

India's Neighborhood Policy and the Northeast: Exploratory Study of the Nagas in the Indo-Myanmar Border

Authors : Sachoiba Inkah

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(Armed Forces Special Powers Act) to suppress the voices of both states and non-state actors. The liberalization of the 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 reorienting of India's foreign policy to 'Neighborhood First' is attributed to the present political dispensation, which is further widened to include 'Extended Neighborhood.' As a result, the Northeastern states have become key players in India's participation in regional groupings such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BCIM. The need for external balancing, diplomacy and development has reset India's foreign policy priorities as the Northeast states lie in the confluence of South Asia, Southeast and East Asia, and a stakeholder in Act East Policy. The paper will explore the role of Northeastern states in the framework of Indian foreign policy as it shares international boundaries with China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and most importantly, study the case of Nagas who are spread across Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh bordering Myanmar. The Indo-Myanmar border is an area of conflict and various illegal activities such as arms trafficking, illegal migrants, drug, and human trafficking are still being carried out and in order to address this issue, both India and Myanmar need to take into consideration the various communities living across the border. And conflict and insurgency should not be a yardstick to curtailed development of infrastructures such as roads, health facilities, transport, and communication in the contested region. The realities, perceptions, and contentions of the Northeastern states and the different communities living in the border areas need a wider discourse as the region the potential to drive India's diplomatic relations with its neighbors and extended neighborhood. The methods employed are analytical and more of a descriptive analysis on India's foreign policy framework with a focus on Nagas in Myanmar, drawing from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents, data, and statistics released by various governmental agencies, parliamentary debates, political speeches, press releases, treaties and agreements, historical biographies and organizational policy papers, protocols and procedures of government conferences, regional organization study reports etc. The paper concludes that the recent proactive engagement between India and Myanmar on trade, defense, economic, and infrastructure development are positive signs cementing bilateral ties, but there is not much room for the people-to-people connect, especially for people living in the borderland. The Freedom of Movement Regime that is in place is limited and there is more scope for improvement as people in the borderland looks towards trade and commerce to not only uplift the border economy but also act as a catalyst for robust engagement between the two countries, albeit with more infrastructure such as road, healthcare, education, a tourist hotspot, trade centers, mobile connectivity, etc.

Keywords : foreign policy, infrastructure development, insurgency, people to people connect

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