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ASIAN CONFLUENCE

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A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

28 July 2021

Conference Report and Summary of Recommendations

FOR VIBRANT MEANS AND ENDS

A Prosperous Indo-Pacific:

Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

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Conference Report and Summary of Recommendations

ASIAN CONFLUENCE
ENGAGING THE THIRD SPACE
A DIVYA JEEVAN FOUNDATION INITIATIVE

Supported by
Australian Consulate-General
Kolkata, India

The Asian Confluence Centre, Lady Veronica Lane, Laitumkhrah, Shillong, Meghalaya, India: 793003

Email: info@asianconfuence.org Website: www.asianconfuence.org

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Preface

The Asian Confluence in collaboration with the Australian Consulate-General in Kolkata hosted a one day dialogue on the theme: "A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood" on July 28th 2021. The North Eastern region of India along with the sub-Himalayan Eastern neighbours Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal constitutes a compact "mountain to sea" geography, the stability and prosperity of which is an important component toward realizing the vision of a prosperous, free and open Indo-Pacific region. Going beyond the "security narrative" of QUAD engagement in the Indo-Pacific geography, the dialogue highlighted the progress and potential of QUAD member nations Australia and India collaborating for the development of the region and also working with other QUAD members such as Japan which are actively conducting projects on ground.

The web dialogue brought together senior policy makers, academia and practitioners from India, Australia and Japan to ideate on the ongoing state of India-Australia collaboration in the development of the North Eastern region of India and future avenues of cooperation. The dialogue was addressed at the highest level by the Australian High Commissioner to India, Barry O'Farrell, and Amb. Riva Ganguly Das, Secretary (East) in Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

We are thankful to the Australian Consulate-General in Kolkata for its support and cooperation in planning, preparation and hosting of this dialogue, as well as to the speakers and chairs for their valuable insights. The dialogue witnessed wide participation from across the North-eastern region in addition to the strategic community in India and the globe. Several ideas were discussed in an open and frank manner as it should be between trusted partners.

Introduction

India-Australia camaraderie is a "comfortable and natural partnership", which is deepening across the board. As two key Indo-Pacific countries and maritime neighbours, India and Australia have an enduring interest in a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region. India and Australia have completed one year of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, and Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, elevated the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in June 2020 during their virtual meeting. The warmth and personal connection between the two leaders are providing the necessary political framework and impetus to this partnership. There is a growing convergence of views on geostrategic and geo-economic issues and a strong desire to work together for a prosperous Indo-Pacific. India and Australia have stepped up their collaborations through institutions and organizations on both sides on innumerable issues in bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral formats. Further, both countries have elevated their 2+2 Foreign and Defence Secretaries Dialogue to Ministerial level, underlining the positive trajectory of their transforming relations. Shifting gears to upgrade their relations underlines the commitment of both countries to work together across a range of areas. India's northeast region (NER) and the eastern neighbourhood is one such important area that presents immense prospects for Delhi and Canberra to deepen their collaborations and contribute to creating a prosperous region.

This report is derived from the webinar "A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood", organized by the Asian Confluence with the support of the Australian Consulate-General in Kolkata on 28 July 2021.

This report identifies some key areas for collaboration in India's northeast region and eastern neighbourhood and highlights the main points and recommendations of the webinar.

Key Takeaways

- Cooperation for strengthening resilient supply chains with products and services from the region and connecting them further downstream to supply chains in the ASEAN and rest of India is an important component of a resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Australia-India-Japan trilateral cooperation in this regard may translate ideas into actual projects in the region.
- Building on the large number of connectivity projects linking the Northeastern states with the neighbouring countries, using digital technologies for easing and facilitating trade at the borders with joint collaboration between India and Australia can add a lot of value to achieving the goal of converting connectivity corridors into economic corridors for a prosperous sub-region in the Indo-Pacific.
- Sharing of best practices and institutional capacity development in the field of integrated water resources management between India and Australia and their application to the Northeast is an avenue of great promise for the region.
- Sharing of technologies and best practices in the energy and mining sectors with Australia can be a key area of collaboration with focus on the North eastern region.
- Sharing of technologies, best practices and forging collaborations in the area of agribusiness with Australia can be a key area of cooperation given the rich agricultural resources of the northeastern states.
- Forging collaboration between educational institutions such as think-tanks, universities and cultural centers to form knowledge centers in various fields such as natural resource management, agriculture, health, sports, tourism, entrepreneurship development, urban renewal can be areas of cooperation. Specially curated "Scholars in residence programmes" inviting Australian scholars to study the region, followed by exchanges between heads of institutions could be a way to encourage an ecosystem of further exchange.

- Familiarization trip by visiting media delegations on the sidelines of other bilateral events, mobilizing the diaspora in Australia who are from the region, cultural exchanges as part of signature events such as "Hornbill Festival" in Nagaland, can be further promoted along with the other points mentioned to forge more people-to-people contacts.
- Collaboration for strengthening institutions in the region to deliver on the recommendations made above through training and capacity building.
- Scaling up the India-Japan-Australia Trilateral Partnership through track II initiatives such as think-tank networks, trade fairs and exhibitions, exchange of media, etc.
- Australian collaboration with regional institutions like BIMSTEC in the areas such as strengthening supply chain resilience and trade facilitation in the Bay of Bengal region as a whole and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) sub-region would be an enabler towards realizing the common vision of a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Exploring Indo-Pacific
Convergences in the Region

Quadrilateral cooperation between Australia, India, Japan and the US, popularly known as the QUAD, has witnessed expanding collaborations in recent years. Despite this grouping being comprised of four diverse and geographically distant nations, a congruence of interests to avail the opportunities and to deal with common challenges, are bringing these nations together. The QUAD's prominence in recent months has generated immense interest and curiosity about this grouping. There are mixed signals of support for this evolving phenomenon. It is, however, apt to note that the QUAD is an effort to develop a habit of multilateral cooperation based on rules, transparency and equality on transnational concerns. Further, the idea of QUAD Plus offers flexibility in its structure and approach to deal with emerging geopolitical and geo-economic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

It is important to look at the key aspects of the historic QUAD leaders' virtual summit (the meeting was virtual due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic), held on 12 March 2021. While the QUAD is perceived by some as a grouping to deal with the 'China threat', there was no direct reference to China in the joint statement or joint article by the leaders. The statement also did not deliberate upon conventional military threats. Rather, the leaders committed to acting together to deal with the most urgent global challenges namely, effects of COVID-19, climate change, cyberspace, critical technologies, counter-terrorism, quality infrastructure investment, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as maritime domains. The leaders aim to bring diverse perspectives and are united to work together for a free, open, inclusive, healthy Indo-Pacific region anchored by democratic values and free from any kind of coercion. This is significant because Asia has seen the use

of interdependence as a tool of intimidation by some. Moreover, the QUAD is a manifestation of geopolitical and geo-economic churnings in the Indo-Pacific and underlines developing partnerships and collaborations at multiple levels by multiple arrangements. Our interlinked economies, social, cultural and security needs with the growing presence of technology have changed the nature of threats. It has become meaningless to make a distinction between the global, regional and local security challenges in some cases. This demands agility and flexibility from policymakers in dealing with sophisticated transnational threats. It also requires the ability to think and act innovatively. The current challenges and difficulties make it inevitable to expand regional and global collaborations. Most recently, in the QUAD senior officials meeting held on 12 August 2021, the officials discussed issues of common interest and explored possibilities of collaboration in resilient supply chains, emerging and critical technologies, maritime security, cyber security, counter-terrorism, infrastructure and connectivity, higher education, climate change and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. India and Australia are working with other partner countries in their effort to make a prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

While the salience of India's NER is well appreciated, coming together of partner countries to develop this region and India's eastern neighbourhood is a new and evolving phenomenon. Australia and India must seize this opportunity to make CSP between the two, a role model. India and Australia have taken a principles-centric approach to the Indo-Pacific region and been working bilaterally as well as with key partner countries for realizing the vision of a prosperous Indo-Pacific region. There is a need for greater coordination on issues of common interests. Both the countries could also consider a QUAD Plus model for enhancing dialogue and cooperation and receptibility of evolving idea of Indo-Pacific in India's eastern neighbourhood. They also need to demonstrate their ability to work together and deliver identified projects in a time-bound manner and to generate necessary momentum in evolving new frameworks of partnerships.

India's Northeast
Region and Eastern Neighbourhood

Against the backdrop of the larger geography of the Indo Pacific, India's North-Eastern states and sub-Himalayan eastern neighbours carry great significance. The region lies at the epicentre of a sensitive and compact "mountain to sea ecosystem" ranging from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal.

India's North-East region (NER) is comprised of eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, with special importance in India, due to their location, geographical and ecological diversity, and cultural and historical uniqueness. Around 98 per cent of the boundary of these states has international borders. NER is a gateway to East and Southeast Asia. Cooperation on connectivity at both a sub-national level and international level between the countries of the Bay of Bengal is a necessary building block for a prosperous Indo-Pacific. The northeast is India's gateway to the ASEAN region. Trade and associated capacity building created through this connectivity carry great significance.

The region, however, has failed to secure equal benefits in the process of India's developmental journey. Though, in the last few years, the region has witnessed improvement in infrastructure and increasing developmental activities. While the region has a lower level of industrial and economic development, it has abundant natural resources.

