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## **Insurgency in Northeast India: A Stumbling Block for India's tie with South East Asia in the Way of Development**

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Insurgency is one of the important impediments to India's relations with South East Asian countries in the way of development. India had a good tie with Southeast Asian countries before the advent of British. The term 'Indo-China' in this region is the glaring example of it. The term 'Indo-China' here does not mean India and China; it represents a particular region in the South East Asia i.e. Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam because that region was under the influence of India and China in a certain period of time. This region (South East Asia) is very significant, because the Indian National Army (INA) was founded on 21 October, 1943 mainly by Indian prisoners of war in Singapore. Then the INA under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose attacked the British with the help of Japanese forces for the liberation of India during the Second World War period and proceeded up to Kohima, Nagaland. On 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1944, Col. Shaukat Hayat Malik, Commander of Bahadur Group of INA hoisted India's national flag (tri-color) on Indian soil (mainland) first time at Moirang, Manipur with the help of Manipuris like Mairambam Koireng Singh and others who were the members of INA.

South East Asia comprises 11 countries like Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Brunei and Timor-Leste. Independent India paid least attention to this region, rather she (India) gave special focus on the West like the USA, UK, Canada, Russia, Germany, Japan and OPEC countries. In the era of LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation), there is a need for diversification of trade destinations for the promotion of export and import of the country. With the rise of South East Asian economies in the recent decades, India felt the need for diversification of its trade direction towards the eastern side i.e. East and South East Asia. In 1991, the then Prime Minister of India, Sri P.V. Narasimha Rao took the initiative of launching 'Look East Policy' for greater economic ties with South East Asian countries in place of the traditional Westward-looking model. Then the successive governments whether UPA led by the Congress (INC) or NDA led by the BJP follows the same. It becomes more vibrant when Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, he changed the nomenclature from 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy' by widening its areas of focus. The main difference between Look East Policy and Act East Policy is that Look East Policy tried to focus on increase economic integration with South East Asian countries only

whereas Act East Policy focuses on economic and security integration and increases its focus areas not only South East Asia but also East Asia. For the realization of this Policy, the Northeast India (NEI) is to play a big role and it should act as the gateway to South East Asian countries. Simply, India connects the South East Asia through NEI. Historically the people of NEI (so-called indigenous people of this region) culturally and ethnically, have more affinity for the people of South East Asian countries because of same stock i.e. Mongoloid stock.

The Northeast India is the hub of insurgency. It is one of the major hurdles for economic development and socio-political stability in this region. A number of insurgent groups are actively operating in all the states in the Northeast like ULFA, DHD, UPDS in Assam; PLA, UNLF, KCP, PREPAK, KRA, KLF in Manipur; NSCN (IM), NSCN (K) in Nagaland; NLFT, ATTF in Tripura, etc. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India declares 16 insurgent groups of Northeast as unlawful organizations under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 like ULFA, PLA, UNLF, KCP, NLFT, AITTF, etc. Some insurgent groups have entered into Suspension of Operation (SoO) like ULFA (Pro-talk), NDFB (Ranjan Diamary), Karbi Peoples Liberation Tigers, etc. and Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) like United Peoples Democratic Solidarity, Dima Halam Daogah, etc. with the Central Government and the government of a particular state.

An 'insurgency' is an armed rebellion against a constituted authority when those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerent by the state. Some groups call for a separate state, others for regional autonomy while some extreme groups demand complete independence. Simply, the term insurgency means a group of persons who revolt against the authority by taking arms in their hands demanding independence, autonomy, separate state or homeland but the authority does not recognize them as belligerent (enemy). At present, it is popularly called 'armed opposition group'.

**This paper tries to throw light how insurgency makes a thorn for India's tie with neighbouring South East Asian countries and also draws some suggestive measures for it.**

India's Look East Policy was initiated by P.V. Narasimha Rao in early 1990s amid a worsening domestic economic and political situation. India's economic conditions were severely affected due to political instability in the country and international geo-political scenario like Gulf War, disintegration of Soviet Union and collapse of Soviet Bloc in 1991. After the collapse of Soviet Bloc, India changed her direction of economic tie from the traditional Westward-looking model to South East Asia for sustaining her (India's) economy. So, India's Look East Policy was a transitional phase between mixed economy and liberated economy.

