

Bangladesh: The Key to India's Look East

Subir Bhaumik

Comments by Atig Ghosh

Subir Bhaumik's proposal, entitled "Bangladesh: the Key to India's Look East", projects a sincere appeal for the broad-basing of what since the prime-ministership of P.V. Narsimha Rao has come to be called India's Look East Policy. This represents efforts to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia in order to bolster India's standing as a regional power and devise a counterweight to the strategic influence of the People's Republic of China. This is the big idea that has been assiduously practiced by successive prime ministers from A.B. Vajpayee to N.D. Modi, the latter having upgraded it, so to speak, to "Act East".

The obvious observation to make here is that one cannot *look*, let alone *act*, "East" (by which the Indian policy pundits have clearly meant the South-East Asian countries) by ignoring the north-eastern states of India. This seems to have been the case for some time after the framing of the "Look East" policy. However, subsequent initiatives, such as the establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) in September 2001, have attempted to rectify this omission with mixed successes. India is also participating in the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Pacific initiatives for an Asian Highway Network and the Trans-Asian Railway network. Discussions are also proceeding on reopening the World War II-era Stilwell Road linking India's Assam state with China's Yunnan province through Myanmar. These multi-modal infrastructure projects, by virtue of their inevitable routing through the north-eastern states of India and the resulting forward and backward linkages, is expected to prioritise the region for investment and redevelopment. At least, Bhaumik's proposal embodies and ingeminates this vision.

However, in his opinion, a serious imperfection continues to bedevil this otherwise exigent need— Bangladesh has so far not been made an integral part of this "Look East" vision. Therefore, Bhaumik "calls for a double Look East". He expatiates: "To make it [the 'Look East' policy] successful and achieve its purpose of situating the country's under-developed and conflict-laden north-eastern states at the heart of its robust engagement with South-East Asia and possibly China, India needs to first look east from its mainland to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is crucial to India for connecting its mainland to its Northeast, linked by land through a tenuous 21-km wide Siliguri corridor, often derided as a 'Chicken's Neck'."

A few observations are in order.

Bhaumik renames this policy-process double Look East probably all the time thinking of a triple Look East, since we find Indian "mainland" looking east first at Bangladesh, then to the north-eastern states, and finally to South-East Asian countries. The felicitic times when we would be able to talk of the Indian mainland and the north-eastern states as the same entity might not have arrived just yet, however clichéd this may sound to

newfound nationalists, and had they arrived, these voluminous disquisitions on the importance of the north-eastern states in a discussion or development of Look East would not have had its mandate in the first place.

Bhaumik's vision is an extension of his concerns expressed in a recently published volume edited by him, entitled *Agartala Doctrine: A Proactive Northeast in Indian Foreign Policy*. The contributions to this volume detail the regional environment in India's eastern and north-eastern neighbourhood where its "Look East" policy is unfolding. And in this book too, like in the proposal, Bhaumik makes a powerful case for developing a robust national doctrine that would rein in a defensive security mindset and leverage the neighbouring countries (in the present case, Bangladesh) for economic opportunities. The demagogues on national television may rant about cross-border infiltration and the 'minority menace' in border states; but, here we have a proposal that is music to our sore ears. And, in fact, the process has actually started as Bhaumik himself mentions, *albeit* fleetingly. The first summit of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) was convened on July 31, 2004, and the leaders of the group agreed on technological and economical cooperation among South Asian and South-East Asian countries along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Commerce, investment, technology, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, fisheries, transport and communication, textiles, leather etc. have been included in it. Not insignificantly, the BIMSTEC is headquartered in Dhaka since September 2014. Further, on December 18, 2013, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar drew up a long discussed plan, emphasising the need to quickly improve physical connectivity in the region, over two days of talks in the south-western Chinese city of Kunming— the provincial capital of Yunnan, which borders Myanmar. This marked the formal endorsement on the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation) Economic Corridor by the four nations, whereby it was agreed that the corridor will run from Kunming to Kolkata, linking Mandalay in Myanmar as well as Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh.

And then, literally at the ground level, are the "border *haats*". The border *haats* aim at promoting the well-being of the people dwelling in remote areas across the borders of two countries, by establishing traditional system of marketing the local produce through local markets in local currency and/or barter basis. Though not significant as a percentage of bilateral trade, these measures help to improve economic well-being of marginalised sections of society. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Bangladesh signed on October 23, 2010 for setting up border *haats* on India-Bangladesh border, has already received approval of the Union Cabinet. Border *haats*, however, are not new-fangled. Braving much adversity, they had survived quite numerous along the India-Bangladesh border since Partition (1947). The political approval therefore is more in the nature of what may be called *ex-post-facto* recognition. Bhaumik rightly emphasizes their importance, while interestingly pointing out how these *haats*, instituted to strengthen bilateral relations by widening the ambit of stakeholders to frontier regions which provide scope for wider connectivity, often end up as regions of conflict due to myopic security-driven state policies.

The fact that Bhaumik's insistence on greater, wider cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the Look East scenario comes at a time when such ties are already well on the way of being forged and implemented does not detract from the merit of such

research. While overemphasis on the novelty of such a proposal is probably misplaced, it is true that good researches should come up which would help us better understand the issues and advantages involved in this inclusive foreign-policy model. Also, we could earnestly expect that such clear expositions would prod, if not goad, policymakers to go beyond lip service.

Finally, Bhaumik tells us such cooperation could become “central to an alternate vision of a South Asian federation minus Pakistan.” This will have much implication for the changing geopolitics of Asia that would insulate the rest of South Asia from Pakistan, he argues, and the terror fulcrum of the “AfPak” region would be pushed into the ambit of West and Central Asia. However, and thankfully, this line of thought does not develop into an anti-Pakistan tirade after all, though it goes a long way in that direction. In fact, Bhaumik surprises us. He tells us: “If India and Bangladesh succeed in carrying their relationship to new heights, it will help dispel fears of ‘Big Brother India’ among its smaller neighbours. An isolated Pakistan may thus feel incentivised to change track and attempt improving relations with India to avoid isolation.”

We have come to the final point of this short discussion. Apart from the reference to border *haats*, the proposal is quite clean of references to local popular aspirations and benefits thereto. I do not have the expertise to speak on this matter legislatively. But, merely ask to be granted permission to voice a few niggles. Neoliberal development has the nature of mobilizing capital from point to point without even touching upon the lives of the downtrodden it traverses *en route*. A literal, visual representation of this is a metropolitan fly-over that jumps over urban squalor and under-bridge homelessness in smug disarticulation with the economy of need. One wonders if Look East would also mean the same for the north-eastern states, where “development” will come as a facilitation of capital movement from the Indian “mainland” to Southeast Asia, leaving the people of these states in much the same historical predicament as the under-bridge slums. Also, does development necessarily mean the dwindling of conflict? In many cases, of which some are from the north-eastern region itself, it has meant the opposite. Will “Look East”-sponsored development mean the end of conflict and nationalist aspirations in the north-eastern region? In these times of lull in conflict, it is easy to thunder a “Yes”. To mix a metaphor only slightly, future may still have a wild card or two up its sleeve.