

3. Northeast India and The Troika of Bangladesh, India and Japan

Prelims Syllabus: International Relations

Mains Syllabus: GS-II International Relations | Bilateral, Regional and India and Neighbourhood Relations



Why in News?

- The third India-Japan Intellectual Dialogue hosted by the Asian Confluence (ASCON), Tripura, was an ideal opportunity to assess the evolving thinking of experts and policymakers.
- It showed that the current decade may produce path-breaking changes in the northeast, bringing the troika of Bangladesh, India and Japan closer.

Significant changes in the North East India

- The region comprising India's eight northeastern States (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim) is undergoing dramatic change.
- It has overcome several (but not all) security challenges and is now heading toward economic development.
- Political changes have been helpful. So is the extensive web of linkages with neighbouring Bangladesh. Besides, Japan has emerged as a significant development partner for both India and Bangladesh.

Japan's historical ties with the North Eastern region of India

- **Cultural ties:** There are deep cultural ties between the North Eastern region of India and Japan, with Buddhism being a common thread that binds the two regions.
- **World War II:** The North Eastern region of India played a crucial role in World War II, with the Battle of Imphal and Kohima considered to be turning points in the war. The Japanese army had advanced into the region and fought fiercely against the Allied forces.
- **Post-Independence:** After India gained independence, the North Eastern region remained largely isolated from the rest of the country. However, in the 1950s, the Indian government started building roads and infrastructure to connect the region with the rest of the country. Japan also played a role in the region's development, with its assistance in building the Dimapur-Imphal highway.
- **Economic ties:** In recent years, there has been a growing focus on economic ties between the North Eastern region of India and Japan. Japan has been investing in infrastructure projects in the region, such as the Guwahati water supply project and the Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project.
- **Connectivity:** Improved connectivity between the North Eastern region of India and Japan is seen as a key factor in strengthening the historical ties between the two regions. There have been talks of establishing a direct flight between Guwahati and Tokyo to enhance connectivity.

What is Asian Confluence?

- The Asian Confluence is a think tank and cultural centre based in Shillong, Meghalaya, India.
- It was established in 2012 with the aim of promoting and strengthening cultural and economic ties between the Northeastern region of India and the countries of Southeast Asia.
- The centre seeks to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between academics, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and civil society groups from across the region, with a particular focus on issues related to connectivity, trade, investment, and tourism.
- The Asian Confluence hosts a variety of events, including conferences, seminars, workshops, and cultural programs, that bring together experts and stakeholders from different fields to discuss and explore opportunities for collaboration and cooperation.
- In addition to promoting economic and cultural ties, the centre also seeks to foster a sense of community and shared identity among the diverse peoples of the region.

Opportunities for Northeast India

- **Matarbari Deep Sea Port:** The development of the Matarbari Deep Sea Port in Bangladesh, with Japanese assistance, is expected to be a game changer for the region. To be optimally viable, the port will have to cater to the needs of Bangladesh and India's northeast, serving a population of 220 million.
- **Competitive advantage:** The creation of regional industrial value chains and rapid industrialization in sectors where the northeast has a competitive advantage will be crucial to ensure that the new connectivity links are fully utilized and productive.
- **Natural resources and strategic location:** The region's natural resources and strategic location make it an attractive destination for investors in diverse sectors such as agro-processing, man-made fibers, handicrafts, assembly of two-wheelers, mobile phones, and pharmaceuticals.

What are the Challenges?

- **Insufficient investment:** Japan as a single investor in the northeast is unworkable. Indian companies must also invest, and India needs to ease restrictions on the flow of investments from Bangladesh.
- **Security challenges:** While the northeastern region has overcome several security challenges, not all of them have been addressed.
- **Infrastructure connectivity:** While Bangladesh and India have made progress in restoring pre-1965 infrastructure connectivity, other countries in the region need to reciprocate with similar connectivity initiatives.
- **Environmental concerns:** As industrialization and development take place, there is a need to ensure that environmental concerns are addressed and sustainability is prioritized.
- **Lack of attention to BIMSTEC:** When issues of regional cooperation and integration are discussed, scant attention seems to be paid to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which is self-defeating.

What measures should be taken?

- **Limited policy convergence:** Policy convergence must be expanded to address challenges in the region.
- **Need for closer linkages:** The three governments of Bangladesh, India, and Japan should forge closer linkages of economic cooperation.

- **Investment:** Indian companies need to invest in the northeast along with Japanese companies. India should also ease restrictions on the flow of investments from Bangladesh.
- **Infrastructure connectivity:** Bangladesh facilitated much connectivity with India and now needs reciprocity from other countries, particularly India, so that it is better connected with other neighbors, including Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar.
- **Need for leadership:** The goal of connecting a large part of South Asia with Southeast Asia requires an astute pilot. This leadership can come from the triad of Bangladesh, India, and Japan.

Conclusion

- The triad of Bangladesh, India, and Japan (BIJ) can provide astute leadership in connecting a large part of South Asia with Southeast Asia.
- A BIJ Forum should be launched at the level of Foreign Ministers, a move that will be welcomed in the northeast. The three governments should forge closer linkages of economic cooperation.

