

Geo-Strategic Significance Of The Northeast India Region: A Physiographic Analysis

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Citation: Imchasunep Jamir, et.al (2024) Geo-Strategic Significance Of The Northeast India Region: A Physiographic Analysis, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 5979 -5982
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.9378

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The present study had been focussed on the strategic position of Northeast India, Northeast as a good natural frontier. A bottleneck Siliguri corridor of just 20 km links the Northeast with the rest of India, while free Northeast insurgency networks and associations have links far and wide both within India and outside. Northeast shares 99 per cent of its boundaries with international country. China lies to the north, Myanmar to the east, Bangladesh and Bhutan to the west this position is facilitating the external linkage and it appears more than probable. These assemblage of foreign countries as neighbours on three sides, in the absence of fortified borders, propels the problem of the strategic vulnerability of the Northeast. For any region to be considered as a good natural frontier depend on its physiography and Geographic location. Northeast India when we look into its physiography and Geographic location it is a good natural frontier. Northeast India is a land-locked region its physiography is not a homogenous unit. It has natural frontiers on three sides and a political boundary on the fourth. Northeast India experiences humid subtropical climate with hot, humid summers, severe monsoons, and mild winters. No other part of India occupies such a strategic position as the North East. For Northeast India, the importance lies in being next-door neighbours and in the existence of traditional trade and cultural ties.

Keywords: *Strategic, Position, Cultural, Frontier, Bottleneck.*

I. INTRODUCTION

North-East India States is constituted of eight states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. It shares its international boundary with foreign countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Bhutan and Nepal. Northeast India/North Eastern Region (NER) is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country. North-east has an area of 262,230 sq. km, almost 8 per cent of that of India, and is one of the largest panhandles in the world. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Northeast India is 46 million and it represents 3.8 per cent of the total population of India. One of the important features of Northeast region is its physiography and Geographic location. The region lies in the coordinates between 25° 57' 36" N latitude and 93° 24' 73" E longitudes. Northeast India is a land-locked region and its physiography is diverse. The region has Tertiary mountains, Archaean plateaus, River valleys, Inter-montane plain and piedmont plain. The region has a tropical climate and experiences heavy rainfall with an average annual rainfall of 200-250 cm. The hills are covered with dense forests, the ridge rises one after another, the valley is deep, narrow, and steep-sided and the streams are deepening and cutting the valleys. Factors like geographical and historical peculiarity have contributed to the economic backwardness, retarded infrastructure and alienation of the region from the mainland. At present, Northeast is witnessing three levels of problems viz. intra-conflicts (Interstate and Ethnic conflicts), rebel movement and psychological alienation of the region from mainland India.

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To study the role of international boundary in the stability of North East India region/ NER
2. To study the physiographic role that enhances the strategic importance of the North East Region (NER).

Methodology

The present study is descriptive taking Northeast region as a unit of study. The study is based on secondary sources of data.

Sources of Data

The present study is based on a secondary source of data. Data is obtained from the Central Library, Department of Geography Library, Nagaland University. Electronic database material was obtained from online sources such as Google scholar and google, science direct, research gate, academia, and slide share.

II. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

When we have a look at a world Political map Northeast India looks like a separate country between India and Myanmar and indeed the region is just like a frontier zone in which India occupies a large area of the territory. One of the most unfortunate finds is that most of the seven sister's international boundaries are not yet demarcated. Strategically, Northeast India is very important as 99 per cent of its boundary are international boundaries. The states of the region are surrounded by China in the north, Bhutan in the East, Bangladesh in the southwest and Myanmar in the Southeast. The region has a long international border of 5182 km, which is more than 99 per cent of its total geographical boundary. These states have an international border with China 1395 km, Bhutan 455 km, Myanmar 1640 km, Bangladesh 1596 km and Nepal 97 km. On the other hand, the region is connected with mainland India through a very narrow strip of land with a width of about 22 km called 'Chicken neck'. All the states in northeast India touch an international boundary. Sikkim shares it with three: China, Nepal, and Bhutan; Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh with China and Myanmar; Nagaland and Manipur share it with Myanmar; Meghalaya and Tripura with Bangladesh; and Assam with Bhutan. At present of the seven, the menace of insurgency pervades particularly in the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura. A bottleneck Siliguri corridor of just 20 km links the northeast with the rest of India, while free northeast insurgency networks and associations have links far and wide both within India and outside. North-east sharing of 99 per cent of its international border with China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh and Bhutan in the west is facilitating this external linkage appears more than probable. This assemblage of foreign countries as neighbours on three sides, in the absence of fortified borders, propels the problem of the strategic vulnerability of the northeast (Laishram, 2007). On several occasions, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan have generated situations that were negative for the stability of India, particularly for the lasting peace of northeast. This strategic location of the northeast aided in the establishment of insurgent base camps, communication camps and facilitated the transaction of arms and ammunitions with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This link can be traced to the time of struggle for independence from India within a few years of transfer of power first by the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. This cradling of the northeast insurgency by neighbouring countries has been checked; so far Bhutan is concerned with the 2003 operation flush-out in collaboration with India resulting in the ousting of bases of ULFA, Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) insurgents of Assam. However, Myanmar has failed to initiate flush-out operations because it lacks the required military strength. It had so far, several partial operations like the operation Golden bird along the Indo-Myanmar border without any success. China was the first country to provide base facilities and guerrilla training to the insurgency beginners of Nagaland. The insurgent outfits of northeast have not faced any determined challenge from Bangladesh so far (Gogoi, 2010; Laishram, 2007; Mackenzie, 2011). So, the strategic location of northeast India is of great significance for the stability and peaceful atmosphere in the Northeast region and India. The region is surrounded by international boundary and the border is still not properly demarcated and fenced by the Indian government adds to the instability of the region and the country as a whole.