In his opening statement at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit (2014) held in Myanmar, Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India said, "My government has been in office for six months and the intensity and the momentum with which we have enhanced our engagement in the East, is the reflection of the priority that we give to this region.....A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become

‘Act East Policy’.” Modi described India’s vision for this region is SAGAR that stands for ‘Security for All and Growth for All’. Act East Policy is based on 4Cs i.e. Culture, Commerce, Connectivity and Capacity Building. It also gives thrust on India’s economic ties, strategic and security partnership with the East and South East Asian countries. Act East Policy pays special attention to the development of Northeast India and would act as the gateway to the East and South East Asia. Some of the major projects like Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, Rhi-Tiddim Road Project, etc. are in progress. India helped Myanmar in completing 160 km. of Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo sector of the proposed trilateral highway that seeks to link India, Myanmar and Thailand. By pursuing the Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor Project, India seeks access to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

After 1990, India realized that South East Asia is emerging as a growing market with countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. At the same time, India realized the fact that China had already entrenched itself deeply in most countries of South East Asia over a period of time. ASEAN i.e. Association of South East Asian Nations is India’s 4<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner. India signed free trade with ASEAN member countries i.e. AIFA (ASEAN-India Free Trade Area) and it came into effect in 2010. In the financial year (2017-18), the volume of trade between India and ASEAN was about \$ 80 billion. In the said financial year, India’s export to ASEAN countries were around \$34 billion and India’s import from ASEAN countries were more than \$45 billion. Japanese investment in India had also increased from \$1.7 billion in 2014-15 to \$4.7 billion in 2016-17.

Geopolitically, the Northeast India is located between mainland India and South East Asia and it also acts as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. This region (NEI) is very rich in natural resources like oil, minerals, gas, coal, hydro, fertile land, forest, etc. India tries to connect East and South East Asia through Northeast India. For greater people to people contact, Air-India is planning to operate air services between Guwahati and Dhaka; and Guwahati-Dhaka and Imphal-Mandalay Bus Service had also been proposed. Many foreign patients mainly from Myanmar and Thailand are frequently being treated in Imphal and Guwahati.

Interestingly, India’s Northeast shares border with insurgency-ridden North West Myanmar which is considered a safe haven for insurgent groups of Northeast in Myanmar. Many insurgent groups like ULFA, PLA, UNLF, NSCN (K), etc. are running their military training in North West part of Myanmar. Almost all the corridors proposed as part of the sub-regional initiatives pass through ethnically volatile and militant prone areas. On the Indian side, the roads would pass through areas where the ULFA, Naga, Kuki and Meitei militants operate from. Drug and small arms may sneak into the Northeast in huge quantities, jeopardizing the peace and stability in the region. Despite the Northeast possessing enough potentialities in temperate climatic conditions, the outsiders including foreign investors decline to invest in this region due to communication bottleneck and ongoing law and order situations like general strikes, economic blockade, ethnic conflicts, etc. and most importantly extortions from real and fake insurgent

