policy for cultural and economic diplomacy by Northeast Indian states.

There are, however, significant challenges ahead. Baruah points out that the Indian heartland's ties with South-east Asia have historically been primarily maritime-oriented and not continental. Even today it is cheaper and easier for India to trade with Southeast Asia by sea rather than by land. The land route is through a difficult physical terrain and there are political uncertainties as well as significant risks. There is for instance the danger that improved roads through Myanmar would bring in drugs, illegal migrants, infectious disease and small arms into Northeast India more easily than before.

But to live up to its potential of becoming Northeast India's road to peace and prosperity, Baruah believes that the Look East policy will have to develop by facing up to those risks, i.e. the risks will have to be actively assessed and managed and not just avoided. He argues for a robust continental thrust to the Look East policy including a clear vision of a cross-border region-building project between Northeast India and its transnational neighbours on the east.

India does not have to go it alone. Thanks to the interest of multilateral organizations and of other major countries with a stake in the globalised economy, there is a virtual boom in the construction of cross-national highways, road, rail and air corridors in the world today. But multilateral development assistance for building roads through Myanmar has not been forthcoming because of economic sanctions on Myanmar by the United States and the European Union. However, in the US and in Europe today there is growing recognition that the

sanctions are not working. This creates an opportunity for India. Baruah believes that India is well positioned to play a leadership role in coordinating international policy towards Myanmar. We can promote reconciliation between the military and the democratic forces and facilitate a political transition in Myanmar.

The author wishes to thank a number of institutions and individuals for giving him the opportunity to engage with the subject. He is especially grateful to Mrinal Miri, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development and to the other members of the Board, and to Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, Director of the Institute and his colleagues on the Faculty, for inviting him to head the Centre and to contribute to the formulation of its intellectual mission.

A number of speaking engagements in the first quarter of 2004 enabled the author to work on various parts of the argument developed in this paper. He is grateful to Jatin Hazarika, I.A.S. and N.K. Das, I.A.S. for the invitation to present the 50th Golden Jubilee Oration of the Assam Branch of the Indian Institute of Public Administration; to Atul Sarma, Vice Chancellor of Arunachal University for the invitation to deliver the 20th Foundation Day Lecture of Arunachal University; and to Rajindra Vora of Pune University, India and Anne Feldhaus of Arizona State University, USA for the invitation to speak at the Arizona State University's symposium on Regions and Regional Consciousness. Short segments of this paper have appeared in two articles published in the *Indian Express* (12th December 2003) and the *Telegraph* (9th February 2004).

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**Between South and Southeast Asia:
Northeast India and the Look East Policy**

“Nations come and go, why not regions?”
— Donald Emerson¹

“The construction of regions and territories is part of the perpetual transformation of the spatial system, in which regions emerge, exist for some time and may finally disappear.”
— Anssi Paasi, 2000

Northeast India is the northeastern borderland of South Asia, but the region can also be described as the north-western borderland of Southeast Asia. A major two-volume work entitled *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* published by the Princeton University Press in 1967 included a chapter on Assam: the province then more or less coincided with what is called Northeast India today. Peter Kunstadter,

¹ Cited in Acharya, 2003: 24

the editor of the volume, explained the inclusion this way. Assam, he wrote, has a large population of tribal and minority peoples whose languages are more closely related to the languages of Southeast Asia than to those of the Indian subcontinent. Their cultures too resemble the cultures of their neighbours in Southeast Asia. Like the southern boundary of China that does not mark a cultural or linguistic division, India's eastern border, wrote Kunstadter, also does not mark off a cultural or linguistic area (Kunstadter, 1967: 205).

The idea that South Asia is a discrete geographical region separated from Southeast Asia is a fiction. There are no "natural" geographical boundaries separating South and Southeast Asia along the Indo-Myanmarese border. In territorial terms today's 'South Asia' is to a large extent successor to the entity called 'British India'. Northeast India's ties — historical, cultural, social and economic — do not stop at these international boundaries.

We know from the rise and fall of regions like Eastern Europe or Central Asia that regions are not objective geographical realities, but rather contingent and contested entities. The Japanese occupation of Myanmar across Northeast India is a critical episode that led to the Indo-Myanmarese border becoming the dividing line between South and Southeast Asia. The Western Alliance formed in 1943 — the foundation of the post-war geopolitical category Southeast Asia — subsequently placed Myanmar within the geographical ambit of the South East Asian Command [SEAC]. A lot has happened since then. What gives Southeast Asia its coherence, writes a scholar of the region

must count as one of the finest acts of collective self-imagination undertaken by a region's nationalist political elite in the wake of liberation from European and American colonialism. As with nationalism and nation-states, regions may be 'imagined', designed, constructed and defended' (Acharya, 2003: 24).

Southeast Asia is of course not unique in being constructed or imagined as a region. The idea that regions, to paraphrase Michael Walzer, are "social constructions: imagined, invented put together" do not imply that they are any "less real or less authentic than some other" (Walzer, 1995: 324). Indeed Etienne Balibar even suggests that may be "only imaginary communities" are "real" since "every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary, that is, it is based on a projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative" (Balibar, 1991: 93).

It is not my intention to privilege Northeast India's ties to Southeast Asia over its ties to the Indian subcontinent except to note that the living within the boundaries of a modern territorial state has a powerful effect on making some ties seem more natural than others. However, there are slippages in the 18th and 20th century efforts to naturalize the space of nation states that become most apparent in border regions. My particular concern here is the "territorial trap" in which Northeast India has been caught as a "sensitive border region" and the opportunities for the region in our era of globalism to get out of this trap and connect with its transnational neighbours².

² I owe the phrase territorial trap to John Agnew (1994).