There has been a rapid change in these states with the modernization of the economy and expansion of education. Further, India's partner countries have indicated enormous interest to collaborate and work together to develop this region.

India's calibrated response to the changing geo-economic and geopolitical situation in Asia resulted in a shift in India's approach toward its east. 'Look East Policy' got elevated to 'Act East Policy' (AEP), assigning a definitive role and agenda for NER in India's pursuit

India's Northeast Region

of economic and strategic relations with neighbouring countries. Development of the region acknowledging NER as the heart of India's eastward engagement has become pivotal to India's AEP. The hope is that the AEP would bring fundamental changes including economic, socio-cultural, and psychological aspects to peoples' lives in NER. Activities such as: highlighting the centrality of the NER; linking domestic development agenda with the AEP; simultaneous focus on maritime and continental connectivity (both hard and soft); embarking upon sub-regional, regional, and multilateral approaches; and monitoring mechanisms for timely implementation of plans and projects can inject further dynamism in AEP.

To unleash the potential and to make NER the growth engine of the country, India has welcomed like-minded countries to come together and become a partner of this developing story. As an example of bilateral cooperation, recent times have witnessed significant collaboration between India and Japan for enhanced connectivity in the region. The role of the states in North-Eastern India in this regard is gaining added significance. There are several projects of India-Japan collaboration in the region, particularly in recent years. The recently launched Feni Bridge connecting the Indian state of Tripura with Bangladesh shortening the distance to the port of Chittagong is a striking example of a game-changer.

The Australia-India CSP has generated immense interest and scope for boosting further cooperation between India and Australia at a bilateral level, or at a trilateral level with Japan or at a multilateral level with the ASEAN or as part of the QUAD to foster further collaboration for development of this region for inclusive growth and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific at large.

With this background, this report identifies several key areas for deeper engagement between Australia and India in India's NER and eastern neighbourhood.

Geo-Economic Regionalism
Unlocking Opportunities in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

The NER due to its strategic location and bountiful natural resources has the potential for accelerating economic growth not only in its immediate neighbourhood of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar but also in the Indo-Pacific region ushering a new era of peace and prosperity. NER shares civilizational, religious, linguistic, culinary, cultural and ethnic ties with the countries of the neighbourhood which were facilitated by a vibrant trade and connectivity between them. The need now is to nurture and sustain this bond. In her remarks, Amb. Riva Ganguly Das, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India underlined that India, through its "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies, is forging a deeper engagement in the neighbourhood.

Amb. Ganguly Das underlined that to facilitate trade, Integrated Check Posts (ICP) are being set up in border areas. India under its Act East Policy is forging deeper engagement with Southeast Asian countries. Amb. Ganguly Das noted apart from physical connectivity, India is engaged in sharing expertise and knowledge and undertaking capacity building in the field of digital connectivity. She said that in addition to all the connectivity projects between Northeast India and the neighbourhood in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, India is working on developing connectivity between Andaman & Nicobar and Aceh in Indonesia, focused on Sabang. MoUs for these connectivity proposals were signed in November 2019. Completion of these projects will have a far-reaching economic impact on Northeast & Southeast Asia.

H.E. Barry O'Farrell Australia's High Commissioner to India said that the Indo-Pacific is a dynamic region at the centre of economic and strategic gravity. The Indo-Pacific encompasses Australia's most important economic and security partners. Like India, Australia is committed to an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. India and Australia are natural partners given the convergence of their

respective strategic outlooks, economic complementarities, shared interests, and dependence on the Indian Ocean for our prosperity.

Australia and India have a deep and productive partnership. The relationship between the two countries has evolved with time. Australia and India relations are based on common interests, mutual understanding, trust and the shared values of democracy and rule of law. India is Australia's seventh-largest trading partner, with two-way trade valued at $ 24.4 billion in 2020. Australia's trade and investment with India encompasses important sectors including energy and mining, education and training, health care, infrastructure and agribusiness. Another growing focus of bilateral cooperation is the development of commercial, research and technology partnerships on critical minerals; many of which are key inputs to the advanced industries that will support India's Atmanirbhar Bharat self-reliance agenda and assist economic recovery from the pandemic. For example, supplying Australian lithium and cobalt needed in India's burgeoning aerospace or electric vehicle industries would be the type of hi-tech trade that is win-win for both our economies.

Amb, Deepa Wadhwa, India's former ambassador to Japan said that Japan has long been involved in the development of NER. India-Australia bilateral partnership and trilateral with Japan can propel the QUAD engagement further in India's NER.

Amb. Anil Wadhwa former Secretary (East), India noted the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative which was formally launched on 28th April 2021 between India, Australia and Japan. Other countries in the region have been called upon to participate in this initiative. There is a recognition that business organisations, think tanks and individuals will all need to contribute to the success of this initiative.

Trade, Connectivity and Value Chains in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

Better connectivity across NER will help in developing a network of cross border production chains with Bangladesh and the Southeast Asian nations. Enhanced trade and connectivity are essential to improve people to people connections between NER and the wider neighbourhood. High Commissioner Barry O'Farrell said that countries can progress agreements and arrangements to facilitate enhanced trade across their borders. Trade agreements set expectations, including that trade and investment will be based on transparent rules and standards. They also help address barriers to the flow of goods and services. The more we build confidence and trust in our trading rules, the more we will be able to strengthen our economic integration. He said Australia recognises the importance of enhancing trade facilitation through improved cross-border linkages and lower non-tariff barriers. Trade facilitation efforts help reduce the cost of doing business and assists micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) – which form most businesses in the northeast – to participate in trade. Paperless customs procedures and electronic certification for perishable products will lower the costs and increase the efficiency of doing business, delivering practical benefits to traders and exporters. The Australian Government is a long-standing contributor to the South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program ($30 million, 2014-23) – a World Bank trust fund that addresses market access and issues across the BBIN sub-region – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal – through gender-sensitive trade facilitation. The trust fund is currently supporting COVID-19 recovery by focusing on labour market disruptions and providing social protection for displaced workers.

Despite Australia India two-way trade valued at $24.4 billion in 2020, Australia and India need to resolve old issues that are a barrier to deeper economic integration and synergy between the two countries. India has high tariffs for agriculture and dairy products like milk, cheese, fruits, butter, vegetables and cereals which makes it difficult for Australian exporters to export these items to India. India seeks greater access for its skilled professionals in the Australian labour market. Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam Industries and Commerce Department Dr K.K Dwivedi said that despite the presence of large numbers of over 60 Australian and 1500 Japanese companies in India few if any of them has a presence and production facilities in NER. NER has huge potential but has not been tapped and harnessed. Assam is strategically located and close to the ASEAN region. Companies doing business with ASEAN can shift their production facilities to Assam and can save both time and money.

Prof. Prabir De highlighted the need for processing and packaging of agricultural products and observed that Australia can help in the setup of the processing and packaging industry in the northeast through the B2B exchange. Further, he noted that the creation of a B2B portal for connecting business people, small entrepreneurs especially the indigenous people of India's northeast region who are dependent on agriculture for sustenance, would help empower them and the growth of the economy. The region provides immense potential for Australia for trade and commerce.

Mr Tim White, Trade and Investment Commissioner, Austrade, remarked that India and Australia have a strong partnership in the mining sector which is one of the fastest-growing areas of activity despite the pandemic. The sector has witnessed a lot of reform by India to boost productivity and increase efficiency. Australia is a natural partner that can provide technical expertise and advanced

machinery to help increase productivity. He further added that NER is a critical part of this partnership as it is richly endowed with natural resources and is an emerging location for the downstream industries. NER also has deposits of critical minerals. Australia and India are developing partnerships on critical minerals, with potential for partnerships between Australia, India and Japan complementing one another's strengths.

Dr K.K Dwivedi said that Assam is one of the largest producers of onshore hydrocarbons, crude oil and natural oil in India and has over 500 million tons of coal reserves.

NER provides huge opportunities to harness hydroelectric power. Hydropower is renewable and clean energy. The hydroelectricity potential is about 58,971MW, which is almost 40 per cent of India's hydel power potential of this immense potential only 1,727 MW (about 2.92 per cent) has been harnessed. **Sonia Arakkal**, Policy Fellow, Perth USAsia Centre pointed out that energy partnerships between Australia, India and Japan intersect in terms of energy and geopolitical interests. Australia and India can collaborate on hydropower and efficient use of coal. Australia can bring its expertise in the Hydropower sector to Manipur. Australia-India Energy Dialogue is the platform between the two countries to discuss energy resources on oil and gas, mines, renewable energy and energy efficiency. Hydropower in the region is the sunrise sector. Improved infrastructure and investor-friendly regulations provide huge investment opportunities for Australian investors and entrepreneurs.

NER is an ideal tourist destination with its scenic natural beauty, rich biodiversity, salubrious climate and friendly people that have been virtually unexplored. Despite this, NER has a minuscule share of India's tourist percentage. The region offers myriad opportunities for tourists to explore and create memories of a lifetime. Australia is world-renowned as a tourist destination with a vibrant tourism industry. Australians visit India in large numbers. This provides huge scope for collaboration in developing tourism in NER. Entrepreneurs have huge opportunities to develop eco-tourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, medical tourism, religious tourism, river cruises and tea tourism.

