

Heading East: Security, Trade and Environment between India and Southeast Asia, edited by Karen Stoll Farrell and Sumit Ganguly, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 275, Rs 950

*Sampa Kundu**

Heading East, Security, Trade and Environment between India and Southeast Asia, co-edited by Sumit Ganguly and Karen Stoll Farrell, consisting of 11 chapters and one introductory note by the editors, broadly deals with India's Look East/Act East Policy (LEP/AEP). More specifically, the book assesses the origin of this policy, its evolution and several aspects of India's trade arrangements (both bilateral and regional or multilateral), connectivity, security dynamics and river water sharing concerns, particularly related to North-East India and its immediate neighbours Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The book is divided into three segments and each deals with one of the three different facets of security, trade and environment. In the security section, two chapters discuss India's engagement with Myanmar; one deliberates on various issues related to the participation of the North-East in India's relations with the immediate neighbours; another narrates the story of India's connectivity ambitions with South-East Asia; and the last chapter in the section speaks about Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)–India counter-terrorism initiatives. In the chapter on connectivity, David Carl discusses how India's policies towards South-East Asia have evolved over the years. An argument offered by him accepts

* The reviewer is Research Assistant with the South-East Asia and Oceania Centre, IDSA.



the popular notion that India's LEP/AEP has, to some extent, successfully corrected New Delhi's negligence towards South-East Asia during the Cold War era; and as a result, India's relations with the region have seen many improvements after 1992. Carl also identifies the challenges facing India's LEP/AEP, which include the lack of official documentation charting out the guiding principles and objectives of the LEP/AEP, red-tapism, India's indifference towards open market economy, bureaucratic unwillingness, and both ASEAN and India's fear of antagonising China. The chapter recommends India to 'Act Home' first to benefit from LEP/AEP, implying that India needs to ensure the success of Make in India (that is, establishing itself as a global manufacturing hub) and making the participation of the Indian producers in other countries a less-hassle free exercise (p. 32).

Julio S. Amador III, in his chapter on ASEAN–India cooperation in counter-terrorism, explains that India relies on ASEAN centric counter-terrorism initiatives along with the several bilateral agreements with individual countries from the region. Amador also argues that the notion of non-interference in each other's domestic affairs is an obstacle to ensuring smooth and effective implementation of the initiatives jointly taken within ASEAN as well as between ASEAN and India. Jonah Blank's chapter on India–Myanmar engagements is a detailed discussion of the dynamics involving economic, defence, security and political affairs. Blank rightly describes Myanmar as India's 'near neighbour' with whom the country shares land and maritime borders, a common historical legacy and cross-cultural connections (p. 70). The chapter, however, lacks arguments on the reasons that impede projects and programmes designed to advance connectedness between India and Myanmar. The complimentary chapter on Myanmar by Bertil Lintner, narrates the security component involving India and Myanmar's bilateral relations. Lintner rightly points out that by helping Myanmar in its transformation India will ensure peace in its neighbouring country, and this would eventually be beneficial for the region's future. Unfortunately, he has not identified/specified Myanmar's expectations from India in its transformation beyond certain points, such as functioning of parliamentary system or sharing of experiences on federal structure of government. Finally, Sanjay Hazarika's chapter deals with the importance of people's participation in the big projects aimed at enhancing connectivity between India and its neighbours. Lack of people's participation in those projects often leads to their failure, he concludes.

In the trade section, three chapters discuss issues involving India's potential of trading with the East, its participation with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (RCEP), and the significance of motor vehicle agreements to endorse sound cross-border transshipment. In the first chapter on trading east, Rani Mullen rightly explains that, despite efforts, India has not been able to gain a significant position in ASEAN's overall external trade. She speaks about India and ASEAN's integrated trade policies that are essential for them to become the 'growth engine' of Asia (p. 127). In the next chapter, Surupa Gupta identifies the challenges and opportunities offered for India by RCEP, followed by a detailed discussion on India's crop sectors and agriculture-based economy. Gupta concludes by saying that while aiming for higher incomes is a sensible goal for India, Indian farmers need governmental support (in terms of greater infrastructure investment in agriculture, including improved cold chains, roads, ports and airports) to facilitate their integration with the global market (p. 163). In the next chapter, Bipul Chatterjee and Prithiviraj Nath analyse the necessities of the motor vehicle agreement between India and Bangladesh as well as the ways to improve the current transportation situation: these include multi-modal method for connectivity, insurance for goods supplied across the sub-region, common integrated check posts at the borders, enhancing synchronisation between state and national level stakeholders, and harmonisation of domestic regulations, among others.

In the section on environment, Douglas P. Hill's chapter on transboundary water sharing recommends an adaptive management of the river systems in the region, which offers a holistic consideration of the ecosystem and human habitation. Hill rightly concludes that matters of national security often tend to overlook the environmental hazards associated with the way nation-states handle common river systems. In the next chapter, Kelly D. Alley recommends that people-led actions are absolute necessity for finer administration and implementation of environmental laws, regulations and protocols. In his chapter on transboundary rivers and pan-Asian connectivity, Rohan D'Souza too calls for people's participation in the developmental projects because that will be 'crucial to defining benefits' of those projects (p. 249).

The book lacks discussion on the expanded geographic ambit of LEP/AEP, which covers East Asia, with the exception of a few passing references to China. Even analyses on India's relations with all South-East Asian countries other than Myanmar and, to some extent, Singapore and

Vietnam are more or less obscure. With regard to individual chapters, it is this reviewer's opinion that David Carl's chapter could have incorporated a discussion on the developmental deficiencies in North-East India and the ways to overcome them. Bertil Lintner's chapter does not specify the exact assistance that is required from India for Myanmar's transformation, considering the fact that the latter is an independent and sovereign nation-state. The chapters in the trade section were expected to explain the future of mega-trans-regional trading arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region and their implications for India, especially given the scenario of the withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Several important aspects of India's Look/Act East Policy, including its defence and security engagements with South-East Asian countries (except Myanmar and, to some extent, Vietnam), role of the Indian diaspora in the region, and India's participation in the ASEAN-led economic integration processes (not RCEP, which is essentially a Chinese-led initiative) counting the ASEAN-India free trade agreement, are barely addressed. Finally, a major setback is the near-absence of India's take on the South China Sea.

Despite these limitations, *Heading East* offers exemplary ideas about India's Look/Act East Policy and is suggested for students, scholars and experts on India's foreign policy and geo-political developments in the Asia-Pacific. The maps in Alley's chapter make this book more commendable. The theme covered by the book is topical and futuristic. Finally, the book is appreciated as it has dealt with a region which is the centre of contemporary international affairs and, hence, it is worth a read.