groups. No major industrial establishments are to be seen in the Northeast. Insurgent group like NSCN(IM) are collecting taxes (extortion) from the passenger vehicles and trucks as vehicle and load taxes regularly which are plying in the NH 39 (popularly called Imphal-Dimapur route, now it renames NH 2) and NH 53 (Imphal-Silchar route). According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India and its report stated that in the period of 2012-13 to 2017-18, there were 3947 extremist related incidents in the Northeast; in those incidents 1508 persons lost their lives (834 extremists, 547 civilians and 127 security personnels). The Report also revealed that the Central Government provided Rs.1679 crores as assistance to the Northeast states under the scheme of Security Related Expenditure during the said period. In insurgency-torn areas of Northeast like Manipur, many officers were shot for resisting terrorist demands like the Director (Tourism), IAS was shot for non-payment of ransom; the Divisional Engineer (Telephone) was killed because he did not waive the bills of two PCOs operated by NSCN (I-M) and PLA; the Chief Engineer, Loktak Project was killed by KYKL on Jan.12, 2000, etc. In other states of Northeast like Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, etc., some insurgent groups also indulge in kidnapping activities for ransom. Very recently, ULFA abducted two employees of Quippo Oil and Gas Infrastructure Limited –drilling superintendent Pranab Kumar Gogoi, 51 and radio operator Ram Kumar, 35 on 21 December, 2020 from Arunachal Pradesh's Changlang district, which borders Myanmar. The outfit makes a demand of Rs 20 crore as ransom for the release of these two employees. If this trend continues so, how can India make good tie with East and South East Asian countries through Northeast India by road connectivity?

India and ASEAN countries have been facing new challenges not only in economic areas but also in the areas of security and environment. This region (SEA) is faced with the US-China trade war which escalates the tension between the two Big Powers in the South China Sea in recent time. There is also mounting tension in the Far-East between China and Taiwan where China claims Taiwan is an integral part of China and is trying to capture it (Taiwan) by force, thus posing a constant threat to the sovereignty of Taiwan. There is also an escalation of tension between India and China in Sino- India border after Galwan Valley incident in Eastern Ladakh (on the night of June 15, 2020) that led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and 35 Chinese soldiers (unofficially), which is followed by the deployment of additional forces in the border areas by both the countries in recent time. From International Politics, it is learnt that 'Your enemy's enemy is your friend and your enemy's friend is your enemy' and 'one will attack other only when one feels that one (he) can dominate other' and 'one will feel safe and secure when one is in a dominant position'. These principles can be applicable when India deals her relations with her neighboring enemy countries particularly China and Pakistan. For India's security concern, India had already entered the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, popularly called the Quad, an informal strategic forum with the US, Australia and Japan for greater strategic partnership among the member countries. Moreover, India needs to keep vigil on those countries which are harbouring and abetting terrorist activities in the country. If India feels safe and secure internally and externally, she can look for developmental activities around her surroundings.

**This paper tries to draw some suggestive measures that may help in solving this issue.**

- (i) Mere deployment of additional security and paramilitary forces in this region (NEI) and making of draconian Acts by the Union Legislature to crush out insurgent groups is not the solution for it. The government should try to make an amicable solution through political dialogue with insurgent groups like Mizo Accord (June 30, 1986) and Bodo Accord (January 30, 2020). Now, Mizoram is one of the most peaceful states in the country.
- (ii) The Central Government treats this region (NEI) in a step motherly manner and this is one of the causes for the birth of insurgency in the Northeast. The Central Government pays least attention, sometimes the Central Government takes decision unilaterally or arbitrarily on even major issues of this region without taking into consideration the sentiments and attitudes of people of Northeast; decisions like scrapping of Inner Line Permit in Manipur in 1950, handing over of Kabaw Valley of Manipur to Burma (presently called Myanmar) in 1953, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA, 1958), Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDT, 1983), etc. have only hurt the sentiments of people. So, it is very essential that the Central Government must understand, read the minds of the people of Northeast India before deciding any major issues pertaining to this region. Moreover, the people of Northeast especially Mongoloid race are treated as second class citizens and sometimes tease them as 'chinkis' or 'jungalees' by the people of mainland areas of this country that leads to the feeling of alienation. So, the Central Government and the States Government should try to make certain efforts to erase such feeling of alienation from their minds by encouraging people to people contact between the people of Northeast and the people of mainland India through cultural exchange.
- (iii) Ethnic clash/ ethnic cleansing can be seen in many parts of Northeast India such as NSCN (I-M) action against Kukis in Manipur, anti-Santhal violence in Bodo areas, Karbis and Kacharis in Karbi Anglong, Kacharis and Hmar in North Cachar Hills (presently Dima Hasao), Mizos and Brus in Mizoram, etc. The governmental machineries, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders must be alert all the times so that any form of untoward incident between different ethnic groups can be averted, otherwise it may affect the trade route between mainland India and South East Asian countries.
- (iv) General strike and economic blockade on National Highways are very common in the Northeast India for even small issues. People of the Northeast must change their mindset while making their demands. While raising their demands, they should look for some other alternative democratic means that do not disturb the normal life of people, affect the movement of vehicles. If Trans-ASEAN Highways gets operational