Mr. M P Bezbaruah, Chairman of the Governing Council of Asian Confluence, noted the tourism potential of the region is immense. Pandemic has opened new tourism opportunities. NER provides what the new generations of tourists are looking for: nature, outdoor experience and experience off the beaten track. COVID-19 has devastated the tourism sector and its revival requires international cooperation in the area of vaccine availability, healthcare facility, harmonization of travel protocol, health and safety protocol. With better connectivity, youthful population and infrastructure development, NER provides immense potential for the sustainable and lucrative tourism sector.

Creation of the right perception of the region is important for all of this. Towards this end, **Mr. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury**, Diplomatic Editor of the Economic Times, remarked that national media should have a local bureau in the NER region. For greater media coverage the Ministry of External Affairs should take Australian and Japanese journalists for a tour in NER. He also suggested a roundtable with journalists of the region and journalists of neighbouring countries. Australia, India and Japan media workshops can be organized in the NER. He suggested Ministry of External Affairs can start an 'author in residence' for Japanese and Australian journalists in Shillong at the Asian Confluence. These Authors in Residence can write a book on the NER region during their residency. **Dr Shristi Pukhrem**, Senior Research Fellow of India Foundation, spoke for the creation of a knowledge centre for the preservation of cultural diversity of Indigenous people of the northeast in collaboration with Australia which also has indigenous people and has worked in the preservation and documentation of their cultures. This centre can help in preserving the traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous people in both counties through research and exchange of scholars between the two countries.

Ms. Jahnabi Phookan, Director, Assam Bengal Navigation Company, JTI Group said that commerce, connectivity and culture are interconnected. NER with its vibrant atmosphere and renowned educational institutions can emerge as an education destination for South Asian and CLMV (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries. She called for greater collaboration between universities from NER with universities from Southeast Asia and Australia.

Mr. Rudra Chatterjee, Managing Director Luxmi Group and Chairman Obetee said that to improve the value chain it is essential to focus on quality over volume. He also emphasized the need for setting up infrastructure and skill development centres for the workforce. He highlighted the importance of packaging and branding and said that Australian companies can set up packaging and branding facilities in Assam. Mr. Chatterjee added the need for certification for organic and fair trade in finished products.

The NER is also very rich in natural and water resources interlaced by many rivers. High Commissioner **Barry O'Farrell** pointed out that, relevant to the NER, Australia is pleased to support the Australia-India Water Centre, launched in November 2020 by a consortium of 23 Australian and Indian universities including the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The Centre is facilitating collaboration in water research, education, training and capacity building, helping both countries to tackle future water and food security challenges. The rich resource endowments of Australia and eastern India, coupled with Australia's mining capabilities and expertise, offer new economic opportunities for both countries and the NER region in particular.

Key Policy Recommendations

In view of the discussion of the dialogue, the Asian Confluence would like to place the following recommendations for consideration of policy makers in both Australia and India:

- **Australia-India Center of Excellence in Northeast India:** A center of excellence could be set up in Northeast India to facilitate knowledge generation on key areas such as technologies and policies for building resilient value chains and trade facilitation, natural resource management, entrepreneurship development.
- **A Scholar in Residence** program may be launched, both at India and Australia. Scholars from Australia can have a deeper study of the North Eastern region. Asian Confluence will be glad to host this program in Shillong.
- **A Joint yearly meeting of Australia-India-Japan with policy makers and academic community in the Northeastern region may be taken up.** Representatives from ASEAN and BBIN countries could be invited as observers.
- **BBIN – Australia media roundtable:** India and Australia could take the lead in organizing more awareness on the opportunities for BBIN collaboration in connectivity and trade.
- **Energy partnerships** in the NE should be central to the India-Australia approach in the region and Australia can bring unique expertise in management of gas, renewable energy and infrastructure requirements and energy production.
- **India-Australia mining initiatives** in the NE and investing in it since it is really important not just in terms of mining but also in equipment and technology. Sharing that technology and making Indian mining more efficient and better at geology and production.

- **Asian Confluence can generate a B2B** portal to connect business people from NE with rest of the world.
- Since NE is the sports powerhouse of the country, Australia can help provide its expertise in institutionalizing sports diplomacy by **establishing partnerships with institutes and sports centres in the region.**
- **QUAD-BIMSTEC Policy Dialogue:** An annual QUAD-BIMSTEC policy dialogue may be organized at the track II level.

Annexure: I

Keynote Address

Amb. Riva Ganguly Das

Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs,
Government of India.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Panelists & Guests

Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am delighted to participate in today's Web Dialogue on the topic, "A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood."

I would like to first congratulate Asian Confluence and the Consulate General of Australia in Kolkata for organizing this interaction.

India shares historical, civilizational, cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic ties with countries in the region. India's North-East binds us with some of our most important neighbours. It is a vital link between two fundamental pillars of our foreign policy, "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East".

Connectivity is essential for realizing our common goal of a prosperous Indo-Pacific. Our Indo-Pacific vision builds on India's Act East Policy and the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) announced by PM in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

For India, the Indo-Pacific has acquired growing significance in recent times. A significant part of our trade also passes through the Indo-Pacific. For instance, last year our bilateral trade with ASEAN was $87 billion, with China $82 billion, with Japan & Korea together was $38 billion, with the US over $88 billion, and with Australia around $13 billion.

Friends,

India's Indo-Pacific Vision envisages a free, open and inclusive region, which embraces all nations in the region and beyond in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative or IPOI envisages practical implementation of this Vision with its seven pillars of cooperation and collaboration, with Connectivity being one such pillar. Promotion of Connectivity in the region has certain pre-requisites to make such activity sustainable from all angles. A common and universally applicable rules-based world order, which upholds sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of all nations is at the centre of this.

Given our geographical location, connectivity comes naturally to us. However, in the last few years, there has been a renewed focus on connectivity, both within India as well as with our partner countries.

Our Prime Minister has noted that the North-East has the potential to become India's growth engine. Focus of our Government has been on connectivity through improvement of infrastructure in the region, be its highways, laying of rail tracks or upgradation of airports or other forms of connectivity. Government is also working to complete several connectivity projects, as a part of India's development assistance in our extended neighbourhood.

Major connectivity projects being implemented by India in the region include the Kaladan transport project, an East-West corridor connecting our Northeast with Myanmar and Thailand, the Rhi-Tiddim road in Myanmar, construction of India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, the Biratnagar integrated check post with Nepal, road projects and power transmission lines in Nepal, restoration of pre-1965 train lines in Bangladesh etc. which during the COVID pandemic has been most useful in helping seamless trade through the border with minimum human contact.

We are now looking to build connectivity between Andaman & Nicobar and Aceh in Indonesia, focused on Sabang. Announced in 2018, it is currently work in progress. Connectivity between Ranong port in Thailand and Vizag, Chennai and Kolkata is also being

explored. MoUs for this connectivity proposals were signed in November 2019. Completion of these projects will have far reaching economic impact on Northeast & Southeast Asia.

During the successive phases of the pandemic, when most borders around the world have remained closed, the India-Nepal trade routes remained open and robust. In fact, after an initial slowdown in April 2020, the trade flows between India and Nepal quickly picked up, and steadily began to exceed even long-term averages. Road and Air connectivity with Nepal has been robust, and India has also been investing in building railway linkages.

In order to increase bilateral trade, India is developing Integrated Check Posts (ICP) closer to the border areas. The ICP in Agartala is already operational. Work on setting up new ICPs at Dawki (Meghalaya) and Sutarkandi (Assam) is underway. Six more ICPs along our International Borders in the North-East States are proposed. In addition, currently, seven Border Haats, five in Meghalaya (Kalaichar, Balat, Bholaganj, Nalikata & Ryngku) and two in Tripura (Srinagar & Kamalasagar), are functional. Nine more are in the pipeline. Border haats allow local communities to trade in local products.

India and Bangladesh have a Protocol on Inland Waterways Trade and Transit (PIWTT) since 1972 to promote trade and transit. PIWTT permits movement of goods over barges/ vessels through the river systems of Bangladesh on ten specific routes between points in India and Bangladesh, and between points in India through Bangladesh. Nearly 99% of the cargo on the protocol routes is carried by Bangladesh vessels. Dredging of this important link is also underway.

A significant development in connectivity of importance to Northeast has been the beginning of the direct sea movement of containerized/bulk/dry cargo between India and Bangladesh pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Coastal Shipping.

Movement of goods from Indian ports through Chittagong and Mongla ports to Tripura and other regions of Northeast through roadways would be enabled under the Agreement on the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports. The trail run under this took place in July 2020. Both sides are currently working on the full operationalization of the agreement. With the recent inauguration of the bridge over the river Feni flowing along the India-Bangladesh border connecting Sabroom in Tripura, for the northeast region it will be possible to access seaports in Bangladesh in future.

Besides physical connectivity, we are also sharing our expertise and knowledge and undertaking capacity building in the field of digital connectivity. Prime Minister PM announced a Line of Credit of US$ 1 billion to promote projects that support physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN and a Project Development Fund with a corpus of INR 500 crores to develop manufacturing hubs in CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) countries at the 13th ASEAN India Summit held in Malaysia in November 2015.

