

INDIA'S NORTHEAST, BANGLADESH & NEIGHBOURS – INTERNAL SECURITY

NEWS: Recently, Muhammad Yunus proposed a comprehensive economic integration plan involving Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and India's Seven Northeastern States (commonly called the 'Seven Sisters'). His remarks have triggered strategic and policy interest in India because:

- He linked India's internal geography (i.e., the landlocked nature of Northeast India) to foreign powers like China.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Geographical Isolation but Strategic Connectivity

- The Northeastern region is landlocked and shares over 90% of its borders with foreign countries—China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar—creating a perception of physical and economic isolation.
- Despite this, India has ensured robust internal and cross-border linkages through infrastructure, trade, and strategic partnerships, especially via the Siliguri Corridor (also called the Chicken's Neck), which connects the region to the rest of India.

Secured Access via Siliguri Corridor

- The Siliguri Corridor is a narrow but critical strip of land in West Bengal, providing road and rail connectivity from mainland India to the Northeast.
- India has consistently upgraded the security and transport infrastructure of this corridor to ensure uninterrupted movement of goods, people, and military logistics.

India-Bangladesh Transit Cooperation

- India's connectivity to the Northeast has been strengthened through extensive bilateral cooperation with Bangladesh.
- India utilizes Bangladeshi ports like Chattogram and Mongla to transport goods to its Northeastern states, bypassing logistical constraints of the narrow Siliguri route.
- Under the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT), India uses river routes such as the Ashuganj-Akhaura corridor and

the Brahmaputra–Barak waterway systems to facilitate efficient movement of goods and energy.

Multilateral Energy Integration

- India has developed energy infrastructure to integrate the Northeast with neighboring countries for hydropower trade.
- A Tripartite Power Trade Agreement between India, Nepal, and Bangladesh allows Nepal to export 40 MW of electricity to Bangladesh using India's transmission grid, creating regional interdependence.
- Bhutan, a key hydropower partner, exports surplus electricity to India, which supports energy demands in the Northeastern region, helping reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

Strategic Autonomy in Connectivity Plans

- India has deliberately promoted self-reliant connectivity initiatives, such as Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project (connecting Kolkata to Mizoram via Myanmar) and India–Myanmar–Thailand trilateral highway, to reduce overdependence on any single external actor.
- These projects aim to link the Northeast with Southeast Asia directly, aligning with India's Act East Policy, while avoiding Chinese-dominated routes.

Caution over Strategic Dependence on Bangladesh

- Although Bangladesh is a cooperative partner, India remains cautious of relying too heavily on it for maritime access to the Northeast.
- Concerns arose when economist Muhammad Yunus suggested Bangladesh could be the "guardian of the ocean" for the Northeast and serve as a bridge to China—raising fears of externalizing India's internal territory and undermining sovereignty.

China's Strategic Interest and India's Security Concerns

- China's investments in Bangladeshi ports (e.g., Chittagong and Mongla) and its push for the BCIM (Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar) Economic Corridor are viewed with suspicion by Indian policymakers.

- Integrating the Northeast into Chinese-linked infrastructure corridors could compromise India's strategic depth and expose sensitive border areas to surveillance and influence.
- Given past border tensions and China's assertiveness under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India remains opposed to letting China gain logistical or technological footholds in the Northeast.

India's Emphasis on Regional Sovereignty and Security

- India prefers bilateral and subregional connectivity that enhances its strategic autonomy while ensuring inclusive growth in the Northeast.
- By controlling trade routes, energy exchange systems, and security operations, India safeguards the region from becoming a strategic vulnerability.

India's Northeast

- The northeast (eight northeastern States: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim) is blessed with vast natural resources.
- Its strategic location, sharing borders with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar, is an asset.
- The region is connected to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor- Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck".
- The region contributes 2.8 percent of India's GDP.
- It is also resource-rich, with supplies of limestone, coal, natural oil and gas, uranium, copper, rare herbs.
- Challenges: The region has faced long-standing separatist insurgencies, leading to both internal security problems and cross-border tensions. These insurgencies have made the region volatile and have led to a sense of insecurity among locals.
- Myanmar Border: India shares a long border with Myanmar, which is porous and prone to cross-border terrorism and refugee flows.
- Four northeastern states - Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Manipur (398 km), Nagaland (215 km) and Mizoram (510 km) - share 1,643-km unfenced border with Myanmar.

Key Policy Initiatives

- India's Act East Policy, announced in 2014, envisions connecting the Northeast with India's eastern neighbours – Myanmar and Bangladesh – and further with Southeast and East Asia.
- Vibrant Village Scheme: The 'vibrant village' scheme of the Centre is intended to develop border villages in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.
- Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP): KMTTP connects Kolkata to Sittwe port, which is further linked to Paletwa in Myanmar through a waterway route along the river Kaladan.

Source: <https://www.india.com/news/anti-india-muhammad-yunus-makes-another-statement-on-northeast-india-asks-indias-neighbour-to-will-modi-govt-teach-a-lesson-to-bangladesh-7818972/>