

Northeast India: The Convergence Point of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Vision For Free and Open Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

The Indian government announced the Act East Policy in the year 2014. Look East policy was upgraded to Act East Policy which was formed with the main objective to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. This could have been possible only through continuous engagement at multilateral, bilateral and regional levels and by providing enhanced connectivity to the north eastern states. Over the years, many initiatives have been taken by the Indian Government for the development of the north eastern region. However, the region still lags behind compared to national development standards. At the same time, the projects could not materialise or achieve success due to the lack of funds in the country. This is when Japan showed up and became a major player contributing towards the development of the north-eastern region's infrastructural sector. Furthermore, Japan provided easy loans at low interest rates to the country for investing in a wide variety of projects which were undertaken for economic growth. This paper highlights the strategic interest of Japan in the development of the North eastern region and how this has benefitted both India and Japan. The paper also explains the vision of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) which is crucial for Indo-Japan ties. North eastern region being a critical geo-strategic region for the implementation of FOIP has been the first choice of Japan in this respect. India's Act East policy and Japan's vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific converge at north-east. The paper attempts to throw some light on the initiatives taken by Japan for the development of India's north-eastern region especially in the light of FOIP and also puts forward some suggested areas on which further projects may be taken up.

Keywords: Act East Policy, Northeast India, Economic Development, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Asia-Pacific.

Introduction

The Look East Policy which was launched in 1991 during the tenure of former Prime Minister of India, P V Narasimha Rao was upgraded and the Act East Policy was announced in the year 2014. The Act East Policy, launched by the present Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi focuses on boosting economic cooperation, cultural ties, building infrastructure for greater connectivity and mainly to build a strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Primarily, it was an initiative to integrate India's economy with global supply chains mainly being concentrated in South East Asia and East Asia.

Out of all the initiatives so taken by the Government of India in regard to strengthening the diplomatic relations of India with foreign countries, the Act East Policy proved to be most significant one in pushing India's foreign policy to another stage. This policy has its focus on one main dimension which is - Security. The four C's of this policy are: Culture, Commerce, Connectivity and Capacity Building.

The north-eastern region of India shares a 4500km long international border with countries like Nepal, Bhutan, China and Myanmar. Among these countries, Myanmar is known as the Gateway of India's North East to South East Asia and shares a boundary of 1643 km with the north eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. Thus, the north eastern region has high potential to develop diplomatic relations with other parts of South East Asian Region. Besides, the rich cultural heritage of north east India, the Brahmaputra River, the sub-tropical climate and abundant availability of raw material makes it a prime location for building strong ties with the South East Asian Nations.

In August 2016, the then Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe at the 6th Tokyo International Conference on African development in Kenya introduced the concept of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) with a fundamental aim to foster regional stability and prosperity. The Indo-Pacific region holds great importance as it is the home to half of the world's population. The main aim of FOIP is to foster regional stability and prosperity of the world by facilitating free and vigorous economic activities in the region and by improving connectivity between Asia and Africa through a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

As a part of its policy, Japan has promoted cooperation with all the countries that endorse the vision of FOIP. Japan looks upon India's north-eastern region as one of the most important and concentric location for introducing FOIP and thereby took many initiatives in developing this region by supporting India. Japan sees good opportunity to invest in a wide variety of projects upcoming in the north eastern region as the development of the region will open import-export and trade routes which will be a blessing for the Japanese economy.

Significance of the Study

Act East Policy, an initiative taken by the Government of India is one major step towards the development and betterment of the north eastern region and the country as a whole by building healthy and fruitful diplomatic relation with foreign countries. This policy focuses on economic and security integration through continuous engagement with countries in Asia-Pacific region at regional bi-lateral and multi-lateral levels.

A study on the 'Northeast India: The Convergence Point of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific' helps us to understand about India's Act East Policy, its aim, and how the same is aligned in connection to the North Eastern Region. This paper tends to throw light on Japan's vision of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) considering North East India as its geo-strategic location. Furthermore, the paper also highlights the different initiatives taken by Japan in context of fulfilling its vision of FOIP in the North Eastern Region.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study about the importance of north eastern region of India in context of India's Act East Policy.

2. To understand the vision of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and its connection with Act East Policy.
3. To identify the initiatives taken by Japan in context of the vision of FOIP in the north eastern region of India.

Methodology

The study follows descriptive as well as analytical research design. The sources of data used are secondary in nature. Secondary data for the study was collected from books, journals and websites.