All our initiatives to promote development of trade infrastructure and connectivity in the region are expected to help cut down on the costs of logistics, the time of transportation and feed into the promotion of seamless inter-regional trade in our near and extended neighbourhood. All of these initiatives will help in regional market integration and increase the diversification of our supply chains.

Friends,

Besides the bilateral mechanisms, under multilateral and regional forums such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, MGC, India is undertaking several regional connectivity initiatives. Under the BIMSTEC Member States have recently finalized a Master Plan for Transport Connectivity with a vision to promote seamless connectivity between and across the member countries of the BIMSTEC region through the use of different transport modes. This will open up many new opportunities for the northeastern states. We are currently discussing a Coastal Shipping Agreement and Motor Vehicle Agreement in the BIMSTEC format and also in the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) group. Cooperation under BBIN is also being discussed in the areas of power and water resources management.

The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement was signed in June 2015. The implementation of this Agreement will enhance trade, economic cooperation and people to people contact, through enhanced regional connectivity, including through facilitation of regional cross-border road transport.

Connectivity, both physical and digital, is a vital pillar of India-ASEAN partnership. The work on early operationalization of the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway is under way. The study done by ERIA on its possible eastward extension to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam was noted by the leaders at the 17th ASEAN-India Summit. The study shows that all countries in the region and most importantly India's Northeast stands to benefit in terms of GDP growth, employment etc. from the implementation of the extension of the trilateral highway.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impact on the global and regional supply chains, the need for strengthening supply chain resilience has become paramount. Recently, India, along with Japan and Australia has unveiled the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with the aim to create a virtuous cycle of enhancing supply chain resilience and to eventually attain strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth in the Indo-Pacific region.

Today's Web Dialogue is an excellent platform to bring together think tanks, experts and relevant stakeholders to discuss issues related to enhancing connectivity in the region, especially connecting India's Northeast with our neighbourhood countries. I hope that today's deliberations would lead to actionable suggestions which would be useful in building practical linkages in the region.

Annexure: II

Inaugural Address

H.E. Barry O' Farrell
Australian High Commissioner to India

Australia's interests in open trade in the Indo-Pacific

Thank you Mr. Dutta.
Good morning, Secretary East Riva Ganguly Das and Chairman Bezbaruah.
And greetings to all online today.

I would like to thank Asian Confluence—with the support of the Australian Consulate-General in Kolkata—for convening this dialogue: A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood.

Today I'll speak about Australia's interests in open trade in the Indo-Pacific, and how India and regional partners such as Australia can cooperate to promote the development of India's northeast and the neighbourhood.

The Indo-Pacific is a dynamic region at the centre of economic and strategic gravity. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific encompasses our most important economic and security partners.

Like India, Australia is committed to an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. India and Australia are natural partners given the convergence of our respective strategic outlooks, economic complementarities, shared interests, and dependence on the Indian Ocean for our prosperity.

Connecting northeast India and Bay of Bengal countries with a resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific is important for the region's continued economic development. Through enhanced connectivity and trade, the northeast can become a gateway to neighbouring and ASEAN countries.

Secretary East can no doubt provide insights on how India's Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative are deepening engagement with neighbouring countries.

Australia's economic strength has flowed from openness to trade and investment, and integrated supply chains. COVID-19 has reminded us all of the crucial importance of the free flow of goods, services and investment to our shared prosperity; both in terms of the rules that govern those trade flows—and the infrastructure that supports our supply chains.

They are essential to ensuring medical and food supplies, protecting livelihoods and driving economic recovery.

To increase prosperity in our region, our goal must be to work together to keep trade and investment flowing in the Indo-Pacific. Today I will discuss some ways to achieve this.

First, Australia will continue to support our global trading institutions upholding the rules-based order. We support efforts to modernise the World Trade Organization – the only institution that develops, monitors and enforces global trade rules. Supporting a system of mutually agreed upon rules, and ensuring their enforceability, provides certainty to international trade and the businesses involved.

Second, countries can progress agreements and arrangements to facilitate enhanced trade across their borders. Trade agreements set expectations, including that trade and investment will be based on transparent rules and standards.

They also help address barriers to the flow of goods and services. The more that we build confidence and trust in our trading rules, the more we will be able to strengthen our economic integration. Australia has long been a champion of free trade.

We negotiate FTAs to benefit Australian consumers, exporters, importers, producers and investors by reducing and eliminating barriers to international trade and investment and opening up new market access. The agreements also benefit our partners by facilitating trade, including access to the Australian market and access to products which can assist grow partners' economies.

Australia has 15 FTAs currently in force, the majority of which are with Indo-Pacific partners. This sends a clear signal of the high-level commitment the Australian Government places on the free flow of trade and investment in our region. And we look forward to expanding our network of trade agreements, including with India.

India is Australia's seventh-largest trading partner, with two-way trade valued at $24.4 billion in 2020. Australia's trade and investment with India encompasses important sectors including: energy and mining, education and training, health care, infrastructure and agribusiness.

In June 2020, Australia's and India's Prime Ministers elevated our bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership or CSP. Under this partnership, Australia and India agreed to renew efforts towards securing a bilateral trade agreement. Officials are currently considering options in progress such an agreement, building on earlier bilateral discussions.

Reaching an agreement on this will be beneficial to both our economies, and further signal our commitment to a rules-based international order that facilitates a prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Relevant to the northeast, Australia is pleased to support the Australia-India Water Centre, launched in November 2020 by a consortium of 23 Australian and Indian universities including the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The Centre is facilitating collaboration in water research, education, training and capacity building, helping both countries to tackle future water and food security challenges.

The rich resource endowments of Australia and eastern India, coupled with Australia's mining capabilities and expertise, offer new economic opportunities for both countries.

Another growing focus of bilateral cooperation is the development of commercial, research and technical partnerships on critical minerals; many of which are key inputs to the advanced industries that will support India's Atma Nirbhar Bharat or 'self-reliance' agenda and post pandemic economic recovery.

For example, supplying Australian lithium and cobalt needed in India's burgeoning aerospace or electric vehicle industries would be the type of hi-tech trade that is win-win for both our economies. And do so as a trusted reliable partner.

Third, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 have also highlighted the importance of building resilient supply chains, not just for essential medical supplies and pharmaceutical

inputs, but also for agriculture production and manufacturing which rely on inputs from elsewhere.

Governments and businesses need to collaborate to identify supply chain vulnerabilities and develop plans to mitigate against the risk of disruption. The Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, launched by Indian, Australian and Japanese Trade Ministers in April this year, is a prime example of this kind of international collaboration.

Fourth, Australia recognises the importance of enhancing trade facilitation through improved cross-border linkages and lower non-tariff barriers. Trade facilitation efforts help reduce the cost of doing business and assists micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) – which form the majority of businesses in the northeast – to participate in trade. Paperless customs procedures and electronic certification for perishable agricultural products will lower the costs and increase the efficiency of doing business, delivering practical benefits to traders and exporters.

The Australian Government is a long-standing contributor to the South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program ($30 million, 2014-23) – a World Bank trust fund that addresses market access and issues across the BBIN sub-region – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal – through gender-sensitive trade facilitation. The trust fund is currently supporting COVID-19 recovery by focusing on labour market disruptions and providing social protection for displaced workers.

Fifth, even in this digital world – we will never lose our need for the trade and transport infrastructure that supports and drives our supply chains, moving goods and services across borders. Be they roads, railways and ports – their proper functioning is critical to facilitating trade and connectivity.

India is investing heavily in its infrastructure and logistics sectors, and I know it is keen for other countries, including Australia, to also invest and share expertise and best practices.

In partnership with the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation, the Australian Government's South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity program ($32 million, 2019-25) is focused on improving transport and energy investments between BBIN countries, addressing a key constraint to trade and economic growth.

We also regard the Blue Dot Network – involving Quad members the US, Japan and Australia – as an important initiative to ensure emphasis on sustainable quality infrastructure.

Australia will do its part with partners like India to support the economic recovery from COVID-19 in the Bay of Bengal region. This is key to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Through development assistance investments of over AUD32 million in South Asia through to 2025, Australia will help enhance economic recovery from COVID-19 by supporting:

- cross-border supply chains
- trade facilitation policy reforms
- regional collaboration in planning and implementing major investment projects
- private sector investment in physical connectivity.

We will be part of the solutions to the region's challenges by working together with our partners like India, Japan and the US, bilaterally, trilaterally and through the Quad.

It is important to reiterate the Quad has a positive agenda.

Over the past two years, Quad partners have deepened practical cooperation on a range of shared priorities, including maritime security, cyber, infrastructure investment, and COVID-19 vaccines. Announced by leaders in March 2021, the Quad Vaccine Partnership will expand access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines in the Indo-Pacific, including through supporting a boost in production by at least one billion doses by the end of 2022.

All of the endeavours I have outlined: supporting global trading organisations, trade agreements, building resilient supply chains, enhancing trade facilitation, and developing and improving on trade and transport infrastructure, can and will be done in partnership.

Australia's approach will be to work with trusted partners and business on a shared path to economic recovery and maintenance of open markets and rules-based trade and investment.

