



KEYNOTE ADDRESS
OF
HIS EXCELLENCY
LT GENERAL NIRBHAY SHARMA,
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd.),
GOVERNOR,
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
IN THE
TWO-DAY NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NORTH EAST INDIA:
STRATEGIC & DEVELOPMENTAL IMPERATIVES
ORGANISED BY-
INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES & ANALYSES (IDSA)
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE ASSAM POLICE
(SPECIAL BRANCH)
AT
NAKSHATRA HOTEL, GUWAHATI
ON
15-16 JULY 2013

- *Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam, Shri Tarun Gogoi,*
- *Director General of Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses, New Delhi, Dr. Arvind Gupta,*
- *Director General of Police, Assam*
- *Eminent speakers and resource persons,*
- *Office bearers of IDSA,*
- *Dignitaries and distinguished guests,*
- *Friends from media and*
- *Ladies and Gentlemen*

At the very outset, I place on record my heartfelt appreciation to the IDSA, and the Government of Assam, especially the Assam Police (Special Branch) for organising this two-day conference on an immensely important subject, that is, **Northeast India: Strategic and Developmental Imperatives**. I trust that this initiative of IDSA and Assam Police will help in bringing out a road map for the region towards more peace and development.

By organising the conference at Guwahati, which is termed as 'Gateway to the Northeast region', organisers have tried to feel pulse of the people, while brainstorming on such an important subject.

The speech delivered by Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam Shri Tarun Gogoi is indeed insightful and vital. Rightly so he as Chief Minister of Assam holds key of the gate to the Northeast. The welcome remarks of Director General of IDSA Dr. Arvind Gupta have outlined the agenda in a lucid manner to set the stage for a highly enriching conference.

Coming to my address

The North Eastern States of India are a critical part of future growth, development and strategic positioning of India. Strategically, the area is of immense importance. **Within its one thousand kilometres radius, it touches eight countries**, i.e. China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. No part of the country has such a location, which touches so many countries within such a radius. These countries constitute 24.6% of the world population and as one region, it is one of

the largest economies (China-2nd and ASEAN-9th) in the world. In this regard, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the President of India says, **“geography is opportunity and the very geographical location of the North East makes it the doorway to South East and East Asia and vice versa, a doorway to economies into India.”** Therefore, with Myanmar forming a land bridge and Bangladesh providing an opening into the Indian Ocean, we are looking at the vital and most happening part of Asia.

In order to fulfil the strategic and developmental imperative we first need to handle the **challenge of isolation**, both due to the physical terrain as well as the historical accident of partition. What was a one night journey from Agartala to Kolkata is now a three day affair. The only link with the rest of India of the 255,000 square kilometers of the land locked states is a 22-km corridor through Siliguri, known by some as the ‘chicken neck’, a term which I dislike. The physical isolation can be further understood, when it is recognized that **six of the eight state capitals are still not connected by rail**. You may find it difficult to believe that **since independence other than Assam,**

we have only added 66 kms of railway line in the entire NE. Four of the State Capitals (Itanagar, Kohima, Gangtok and Shillong) do not have modern airport facilities. In the absence of adequate rail and road network and long gestation period of its planned development, air connectivity is vital. Out of nearly 25 inherited airports / airstrips, half of them now are functional and more are on the way. Likewise we need to **revive the use of waterways**- National Waterway 2 running along the Brahmaputra and announced in 1988 is yet to become operational. It is estimated that the region has 1800 kms of river routes that can be used by steamers and large country boats. Infact, development of waterways has to be our national priority and requires more effort. A towering challenge of the region therefore is inadequate infrastructure, road, rail and air connection, tele-communication and waterways.

This isolation obviously affects the economic prospects of the region (by affecting the costs of imports and exports) as well as the integration with the rest of India.

The region is **endowed with natural resources**. It has huge petroleum and gas reserves. It is said to constitute a fifth of the country's total potential. One-third of India's runoff water flows from the Northeast through the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers. While these rivers in the region have huge impact on the socio-economical activities of the people, it also has its impact in its downstream in Bangladesh.

The region also has an estimated 63,257 (63000 Megawatt) MW of economically viable hydropower potential which is 75% of country's hydropower capacity. At present, going by the records it generates less than 8% of its potential. All this has to be realised on a war footing. **In that the States must rise to resolve interstate disputes affecting this national cause.** Equally challenging aspect in this is harnessing the economic potential and balanced exploitation of the rich biodiversity. For this to happen the efforts are on, but these need to be augmented further

There is need for a policy framework for countries benefiting from these water bodies. Our approach should be for mutual benefit for all in the international arena. This is necessary for peace and stability of the

whole region. As former World Bank Vice-President Dr. Ismail Serageldin once said, “**many of the wars of this century were about oil, but those of the next century will be over water.**” Therefore India should push and get China to sign a treaty. More importantly a tripartite agreement among India, China and Bangladesh is required.

More than **80% of the people reside in the rural areas**. It is natural that almost all of them depend on agriculture. Therefore emphasis on agriculture sector with horticulture and other allied sectors can bring significant changes. New scientific methods and technologies must be made available to the agrarian community.