There are no questions of war within the Northeast states but there are boundary and territorial conflicts among the states. The carefree demarcation of the boundary within the states by the then British raj and presently the Indian government has often resulted in intra conflicts (Interstate and Ethnic conflicts). There are the insurgents and rebel armed groups representing different tribals and ethnic communities which adds to the instability of the region. These are the results of colonialism from the British and the result of negligence from the past in the border management by the Indian government. But now as the population of this region expands there is a pressure of population on land often resulting in intra-conflicts.

Several scholars have divided North East India into five physiographic units. The physiographic divisions of the region are:

- (1) Karbi-Meghalaya Plateau
- (2) North-Eastern frontier mountain ranges or Arunachal Himalaya
- (3) Brahmaputra Valley
- (4) Barak Plain or Cachar Plain

(5) South-eastern Hill Ranges

For any region to be considered as a good natural frontier depend on the physiography. Northeast is surrounded by international boundary but because of its physiography and climatic conditions, it acts as a perfect natural frontier for India. To the north bordering with China, we have Eastern Himalaya or Arunachal Himalaya, to the east we have South-eastern hill ranges this region includes the Patkai, the Naga, the Barail range, the highlands of Manipur, the Mizo Hills and Tripura ranges bordering with Myanmar, bordering with Bangladesh we have Karbi- Meghalaya plateau. It has natural frontiers on three sides and a political boundary on the fourth. Northeast India has a predominantly humid subtropical climate with hot, humid summers, severe monsoons, and mild winters. Along with the west coast of India, this region has some of the Indian subcontinent's last remaining rainforests, which support diverse flora and fauna and several crop species.

North East region occupies a very important strategic position both from a Geographic and historical point of view. When we look into the history of conflict northeast India has seen two important wars i) The battle of Kohima and Imphal (1944) ii) the Indo-china war (1962). In 2013, the British National Army Museum voted the Battle of Imphal and Kohima to be 'Britain's Greatest Battle'. The battle of Kohima is often referred to as the 'Stalingrad of the East'. According to National Army Museum, United Kingdom in March 1944, the Japanese 15th Army began an advance against India's northeast frontier to forestall a planned British invasion of Burma. They intended to capture the British supply bases on the Imphal plain and cut the road linking Dimapur and Imphal at Kohima. With Imphal in their hands, the Japanese would be able to interrupt air supplies to China. It would also give them a base from which to conduct air attacks against India. Kohima's strategic importance in the wider 1944 Japanese Chindwin offensive lay in that it was the summit of a pass that offered the Japanese the best route from Burma into India. Through it ran the road which was the main supply route between the base at Dimapur in the Brahmaputra River valley and Imphal, where the British and Indian troops of IV Corps (consisting of the 17th, 20th and 23rd Indian Infantry Divisions) faced the main Japanese offensive.

Looking from the historical point of view the advancement of Japanese force was stopped in the Northeast region of India where its physiography and climatic condition played a very vital role in the outcome of the war. The huge losses the Japanese suffered in the Battles of Imphal and Kohima was mainly through starvation and disease which crippled their defense of Burma against Allied attacks during the following year (Lyman, 2010; Keane, 2010).

III. CONCLUSION

The whole region has been suffering from challenges from both within and outside and has weakened the current process of development and regional integration. For India, it has become very important to draw boundaries with great precisions and to solve all border-related problems taking into account the people of Northeast region. It is of utmost importance especially in the context of Act East policy. If India fails to resolve the boundary issues it would lose in the war of Geopolitics of Northeast region. The researcher is of the view that if it had not been for northeast India during the war the outcome of the World War 2 would have been very different. Now if India loses northeast, it is vulnerable to attack from a foreign country like China as there will be no natural frontier to defend. The capital of India New Delhi itself will be under threat within a few periods. Recent Chinese activity on Bhutan's Doklam Plateau, combined with the vulnerability of the Chicken's Neck and the potential dislocation from the Gangetic Plain, has seen the North eastern states become a pressing concern for New Delhi (Wyeth, 2018).

The attainment of India's vision for a superpower and largest economy depends on its approaches and policy toward the Northeast region, as it has already realised the economic potentiality and natural resources that it brings to the table. Most importantly, the Physiography and Geographic location have a unique position in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. For the Northeast to act as a gateway to Southeast Asian countries problems related to politics, economics and society have to be solved without which India's Act East Policy will be unfruitful. This is where the geostrategic importance of the Northeast lies for India.

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