I look forward to the stimulating discussions during today's dialogue, and hearing the perspectives of speakers from the northeast and the wider region on how Australia can contribute further to the development of India's northeast and eastern neighbourhood as part of an open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific.

Annexure: III

Speakers and Participation

Inaugural Session

Setting the theme-A Prosperous Indo-Pacific: Enhancing Cooperation in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

1. *Inaugural Address:* **H.E. Barry O'Farrell**, Australian High Commissioner to India
2. *Keynote Address:* **Amb. Riva Ganguly Das**, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India
3. *Opening Remarks:* **Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah**, Chairman, Governing Council Asian Confluence and former member North Eastern Council.
4. *Anchor:* **Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta**, Executive Director, Asian Confluence

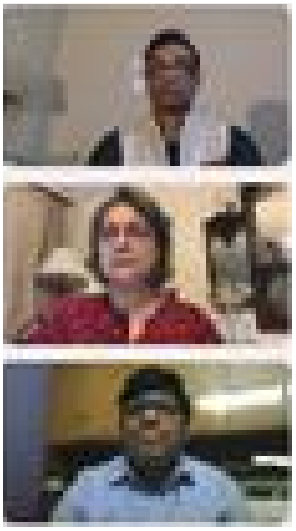
Session II

Panel Discussion: Decoding Geo-economics: How the Australia-India partnership can propel QUAD engagement in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

Chair: **Amb. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa,** IFS (Retd.) Former Amb. To Japan and Member Governing Council, Asian Confluence

Panelists:

1. **Ms. Sonia Arakkal**, Policy Fellow, Perth USAsia Centre
2. **Prof. Prabir De**, ASEAN India Center, RIS, India
3. **Mr Kengo Akamine,** Senior Representative, JICA, India
4. **Dr. Shristi Pukhrem,** Senior Research Fellow, India Foundation
5. **Mr. Dipanjan Roy Chowdhury**, Diplomatic Editor The Economic Times



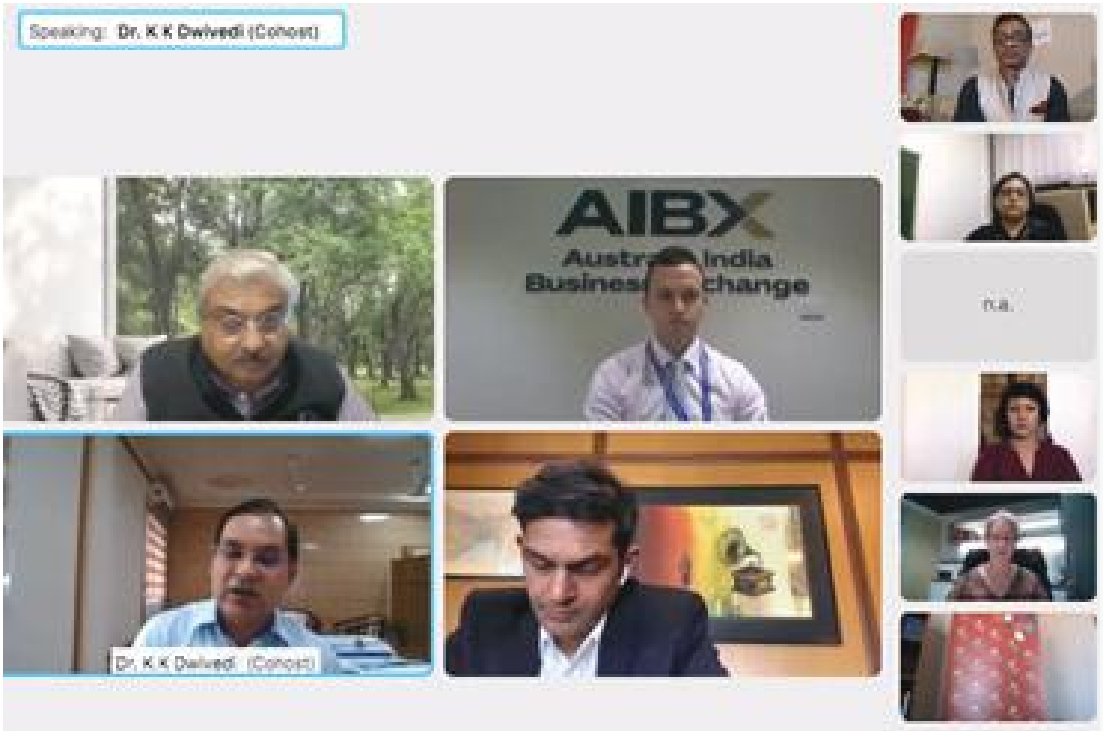
Session III

Trade and Connectivity and value chains in India's Northeast Region and Eastern Neighbourhood

Chair: **Amb. Anil Wadhwa,** IFS(Retd.) Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

Panelists:

1. **Mr. Tim White,** Trade and Investment Commissioner, Austrade
2. **Dr. K.K Dwivedi,** IAS, Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam Industries & Commerce Department, Assam
3. **Ms. Debdatta Nandwani,** Lead Consultant, East India Trade Advisors
4. **Mr. Rudra Chatterjee,** Managing Director Luxmi Group and Chairman Obetee
5. **Ms. Jahnabi Phookan, Director, Assam Bengal Navigation Company, JTI Groups**



Concluding Session and Vote of Thanks: The Way Forward

Ms. Rowan Ainsworth, Australian Consulate-General, Kolkata

Participation

The webinar was hosted on the **Webex platform**

Total number of registrations: **250**

Total Participation online on Webex: **119**

Dialogue was broadcast on Facebook and total views so far: **322**

(https://www.facebook.com/512810072083924 videos/1959629614201996)

Countries Represented in Audience (Webex): India, Australia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, United States

Annexure: IV

Biographs of Speakers and Chairs

Mr. M. P. Bezbaruah

Chairman, Governing Council, Asian Confluence

Madan Prasad Bezbaruah served as member of the North East. He belongs to an illustrious family with a civil service background. He has held important government positions in the North Eastern Council – Assam and Meghalaya and in the Government of India. He was Secretary to the Government of Assam in the Departments of Education, Health, Industries and Finance, Chairman of the Assam State Electricity Board and the Home Secretary of Assam from January 1986 to August 1990. During 1990 to 1994, he was Minister (Economic) in the High Commission of India, London. From 1997 to 2001, he served as the Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, and Government of India. He also served as the Principal Adviser in the Planning Commission of India and was Banking Ombudsman for the Reserve Bank of India. After retirement, he was conferred the Honorary Permanent Representative of World Tourism Organization (WTO).

The Hon Barry O'Farrell AO

High Commissioner of Australia to India

Mr. O'Farrell served in the Parliament of New South Wales from 1995 to 2015, including as the State's 43rd Premier between 2011 and 2014. As Premier, Mr. O'Farrell initiated and led annual trade missions to India to promote economic, cultural and social links between New South Wales and the states of India. He has also served as NSW's Special Envoy for India and has made a significant contribution as the Deputy Chair of the Australia India Council Board. Mr. O'Farrell has a Bachelor of Arts from the Australian National University, Canberra. Born in Melbourne, Mr. O'Farrell grew up in Darwin. He is married to Rosemary and they have two adult sons.

Amb. Riva Ganguly Das

Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

Ms. Riva Ganguly Das joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986. She is a Post Graduate in Political Science from Delhi University. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, she was a Lecturer at Delhi University. Her first posting was in Spain. Thereafter, she was at Headquarters dealing with External Publicity, Nepal and Passport/Visa work. She was Head of the Cultural Wing of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka. After her return from Dhaka, she took over as Director at the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Division and participated in environmental negotiations, particularly climate change. She was the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Embassy of India, The Hague. She was also the Alternate Permanent Representative of India to the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons at The Hague. She served as Consul General of India in Shanghai from 2008 to 2012. After her return from China, she headed the Public Diplomacy Division and later the Latin America & Caribbean Division in the Ministry of External Affairs. She was Ambassador of India to Romania with concurrent accreditation to Albania & Moldova and thereafter served as India's Consul General in New York. Ms. Das most recently served as High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh. Before joining as HC Dhaka, she was Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). She speaks Bengali, Hindi, English and Spanish.

Ms. Rowan Ainsworth,

Australian Consul-General Kolkata

Ms. Rowan Ainsworth is the Australian Consul-General in Kolkata. She is a career officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and was most recently Counsellor, Australian Embassy, Paris. She has previously served overseas in Moscow and Tokyo. In Canberra she served with DFAT as Director, Northern, Central and Eastern Europe Section and State Director, Tasmanian State Office. Ms. Ainsworth holds a Master of Arts and Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney.

Mr Sabyasachi Dutta

Executive Director, Asian Confluence

Sabyasachi Dutta is founder Director of the Asian Confluence, India East Asia, Center headquartered at Shillong, Meghalaya in Northeast India. Sabyasachi brings a unique combination of experiences to push this initiative: A deep and insightful stint of rural development in the Northeast and Eastern India where he set up a chain of 80 primary schools using the model of community participation propelled by youth leadership; A successful career spanning 12 years in the Silicon Valley, California USA in cutting edge technology, innovation and entrepreneurship, having held important positions in large corporations such as SONY Corp as well as successful startups, and he holds several patents; He is a long time avid student of Indian Culture, Philosophy, Public policy and International relations. Sabyasachi continues to facilitate cultural programs, exchange programs, talks, discussions and symposia with scholars and leaders of culture and thought, from India and abroad as part of the Asian Confluence.