Review of Literature

Some worthwhile studies relating to the present study are as under:

Potsangbam and Barman (2017), conducted a study on the Act East policy and the presence of Japanese businesses in India. The paper highlights the potential of the Act East policy and examines its effect on the Japanese Business presence in India till date. It also concentrates on how the Act East Policy will increase the trade flow in the country. The study also revealed how committed the leaders of both the countries are towards realising 'Jai Japan - Jai India' and also revealed that the Japanese Prime Minister said that they will support Modi's "Make in India Initiative".

Rossiter (2018), conducted a study on "the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and Japan's Emerging Security Posture". The paper highlights the aims and objectives of the government of Japan towards the Indo-Pacific region: its FOIP Strategy which was unveiled in 2016. The paper revealed that though being an attractive force for analysts the practical implications of the FOIP remains lost in all the noise.

Ahmed (2019), conducted a study on "India's Act East Policy and North-East India's critical review". This paper highlights the various objectives of the policy and the importance of the North-Eastern region for the same. Through this study the author concluded that the progress of the North-Eastern region would lead populace of the region towards prosperity and for the same it is very important that the region recognise that it must have leverage on the opportunities which are present today.

Sahashi (2019) conducted a study on "The Indo-Pacific in Japan's Foreign Policy". Through the study it was concluded that FOIP concept is an important and useful means not just for Japan but other countries as well to identify the areas of cooperation that can support security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Analysis and Discussion

The Act East Policy, an up gradation of the Look East Policy of India was announced in the year 2014 with the objective of bringing economic cooperation, cultural ties, building infrastructure for greater connectivity and mainly to build a strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. For the implementation of the same in a timely manner, the Government of India, especially the north eastern region opened the Act East Policy Department facilitating an environment for investment and rapid industrialisation in the north eastern region.

The geographical location of the north eastern region has made it the geo centric location for the implementation of this policy. Being the eastern most region of India, this region shares international borders of about 4500km long with Nepal, Bhutan, China and Myanmar. Not only this, the region is rich in cultural heritage and is quite very unique as various ethnic groups and tribes reside here. Furthermore, most parts of the region have sub-tropical climate thus making it a central location, rich in natural vegetation and precious metal. It is worth mentioning that the Brahmaputra River that flows in this region has immense water resource that can be used to produce electricity and to develop the waterways to Bangladesh or Tibet making it the cheapest means of transportation. Due to these special characteristics, the north eastern region qualifies to be the key location for developing and strengthening the diplomatic relations with the different parts of the South East Asian regions. Development of communication infrastructure is the prime requirement for the north eastern region to be linked with the neighbouring South East Asian countries.

The concept of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) of Japan envisages stability and prosperity as a means through dynamism of the international community by combining the two continents i.e., Asia and Africa and the two oceans namely Pacific and Indian ocean. Many challenges including terrorism, natural disasters, piracy and proliferation of WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) is faced by the Indo-Pacific Region and as such to end this and to promote peace, stability and prosperity, Japan introduced its vision of FOIP thus making the Indo-Pacific free and open for cross border transactions by abiding by the international rules including Rule of Law and resulting in peaceful settlement of disputes. The 3 key pillars of FOIP includes-

1. Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc- The key features include fostering cooperation among the principal nations and promoting strategic communication between them.
2. Pursuit of Economic prosperity- This has been implemented by improving:
 - Physical connectivity- It includes taking up infrastructural development projects such as railways and roads, energy and ICT, ports, etc.
 - People to people connectivity- This can be done by developing the most important resource i.e., the human resource of the nation.
 - Institutional connectivity- this includes promoting connectivity through improved communication among the various South East Asian Nations.

FOIP tends to strengthen diplomatic relations for which it is very important to build a healthy business environment through improved economic partnership.

Commitment for peace and stability

The key feature of this pillar is the capacity building of the countries in the Indo-Pacific Region by eliminating various challenges that these countries face through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, counter terrorism and non- proliferation.

Japan has long time connection with north eastern part of India since the World War II days when the Japanese troupe fought for the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose. Talking about the current situation, the north east India has become a major part of Japan FOIP and the latter is the major contributor in developing the infrastructural sector of the north eastern region. A number of projects in this regard have been taken up in this region by Japan for the development of the infrastructural sector in the region including:

The Guwahati Water Supply Project

The first phase of Commissioning of ambitious South-West Guwahati Water Supply Project under Kamakhya Distribution Zone was inaugurated by Sjt. Sarbananda Sonowal, the then Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam on 30th Nov 2020 with financial assistance from Government of Japan of JPY 29453 million (approx. INR 1,736 crore) to provide safe and reliable drinking water supply to approximately 1,42,000 households. As on Dec 21, 2022 these facilities were expected to provide water connection to 14 DMAs's (Districted Meter Area) with 10,000 households out of which 1500 have already been served.