- passing through Northeast, these general strike and economic blockade will cause a big hurdle.
- (v) Once the Central Government promised to set up Highway Protection Force in the NH-2 and NH-53 during the time of Congress government led by Okram Ibobi Singh in Manipur. Unfortunately, it is just a dream that has not materialized to date. It is the need of the hour to set up Highway Protection Force so that it can provide safety and security to the movement of vehicles on the Highways from the attack of insurgent groups especially NSCN (I-M).
  - (vi) Insurgent groups receive financial and logistic support and arms from India's neighbouring countries. India should try to improve good relations with her neighbours, so that insurgents operating in these countries can be driven out. Many training camps operated by ULFA and NDFB were destroyed and many cadres were flushed out from Bhutan by conducting a joint military operation of Indian army and Royal Bhutan Army in Bhutan.
  - (vii) Intelligence agencies must be alert all the times because these routes are very volatile for arms smuggling and drug trafficking. Stringent action must be taken immediately against those persons including insurgent groups who engage in arms smuggling and drug trafficking.
  - (viii) The Central Government and the concerned states government must have to monitor minutely the activities of those insurgent groups who had already signed ceasefire agreement or suspension of operation or memorandum of understanding with the government whether they indulge in extortion or not. It is known to all that the insurgent groups like NSCN (I-M) cadres have been collecting taxes (extortion) openly in broad day light from deluxe passenger buses and trucks at gun point in the NH 2 and NH 53 over a period of time. No action has been taken against this insurgent group by the government where NSCN (I-M) had already entered ceasefire agreement (1997) with the Central Government. If this trend continues, what will the image of India before South East Asian countries when the trade routes get opened passing through Northeast India?
  - (ix) Electrified border fencing should be erected and border patrol needs to be intensified so that the movement of insurgents in the borders could be checked somehow.
  - (x) The government must study very carefully the possible consequences before signing agreement or accord with any insurgent group, see to it whether it affects other group or community. For example, the Government of India (GoI) tries to solve Naga issue permanently but there is an apprehension in the minds of the people of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh that territorial integrity of their states are likely to be disturbed. So, the GoI must consult the stakeholders of these states before signing Naga Agreement / Accord.
  - (xi) The Central Government must frame certain laws that can protect and safeguard the interest of indigenous people of the Northeast. There is a fear psychosis among the

indigenous people of the Northeast that they are becoming minority in their own soil. So, they form insurgent groups that can protect their interest like United Liberation Front Assam (ULFA) in Assam. Moreover, the government must stop the infiltrators and illegal migrants from our neighbouring countries and also needs to regulate the migrants from other parts of the country.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, it is learnt that insurgency is one of the major hurdles for India's relation with her neighbouring South East Asian countries when the Trans-ASEAN Highway gets operational through the Northeast India there would be possibility of activities like kidnapping for ransom, extortion, murder, etc. In the inaugural ceremony of 'Destination North East 2020' via virtual platform held at Shillong on September 27, 2020, Mr. Amit Shah, Union Minister of Home Affairs assured that insurgency problem in the Northeast will come to an end by 2024 and the NER (North East Region) will be an important doorway in the 'Act East Policy'. The people of the Northeast have been facing insurgency related problems for more than 70 years. If this problem is solved for all, the trade route between mainland India and South East Asian countries can pass through Northeast without any hindrances when it gets opened. Mr. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India regards the Northeast "New Engine of Growth for the country"

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