Amb. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa

Former Amb. To Japan and Member Governing Council, Asian Confluence

Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa has been a distinguished career diplomat who joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in 1979 and retired in December 2015. A graduate from Madras University, she has an undergraduate degree in Chemistry and a post graduate degree in English Literature. She has served as Ambassador of India to Japan (2012-2015), Qatar (2009-2012) and Sweden (2005-2009). She was concurrently accredited as Ambassador to Latvia (from Stockholm), and Republic of the Marshall Islands (from Tokyo). During her career, she has also held other significant assignments in Geneva, Hong Kong, China, The Netherlands, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ministry of External Affairs. In the course of her career spanning over 36 years, she has handled a wide swathe of issues and subjects related to India's relations with key countries such as Pakistan, China, and Japan; participated in international conferences and negotiations related to climate change, sustainable development, disarmament and human rights and was instrumental in the active promotion of India's economic interests in areas of trade, technology, investments and energy security during postings in Europe, the GCC and Japan. Deepa Gopalan is Chairperson of the India-Japan Friendship Forum, Member Governing Council of the Institute of Chinese Studies and is on the Governing Council of the Asian Confluence based in Shillong.

Ms Sonia Arakkal

Policy Fellow, Perth USAsia Centre

Sonia Arakkal is a Policy Fellow at the Perth USAsia Centre. In addition to planning and coordinating a range of program and research initiatives, Sonia directs the Centre's India programs and convenes policy workshops focused on Australia-India relations. Sonia was previously a political staffer for state and federal parliamentarians. In these roles she provided strategic advice to politicians on state and national level policy priorities, maintained

and managed relationships with multinational business, peak body and academic stakeholders and formed a sophisticated understanding of parliamentary processes in Canberra. Prior to this Sonia was a Management Consultant in Nous Group's public policy practice in both Melbourne and Perth. There she led complex research, analysis and policy development projects for government clients across Australia. She also has experience in lobbying having worked at Hawker Britton as an analyst, providing strategic government relations briefs for corporate clients on financial policy, regulatory reform and cross-jurisdictional analysis of economic policy. Sonia's opinion pieces have been published in The Age, Sydney Morning Herald and online. She offers commentary in the media, most recently on ABC Radio National and ABC's The Drum. Sonia has a degree in law and international relations with honours from the Australian National University

Prof. Prabir De

ASEAN India Center, RIS, India

Dr. Prabir De is a Professor at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi. He works in the field of international economics and has research interests in international trade and development. He was a Visiting Fellow of the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE-JETRO), Japan; Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), Tokyo; and Visiting Senior Fellow of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Bangkok. He obtained Ph.D. in Economics from the Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He has contributed several research papers in international journals and written books on trade and development. His recent book includes Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's Expanding Neighbourhood, published by the Knowledge World in 2020; an edited volume (with Selim Raihan) Trade and Regional Integration in South Asia: A Tribute to Saman Kelegama, published by the Springer in 2020; and an edited volume (with Ajitava Raychaudhuri and Suranjan Gupta) World Trade and India: Multilateralism, Progress and Policy Response, published by Sage in 2021. In 2020, he edited a flagship Report ASEAN-India Development Cooperation Report: Avenues for Cooperation in Indo-Pacific. He is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Asian Economic Integration, published by Sage.

Mr Kengo Akamine

Senior Representative, JICA

Mr. Akamine graduated from Waseda University, Tokyo majoring in Development Economics in 2005. He joined Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and engaged in operation for India in the same year being based in Tokyo. In 2010 he was the representative in JICA Peru Office. In 2015 he was deputed to Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan and engaged in promotion of High-Quality Infrastructure. From 2017 till present, he is the Senior Representative in JICA India Office, in charge of overall operation especially in water & sanitation, power, forestry, agriculture, and human resources development sectors

Dr Shrishti Pukhrem

Senior Research Fellow, India Foundation

Dr. Shristi Pukhrem is a Senior Research Fellow at India Foundation, a New Delhi based think tank. She has been awarded doctorate from the Centre of South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her PhD thesis titled as "India's Connectivity with South-East Asia: The Economic and Security Implications of the Asian Highway". Earlier she has worked as a Researcher at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi. She is also a Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) holder in Political Science, awarded by the University Grants Commission, India. Her areas of research and interest cover India-ASEAN relations, India and Southeast Asia relations, Act-East Policy. She has served as a Visiting Scholar at the ASEAN Studies Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok in April 2016. She was also selected as one of the Canberra Fellows, March 2019 during which she participated in the Trilateral Canberra Fellowship held in Australia.

Mr Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury

Diplomatic Editor The Economic Times

Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, is a Sr Assistant Editor with The Economic Times, Delhi and writes on foreign and strategic affairs for the daily. A journalist since 2001, Dipanjan has been posted in Jammu and Kashmir and traveled extensively in India's Northeast to cover insurgency in the past. As a reporter for foreign affairs Dipanjan has traveled to various parts of the world on key assignments including Summits, Prime Ministerial and Presidential visits and developments in India's Neighbourhood. A US State Department IVLP fellow in 2015, he has been on fellowships to Germany and Taiwan.

Amb. Anil Wadhwa

Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

Ambassador Anil Wadhwa was a member of the India Foreign Service from 1979-2017 and has served as the Indian Ambassador to Italy, Thailand, Oman and Poland. As Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs of India he oversaw relations with South East Asia, Gulf and West Asia, Pacific and Australasia. He has served as the Indian Ambassador and Permanent Representative to FAO, IFAD, WFP, UNESCAP and worked with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague heading the Government Relations and Political Affairs and Media and Public Affairs Branches. He has served as India's chief delegate TO THE East Asia Summit, ASEAN- India, ASEM, Asian Cooperation Dialogue, the Arab League, Mekong Ganga Cooperation, and ARF meetings. Ambassador Wadhwa's previous postings include stints with the Indian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, twice to the Indian Embassy in Beijing, and in the Commission of India in Hong Kong. He has led a CII task force for writing the Australia Economic Strategy report for the Indian government. Ambassador Wadhwa is currently a Distinguished fellow with the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi and serves as an Independent Director on the Boards of some corporate firms.

Mr Tim White

Trade and Investment Commissioner, Austrade.

Tim manages Austrade's flagship trade and investment promotion program in India the Australia-India Business Exchange (AIBX). AIBX is a digital-first and partner-driven program that aims to build two-way business literacy and driver commercial outcomes in priority sectors, including agri-food, mining & resources, infrastructure and education. Tim also leads Austrade's Marketing and Mining & Resources teams in South Asia and manages Austrade's New Delhi and Kolkata, and Dhaka posts. Previously Tim served with Austrade in Greater China where he led Austrade's Healthcare team and managed the agency's West China presence. Tim also worked for more than 10 years with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade across roles in China and Canberra. He holds degrees in Law with Honours and Asian Studies from the Australian National University.

Dr K.K Dwivedi

IAS, Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam

Industries & Commerce Department, Assam

Dr. K. K. Dwivedi is an Indian Administrative Service Officer of Assam -Meghalaya Cadre of 1996 Batch. Since then, he has served the Government of Assam in various capacities. Dr. Dwivedi started his career as Assistant Commissioner, Goalpara. He was the S.D.O. (Civil) in Dhemaji and Barpeta. From 2004-2012, Dr. Dwivedi was the Deputy Commissioner in Sivasagar, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district. From 2012-16, he was the Commissioner, Panchayat and Rural Development and Chief Executive Officer, FREMA. Since 2016, he was the Commissioner and Secretary to the Government of Assam, Industries and Commerce, IT, Science and Technology, Personnel, Administrative Reforms &Training, Irrigation and Public Enterprises. He has also served as the Commissioner of Industries and Commerce and Managing Director, Assam Industrial Development Corporation Limited.

Presently, Dr. K.K. Dwivedi is serving as the Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam, Industries & Commerce, Transport,

Act East Policy Affairs & Skill, Employment & Entrepreneurship, Mines & Mineral Department and Managing Director, Assam Hydro Carbon and Energy Corporation Ltd.