The Guwahati Sewerage Project (Assam)

The Guwahati Sewerage Project is for the Guwahati Kamrup Metropolitan District (South Central and South-East Area) which was projected to be implemented within a period of 7 years. The project began its implementation in October 2014 and was completed in March 2022 i.e. in 90 months which is 6 months more than the estimated period. The JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) assisted an amount of Rs. 1178.75 crore for this Project.

- The North-East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Assam-Meghalaya) – This programme was launched with the aim to build 403 km long roads in Meghalaya and Mizoram, approximately 52 kms will be in Meghalaya and 351 Kms in Mizoram. The civil work was expected to be completed by 2021 and maintenance work by 2025. The Government of Japan extended a financial support of INR 6721 crores.
- The Project for Renovation and Modernisation of the Umiam-Umtru Stage III Hydroelectric Power Stations (Meghalaya) - Umiam-Umtru is a 174 MW hydro power project. An investment of Rs. 315 crores have been made by Japan for the same.
- The Sustainable Catchment Forest Management Project (Tripura) – The SCATFORM is a new project funded under Japanese ODA Loan to implemented over a period of 10 years beginning from 2018-19 by the Tripura Forest Department with a total outlay of about Rs. 1000 crores.
- A Forest Management Project in Nagaland – The NFMP is a 46 million Euro (INR 400 Crore approx.) forestry project for the state of Nagaland targeting 185 Project Villages across 16 districts covering around 80,000 Ha for Forestry Intervention.

Apart from the ones mentioned above many other projects like The Project on Capacity Enhancement for Sustainable Agriculture and Irrigation Development (Mizoram), Primary Schools in Manipur, etc. have been initiated by Japan in the North-Eastern Region.

As of January 2021, Japan had already made a total investment at over 231 billion Yen (approx. 2 Billion Dollars) in North East India.

The IRIS, a youth initiative programme taken up by the government of Japan through which young talents from all over the North-eastern region are invited to Japan for training and development. The programme was announced in May 2017 by Ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu at the Commemoration of the 73rd anniversary of Battle of Imphal with the main aim of improving its relation with the north-eastern region in the long run. The name IRIS was taken up as it is linked with both Japan and North-eastern region in a mysterious way. Near the Loktal lake of Imphal, a species Iris is grown i.e. KOMBIREI used in festivals commonly was found to be a new species in India and seemed identical with the Japanese Iris i.e. KAKITSUBATA, an indigenous species of Japan since a thousand years and more.

In the past five years. this relation between Japan and India has reached new heights. Recently on 15th March, 2022 both Japan and India met at its Sixth joint meeting of the India-

Japan Act East Forum in New Delhi, co-chaired by Foreign Secretary and Ambassador of Japan to India Mr. Suzuki Satoshi. All the representatives and the state governments of the North-eastern region attended the meeting including the officials of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan Foundation (JF). A review was made to measure the progress of the ongoing projects in various areas including connectivity, hydropower, forest management, water supply and sewerage, skill development and Japanese language education. Furthermore, new areas of co-operation were discussed and the same will be implemented in the upcoming years.

Suggestions

Some specific activities and areas that may be considered by Japan in north-eastern region of India as a part of its FOIP initiative are:

1. Seminars and field training
2. Technical guidance
3. Education and training programs
4. Cyber security
5. Health security
6. Climate change
7. Artificial Intelligence
8. Training in latest technology etc.

Conclusion

Through this study it can be concluded that Japan plays a major and prominent role in the development of the north-eastern region of India. The north-eastern region being the central location for the success of the Japan's vision of FOIP has received a hefty investment from Japan over the last few years for development in various sectors. This has helped in developing a healthy relation between the two countries and it is growing day-by-day. The Act East Policy of the Indian government has received a boost because of Japan's initiative and definitely fostered world development. The north east India has availed many benefits for being the convergence point of India's Act East policy and Japan's vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The once neglected and disconnected north-eastern region of India has now become the limelight and in times to come will play a major role in the development of the country as well as the world.

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