The **people of the region need to be empowered through inclusive governance**. Involving them in governance at micro level will instil sense of belonging and lead to efficient and maximum utilization of resources. It will also instil sense of social accountability. As you know that the tribal communities of the region have strong and deep rooted traditional village institutes for self governance. **Strengthening**

the self governance concept is necessary in establishing peace and prosperity of the region.

The recently conducted Panchayat elections and the intended empowerment of Panchayats should bring in a cheer in this regard.

Another area waiting to be developed is eco tourism, as it offers unparalleled opportunities in water sports, mountaineering, trekking and unpolluted view of the most awesome natural sights in the world. The planning for these is being done and we are looking at creating a tourist circuit of international standards

The region has historically been characterized by a preponderance of people classified as “Scheduled Tribes”. As compared to a national average of 23% scheduled tribes, the proportion of scheduled tribes ranges from 29% in Manipur to 93% in Mizoram. **Despite the high proportion of tribal people, the literacy rates are higher than the rest of India.** But it has not necessarily translated into more employability and prosperity. They have also experienced a greater rate of population growth compared to the rest of India.

An objective analysis of the population growth indicates that some of the increased growth rate is related to illegal migration. This has, in turn, aided political and criminal enterprises that wish to take advantage of the situation. While in Assam it has altered the demography of districts bordering Bangladesh significantly, Meghalaya and Tripura that also sharing border with Bangladesh, but had the lowest decadal growth rates in the North East. **This explains the complexity of migration issue and the need for a holistic approach.**

Addressing the above referenced factors in a coherent and consistent fashion requires addressing the root causes. To that extent, it is essential to (a) enhance transportation and communication infrastructure; (b) wealth creation through industrial development and tourism and (c) manage immigration. Clearly, none of these prescriptions are easy to implement, or they would already have been achieved. These sub-goals are being attempted to set the stage to effectively accomplish the major goals of political stability and

balanced development. However, **it is still a work in progress and needs further momentum.** I am certain that the participants of this conference will dwell on these in totality and come up with doable options.

In all, North East of India has to graduate from a transient to a driver of economic growth, looking East to and fro. Centrality of North East of India in the entire endeavour needs to be emphasised and worked upon. Our investment, both political and economic, in Bangladesh and Myanmar will also be crucial.

One pertinent question that needs to be raised and analysed at this juncture is how we deal with the issue of security in relation to the borderless world. The international borders in the region are mostly porous and these porous borders absorb the shock that could be produced by the separation of Burma from India in 1937 and the subsequent hardening of borders since 1947.

Sharing of 5109 km of International border with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, which amount to 96% of its total border length, places a heavy strategic responsibility. **Unsettled border with China and porous boundary with Bangladesh and Myanmar make the security a vital issue. Is fencing and heavy policing the only answer or a complete answer. We need to examine it further. In the context of border dispute with China, independent of economic engagement, we should be prepared for a long haul. Building matching infrastructure and military capability is therefore a must to ensure peace and enable negotiations from a position of strength. And this should be done without beating war drums to create a hype.**

The northeastern states are also the **victims of armed insurgencies** that, other than the Naga movement, are probably directly related to the perceived neglect of the Central Government and to the financial mismanagement of Central funds allocated. The Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan had also taken advantage of the discontent in the northeastern

states, further aggravating the situation. **As a result, while the insurgency may have had its roots in the lack of development, today, it is believed in some quarters that it is the insurgencies that prevent development.** The situation has since improved somewhat for reasons well known to this audience.

Another problem for the region is that it has become **safe havens for drug menace.** This region is connected to the infamous 'Golden Triangle' of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. Many States of Northeast region are now experiencing rise in drug consumption, trade and addiction. The problem is spreading like contagious disease, we need to evolve comprehensive strategy to address this problem. **This has transnational dimensions as well and perhaps requires another conference by the IDSA and / or the North East Council.**

The Look East Policy in principle aims for the creation of an enabling environment so as to end the landlocked situation and isolation of the North-Eastern region by opening up the borders and re-integrating

the region's economy through improved trade and connectivity between the North East India and South East Asian countries.

Overall, we need to look at the entire region in strategic and developmental dimensions starting from Tibet to Yunnan in China and on to Mekong-Ganga basins turning it from a “battlefield to a market place.” For it to succeed, internal health of the North East in terms of political stability and capacity building are a prerequisite and so is the multidimensional connectivity within and without North East to reach in and reach out.

In conclusion, I call upon all stake holders, specially the policy makers, the intellectuals and above all the people of North East to put in their best to realise this vital national imperative.

Coincidentally, I am now heading for Delhi to participate in a meeting to be attended by all the Governors and Chief Ministers of NE States to discuss some of these issues. This morning's deliberations will certainly be useful in this regard.

Finally, on behalf of people of Arunachal Pradesh and on my own behalf, I congratulate the IDSA and Assam Police for organising this event.

I wish the conference a tremendous success.

Thank you all.

JAI HIND