

## The North East is key for India's ties with Asean

India was host to all 10 leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) this January, to celebrate 25 years of a growing relationship through a commemorative summit with the grouping.

Ever since India transformed its "Look East" policy to "Act East", there have been continuous efforts to make this relationship result oriented and practical. In the absence of political differences, trade and investments should be the main drivers of the relationship, but India and Asean are struggling to push bilateral trade to the agreed target of \$100 billion. This could, inter alia, be helped by improving connectivity—through land, sea and air—which will cut down costs of movement of goods and services.

Among the connectivity projects already envisaged is a four-lane trilateral highway linking India (Moreh in Manipur) with Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar which will be expanded to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This highway can only be sustained through movement of goods and economic activity along the route through Myanmar and, hence, the growing importance of our North-East. For this, it is essential to focus on development and connectivity in India's North-East itself, with new road and rail links, opening up multi modal transport, including river navigation, and setting up industrial corridors and economic activities like haats or local markets, with emphasis on agriculture, horticulture, handlooms, handicrafts and processed food.

This will allow India to export its produce through this link rather than become a net importer of cheap Chinese goods. Sea connectivity from India to Asean will be helped by the Kaladan multi-modal transport project, which will link Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar, as also Mizoram by the river and land route.

The North-East, home to 3.8% of the national population, occupies about 8% of India's total geographical area, and is strategically important with over 5,300km of international borders. A narrow chicken's neck corridor connects it with the rest of India, and infrastructure connectivity with the mainland as well as the bordering countries needs upgradation, for which large investments are needed.

Naveen Verma, secretary, ministry of development of north eastern region, or DONER, has said that India plans to spend Rs45,000 crore for the development of the region bordering China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Some recent decisions to enhance connectivity of the North-East include a 4,000-km long ring road connecting the states; expediting railway projects connecting all state capitals by 2020, and extending to 15 new destinations; border last-mile rail connectivity with Myanmar and restoring rail connectivity with Bangladesh. Twenty port townships are to be developed along the Brahmaputra and Barak river systems to enhance intra-regional connectivity.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also proposed the augmentation of air connectivity to and from the region, which will help business ties with the Asean. At least 50 economic integration and development nodes are to be developed across the region, in tandem with transport corridors to boost manufacturing. Connectivity is also being upgraded in the border areas for strategic purposes, with highways and development plans approved for Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur, including a four-lane highway between Dimapur and Kohima.

This will also aid in improving law and order in the region and boost the underutilized tourism potential. A recent Research Information System study notes that the Kaladan project, and

trilateral highway are both going to have a positive impact in the region.

Japan has emerged as a major partner in our efforts for the development of the North-East and connectivity to Asean. Towards this end, the “Japan India Act East Forum” has been set up, which will seek synergies between India’s Act East policy and Japan’s Partnership for Quality Infrastructure located in the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and link with Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”.

India has sought and received assistance from Japan in areas such as road connectivity, power, water supply and sewage, skill development, food processing and tourism.

In this context, the results of the state elections in Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland assume significance. The BJP and its allies had already secured poll victories in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

Consolidating its hold in the other states of the region will allow the ruling combine to implement its foreign and national policy promises.

Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland are important states for connectivity with the North-East. Transformational policies and supportive governments in these states could enable the government at the centre to roll out development schemes and infrastructure projects quickly, as has been the case with Assam.

It might help to develop a collective focus on inter-state boundary disputes and other ethnic conflicts within the North-East states, and also a common approach towards enhancing connectivity and trade facilitation with Asean.

*Anil Wadhwa was former secretary (east) in the ministry of external affairs.*

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