

Note on Inclusion of North Eastern Council (NEC) as the Driver of Act East Policy

The Act East Policy of the Hon'ble Prime Minister has provided the much needed fillip to the North Eastern Region to come out its glass ceiling of perceived periphery of the nation. The proactive policy seeks to reposition the region as the fulcrum of the country's emerging relations with the nations of the ASEAN and BBN blocs. In this regard, the Hon'ble Prime Minister has *not only* designated 'Act East' Policy as a key component of his Government's Foreign Policy, *but also* explicitly mentioned that North-East India would play an important role in that 'Act East' Policy.

The policy hinges on the 3 Cs: Connectivity, Commerce and Culture.

- **Connectivity** – The idea is to establish multi-modal connectivity networks with the neighbouring nations (*viz.* Bangladesh and Myanmar); through their territories to the Mainland India, the major ports in those countries, and South East Asia; and also within the region. On the airways front, direct flights from Guwahati to capitals and major cities of ASEAN and BBN countries have been thought of. Efforts are on to restore Railway links prior to independence, as well as establish new linkages. Roadways have been planned to be upgraded to major expressways linking the major urban hubs with the ports and similar major hubs in neighbouring countries. Inland waterways have also been projected to be developed to their full potential.
- **Commerce** – Trade through the land route with and through the neighbouring nations of Bangladesh and Myanmar, removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, and development of border infrastructure are some of the agenda the Policy has in its fold. Other than establishing connectivity, promotion of commerce also entails harmonizing of the systems and development of infrastructure and means of production.
- **Culture** – Commonality of the multi-faceted culture of the region with the neighbouring countries can go a long way in sustaining the relation that is being proposed to be established. Cultural exchanges, tourism, people-to-people contact, educational exchanges, and exchanges of services are some of the facets that have been conceived.

In this context, the North Eastern Council (NEC) may play the role of the driver to steamroll the Policy to its logical end. NEC has been established as an organization to foster the development of North Eastern Region. After the setting up of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) in 2002, NEC became a wing of that Ministry. Today, the Prime Minister desires the NEC to focus on issues in the emerging areas of Livelihoods, Entrepreneurship, Venture Funds, Start-ups, Skill Development, Tourism and Connectivity, which would help in generating employment.

Besides, the role of NEC in Infrastructure Development cannot be denied. This can be regarded as a key driver for realizing the vision of progress and for creating an investment climate in the region. While under the Act East Policy there is a renewed focus on reducing the isolation of the region by improving all round connectivity through roads, railway and air; it has to be noted that most of the North Eastern states receive a lot of rainfall and are also prone to natural calamities and landslides. We thus

need to seriously consider introducing appropriate technologies in the construction of roads in these areas and to set up Road Research Institutes in the region. Such specialized interventions can be initiated by an organization like NEC.

Moreover, the vistas emanating from each of the 3 Cs can be exploited only through the medium of a body like the NEC. The States of NER have to walk hand in hand in order to harness the immense potential of the Act East Policy holds for the region. In other words, there are a number of strengths of NE India which need to be translated into all round socio economic development of the region. For example, all the States of NE Region are endowed with natural scenic beauty, distinct cultural and ethnic heritage. All these offer tremendous scope for employment also. NEC obviously provides the right kind of platform for the State Governments in this connection.

Further, it is worth noting that a start has already been made with the launch of the NITI Forum for the North East under the aegis of NEC – in order to take advantage of the prospects of Act East Policy for the Region.

The Government of Assam has established the Department of Act East Policy Affairs for stakeholder integration, facilitation of activities, R&D and policy generation with regard to Act East Policy. Yet it is pertinent to concede that a Central Govt. body like NEC needs to handhold it to meet its objectives.

Thus, it can be concluded that the NEC, along with forums under its aegis like the NITI Forum for the North East, can act as the harbinger of the all-round development the Act East Policy promises for the region presently languishing in the North-Eastern corner of the country. To put in plain terms, NEC can be designated as the driver of Act East Policy for the North Eastern Region.