Ms Debdatta Nandwani

Lead Consultant, East India Trade Advisors

Armed with a post graduate degree in Political Science from Calcutta University and an alumnus of Harvard University where she studied Organizational Behaviour, Debdatta Nandwani, has been doing the balancing act between administration and international trade facilitation. She began her career with IT management services and went on to work with Dun and Bradstreet, India, a world-renowned business information and credit rating company and established their Eastern region office in Kolkata. Moving on, she joined the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), an apex body set up by Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, as Deputy Director General in 2009, engaged in international trade facilitation and trade promotion. She also served a short stint with Ernst & Young, as Director, Global Trade. She was nominated for the South Asia Women Entrepreneurs Forum which serves as a platform for catalyzing follow on activities to advance women's entrepreneurship and leadership in the region and beyond, creating cross border linkages between women entrepreneurs and leaders throughout South Asia. In a career spanning 30 years of cross functional responsibilities in various service sectors particularly related to international trade, she launched her consulting firm, East India Trade Advisors, in July 2020, providing advisory services in various aspects of International Trade. She has also recently been appointed "President" of the recently opened West Bengal Chapter of the Asian-African Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Mr Rudra Chatterjee

Managing Director Luxmi Group and Chairman Obetee

Rudra Chatterjee is the Chairman of Obeetee, India's largest carpet company. He is the Managing Director of Luxmi Tea Pvt. Ltd., a company growing 15 M KG of tea in Assam and West Bengal, and

of Luxmi Township, that owns and develops real estate in Siliguri. In his previous role, Rudra worked in the New York office of Booz Allen Hamilton, a management consulting firm, and graduated from Columbia Business School. Rudra is adjunct faculty at IMI Kolkata and guest lecturer at IIM, Kolkata. He writes op-ed columns for The Statesman. Rudra is a director of Makaibari, Biswa Bangla Marketing Ltd., Banglar Dairy, Manor & Mews, UK and Haldia Petrochemicals Ltd. Currently he is the President of Indian Chamber of Commerce.

Ms Jahnabi Phookan

Director, Assam Bengal Navigation Company, JTI Group

Jahnabi Phookan is the Immediate Past President of FICCI Ladies Organization (FLO), women's wing of the apex industry body, Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FICCI). Representing over 8000 women entrepreneurs and professionals, FLO works aggressively towards promoting economic empowerment and equal opportunities for women. Jahnabi is an entrepreneur, a co-founder of two National Tourism Award-winning companies: Jungle Travels India and Assam Bengal Navigation Company under JTI Group. Her companies are encompassed in travel & hospitality – boutique river cruising, a small group specialized tours, tea and textiles – all of which empower young people's livelihoods, especially women and their communities. Jahnabi has been responsible for setting up the FLO Northeast chapter as its Founder Vice Chairperson in 2007. During her tenure, she conceptualised the 'Iconic Women of Northeast' Awards that honour 5 women from across diverse genres in the NE who have overcome difficulties to achieve their dreams. Jahnabi was a recipient of the FLO Outstanding Women Achievers Award in December 2013. Passionate about women's empowerment Jahnabi strongly advocates and tirelessly works towards building sustainable livelihoods for women's economic upliftment, policy and legislative levels, equality, social justice and skill development in order to make them confident, employable and economically independent.

Annexure: V

Session-Wise Discussion

Inaugural Session

Mr. M. P. Bezbaruah

Chairman, Governing Council, Asian Confluence

- This webinar lays the foundation of Indo-Pacific cooperation for development of India's NE which is the core concern. This is a very significant step to Pacific cooperation symbolically and otherwise.
- Asian Confluence is focused on giving importance to the Third Space, which is the common people in the NE. It explores avenues for prosperity and promotion of sustainable livelihood through cooperation with its neighbourhood by exploring the shared experiences, aspirations, resources and histories.
- Rivers crisscross the region and it is called NADI which maybe considered as a symbol of binding relationships and the journey together is necessary to create a better tomorrow.
- Peace and stability are the essential objectives but the canvas of cooperation needs to go beyond that. It has to put people to the core and therefore in Asian Confluence we feel, people-to-people contact is the most valuable step for any cooperation.
- India's Indo-Pacific initiative launched in November 2019 which identified seven pillars including maritime security, ecology, resources, capacity building and resources sharing, disaster risk reduction management, science technology, academic cooperation, trade connectivity and transportation.

- The need for linking India's cooperation with commitment made by our global community for the future of mankind, our commitment to MDGS in poverty and malnutrition remained high, now we have the commitment to SDGS
- Geopolitics will always be fragile if hunger, inequality, malnutrition coexist. Sustainability should be the driving force and the overriding consideration in whatever we intend to do together for a prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- Indo-Pacific is important for India's Act East Policy; NE has high expectations from Act East policy. NE is an example of great contradiction of slow economic progress in spite of huge resources, like oil, Human resources etc. Link to the east can be a catalyst to our goal.
- NE has already seen robust development and involvement of Japan in infrastructural development in this region.

Mr Sabyasachi Dutta

Executive Director, Asian Confluence

- In the past few years, one has witnessed how the deep bonds of friendship between India and Australia have manifested in several dimensions
- Some of these include the India Australia Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement negotiations, the India Japan Australia Supply Chain Resilience Initiative and of course the QUAD with many new initiatives
- A map created by the famous Australian Explorer and Surveyor general of New South Wales Sir Thomas L. Mitchell in his 1848 book "Tropical Australia" which shows the "so called" tilted view. If one were to draw a straight line from the North-eastern region in India to Australia on the map, it would pass through the immediate neighbourhood e.g. (Bangladesh and Myanmar), the extended neighbourhood in ASEAN, Indonesia in the Bay of Bengal
- It is well recognized that improving connectivity and trade between and within these geographies by developing and improving on trade and transport infrastructure, building resilient supply chains and enhancing trade facilitation is an important component to realizing a vibrant and prosperous Indo Pacific

The Hon Barry O'Farrell AO

High Commissioner of Australia to India

- India and Australia can cooperate to promote development in the Northeast and the wider neighbourhood.
- Indo-Pacific is a dynamic region and for Australia the region encompasses important security and economic partners.

- Like India, Australia is also committed to an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific and as natural partners with shared interests they also share the common dependence on the Indian Ocean as a source of prosperity. Australia regards India as a natural leader in the region.
- Connecting the Northeast to a resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific is important for the region's continued economic development.
- Through enhanced connectivity and trade, NE can become a gateway for the neighbouring and ASEAN countries.
- India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies contribute to the neighbourhood economies.
- Australia has 15 trade agreements in force with its Indo-Pacific partners. Look forward to expanding its trade network including with India.
- India is Australia's 7th largest trade partner with two-way bilateral trade of just under 25 billion dollars in 2020. This includes energy, mining, education and vocational training, infrastructure, healthcare and agribusiness.
- In June 2020, the Prime Ministers of Australia and India elevated the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Under this partnership, India and Australia agreed to renew efforts to secure a bilateral trade agreement.
- Reaching an agreement on this will be beneficial for both the economies and will further signal our commitment to a rules-based international order for a prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- In support of development in Northeast India, Australia supported the launch of a Water Centre in November 2020 with a consortium of 23 partners.
- Australian and Indian Universities including IIT Guwahati to facilitate collaboration in water research, education and capacity building helping both the countries to face the food and water security challenges in the future.
- The rich resources in Australia and Northeast India coupled with Australia's mining capabilities and expertise offer new economic opportunities for the North East.
- Another growing focus of bilateral cooperation is the commercial, research and technical partnerships on critical minerals. The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have led to the need to build resilient supply chains, not just for essential medical supplies and pharmaceuticals but also for agriculture, manufacturing etc.
- Governments and businesses need to collaborate to identify supply chain vulnerabilities amidst the risk of disruption. Australia recognises the importance of enhancing trade facilitation through improved cross-border linkages.
- It is important to reiterate that the Quad has a positive agenda. It has worked on a number of issues over the past two years such as maritime security, cyber issues and COVID-19 vaccines. The Quad vaccine partnership aims to extend safe vaccines across the Indo-Pacific including a boost in production of 1 billion doses.

Amb. Riva Ganguly Das

Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

- India shares historical, civilizational, linguistic and cultural links with our neighbours. The NE binds us with our most important neighbours. It is a vital link between two fundamental pillars of the foreign policy - Neighbourhood first and Act East Policy.
- Realizing the common goal of Indo-Pacific - Indo-Pacific vision based on India's Act East Policy and the doctrine of security growth for all in the region (SAGAR), announced by the PM in 2014 and 2015.
- For India, the Indo-Pacific has acquired a growing significance in recent times. Significant part of the trade passes through the Indo-Pacific region. For example, bilateral trade with ASEAN is 87 billion dollars, with China 82 billion, Japan and Korea together it was 38 billion, over 88 billion with the USA and over 13 billion with Australia.
- India's Indo-Pacific vision envisages a free, open and inclusive region which embraces all in the region beyond in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative envisages practical implementation of these region with its 7 pillars of cooperation and collaboration with connectivity being one such pillar.
- Promotion of connectivity in the region has certain prerequisites to make such activities sustainable from all angles. A common and universally applicable rules-based world order upholds sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of all neighbours at the center.
- Given the geographical location, connectivity comes naturally. However, in the last few years, there has been a renewed focus on connectivity, both within India as well as with our partner countries.
- The Prime Minister has noted that NE has the potential to become India's growth engine. The focus of our government has been on infrastructure improvement in the region, be it in highways, railways or upgradation of other forms of connectivity.
- Government is also working to complete several connectivity projects as part of India's development partnership in our extended neighbourhood. Major connectivity projects being implemented by India in the region include the Kaladan Transport Project, and East West Corridor Connecting our NE with Myanmar and Thailand, construction of India-Bangladesh friendship pipeline, the Birat Nagar integrated check post with Nepal road project and restoration in Nepal, etc.
- Trade with Bangladesh proved to be useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Operations using land routes became difficult but the railway system helped in a seamless experience through the border with minimum contact and has really taken off between the two countries. New connectivity projects between Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Indonesia focused on the Sabang was announced in 2018 and is currently in progress.

- Connectivity between the Thailand port, Vizag, Chennai and Kolkata are also explored. MoUs for this connectivity proposals were signed in November 2019. These projects will have far reaching impacts on the economy of NE and SE Asia.
- During the different waves of the pandemic, India-Nepal trade routes remained open and robust. Road and air connectivity with Nepal has been robust and India has also been investing in building railway linkages. To increase bilateral trade, India has check posts closer to the border areas. The ICP in Agartala is already operational.
- Six more international borders in NE states are proposed. India and Bangladesh have a protocol of an inland waterways and transit since 1972 to promote trade and transit between the two countries; PIWTT permits movement of goods over barges through the river system of Bangladesh and specific routes between points in India through Bangladesh. About 99 per cent of the cargo is carried by Bangladeshi vessels.
- Significant development of connectivity to the NE has been the beginning of direct sea movement of containerised bulk dry cargo in India and Bangladesh.
- Recent inauguration of the bridge of river Feni along the India Bangladesh border connecting NE will have access to sea ports in Bangladesh in future.
- Regarding digital connectivity, PM announced 1 billion dollars to promote projects that supports physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN and a project development fund corpus of 500 crore INR to develop manufacturing hubs in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, announced at the 13th ASEAN-India Summit, held in Malaysia in November 2015.

Session II

Panel Discussion: Decoding Geo-economics: How the Australia-India partnership can propel QUAD engagement in India's Northeast and Eastern Neighbourhood

Amb. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa

Former Amb. To Japan and Member Governing Council, Asian Confluence

- Australia is not a stranger to NE. Japan has been involved in the development of NE. India-Australia relations have in the past years developed a comprehensive partnership in the format of bilateral and trilateral.
- India-Australia partnership can propel the QUAD engagement in India's NE.
- Freedom of expression and the role of the media is very important in development.

- Australia-India economic strategy report points out the importance of what can be achieved and applies it to the NE for its development and relations with the neighbourhood.
- Distance is not as daunting as it used to be earlier. Australia has an active role in the NE which is quite possible and in partnership with other QUAD members.
- There is huge Australian involvement in the development plans of the ASEAN, and the projects can be used for the NE.
- Trade facilitation is really important, in the context of opening NE to Myanmar and to ASEAN and we realise the challenges to trade facilitation and also the need to have better border management, in this regard the Quad countries can work together.
- Australia investing into education is NE, basically a global partner.
- Japan has been India's partner of choice in the development of NE and there has been a convergence of interest which has made it possible.
- JICA has been proved to be a trusted partner of India and it has been involved in the transformation of the NE by undertaking different projects in infrastructure, disaster management, environmental protection etc.
- Japan has always been for the NE region; it connects NE to Myanmar via Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal and Bhutan and Nepal. It has been a forerunner of cooperation by other countries in the NE. JICA has been doing training of nurses in the NE, but health is also a sector identified in India where Australia and India can work together particularly in hotel management and so on.
- Travel time has been cut off from several hours because of the development initiative and it made a change in the lives of NE.

Ms Sonia Arakkal

Policy Fellow, Perth USAsia Centre

- Three propositions on how India and Australia can bring the QUAD along to the NE region Australia can bring its capabilities in bringing QUAD to the region especially in the sectors of maritime, humanitarian and disaster relief, which can bring value to the countries in question
- Clear economic value in mining and energy partners that Australia can bring to NE through the bilateral relations with India.
- Supply chain resilience initiative might be a better vehicle for QUAD or even the bilateral to bring the NE region and its neighbouring countries into focus for Australia.
- In 2021, QUAD gained considerable momentum and large regional expectations that the QUAD countries have set out to do, from vaccines to countering disinformation.

- QUAD is a strategic grouping, even researchers have shown that the ten working group launched in the March Summit have made sufficient progress by the time the QUAD meets again this year.
- The main game is Prioritisation. The first is the COVID-19 vaccine delivery, next would-be attracting investment in India's NE and neighbouring states. Australia can bring the QUAD partners along in leveraging expertise and applying these in the region.
- Natural disaster resilience can also be prioritised, as the BIMSTEC countries suffer the worst natural disasters. Also, the environmental and climate change angle especially in relation to sustainable mining practices, energy and maritime domain with regards to sustainable fishing and pollution in the Bay of Bengal area – Australia can advocate for these projects.
- Strategic energy partnership (which is a brainstorm of the Trump administration) started between US-Japan-India-Australia. It was based on the intersection of energy and geopolitical interests.
- Australia is working in LNG and Gas and there is an opportunity to replicate energy diplomacy in the NE region in hydropower, or efficient use of coal.
- Three important recommendations:
  - » Energy partnerships and diplomacy in the NE should be central to the India- Australia approach in the region and Australia can bring unique expertise in management of gas, renewable energy and infrastructure requirements and energy production
  - » Mining: India-Australia mining initiatives in the NE and investing in it is really important not just in terms of mining but also equipment and technology. Sharing that technology and making Indian mining more efficient and better at geology and production and also looking at how to engage with the ethnic and tribal groups in the region can be beneficial for this sector.
  - » Supply chain Resilience Initiative: Initiative between Japan- India-Australia brings Australia in a practical way into the region, for example investing in agriculture etc.

Prof. Prabir De

ASEAN India Center, RIS, India

- Australia is the oldest dialogue partner of ASEAN. In 1974, it joined as a dialogue partner. It completed its 40 years anniversary in 2014. In 2022, India will be commemorating its 30 years of partnership with ASEAN.
- Development cooperation funding report in the last decade showed that 50 Billion US dollar was given as Australian development aid to ASEAN countries.
- Connectivity plays an important role here including the supply chain resilience between Australia and ASEAN. Besides financial integration like Capital market integration and

several other initiatives like ASEAN partnerships, narrowing the development gaps be it in trade, logistics sector and emergency helps in disaster management, mineral mining and cooperation in other several areas.

- Australia's engagement with ASEAN to India's NE is in three areas: Trade facilitation: Especially the contactless trade, paperless trade in the region can be introduced. Supply chain resilience in the region along with Border integration in the region from India to South East Asia.
- Our NE and Eastern part have agro climatic conditions, fertile soil with drinkable water and the productive capacity of indigenous horticultural crops in the world but they lack the technology, lack of processing, packaging, etc.
- P2P areas: India has a civilization history with ASEAN and Australia. Indian students go for higher education to Australia and contribute to their educational system.
- Three important recommendations:
  - » Supply chain, value chain, logistics areas. Almost every NE state has been doing something in the logistic sector but a lot more can be done.
  - » Some important projects in the horticulture industry, in terms of packaging, coming up with a B2B portal and local entrepreneurs can support the local traders.
  - » Infrastructure should be resumed, for example airways can be resumed for Mandalay, Bangkok. Air connectivity will play a very strong role in bringing resources that will lead the neighbouring countries opening up their mission in the Consulate's office.

Mr Kengo Akamine

Senior Representative, JICA

- JICA's priority is in two areas mainly: Road connectivity and health sector. JICA is working towards enhancing connectivity to the NE region and this will not only help in development of the region but also be the gateway of India to the other countries.
- In the last 6 years, JICA has been providing finance for construction and improvements of road networks in various parts of the NE. So far, the cooperation extends to 5 phrases and there are few more new projects to come.
- Map description: Corridor connecting Bhutan, India and Bangladesh in the state of Assam and Meghalaya, this includes the bridge over Brahmaputra River, Dhrubri Phulbari bridge, this will be the largest bridge of 20 km.
- In Tripura, the road will connect to Bangladesh and this would enable access to Bay of Bengal, mainly the ports of Chittagong and Matarbari. In the state of Mizoram, this network will connect to Myanmar (ASEAN).

- JICA is using Japanese technology for slope protection in hilly areas for disaster protection
- In 2020, JICA launched an "Initiative of Global Health and Medicine" to respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This aims to promote the construction of hospitals as well as human resource development for the health sector and this also focuses on prevention measures such as hygiene improvement programs.
- In the NE area, there is no ongoing project yet but there is a huge demand for developing healthcare systems. JICA has already received proposals from the government of Mizoram, Assam and Nagaland. Based on this "Initiative of Global Health and Medicines", JICA would contribute to the health care system.
- Good preparedness is very crucial, it has to have a good quality of Detailed Project Report (DPR), sufficient budget allocation, and institutional setup of implementing agency. Without these points being considered at the project formulation stage, it would lead to a much longer implementation period and this would delay the impact delivery to the people.
- Another important aspect is prioritization. There needs to be a clear prioritization among NE states as well as the Central Government. Since JICA's budget is limited, it cannot meet all the requirements. So, in order to handle these two aspects, there is a good mechanism established between the Japanese and Indian governments, which is called "Act East Forum".
- "Act East Forum" is co-chaired by the Foreign Secretary of MEA and Japanese Ambassador, and it is held approximately twice a year. From the Indian side, there are representatives from all the NE states as well as Central Ministries. This dialogue discusses priorities of future cooperation and bottlenecks of the on-going projects at a very high level.
- Three important recommendations:
  - » Starting a dialogue between the Japanese government, India and Australia.
  - » Promoting people to people exchange
  - » Women capacity building can be a new area that JICA would like to focus on.

Dr Shrishti Pukhrem

Senior Research Fellow, India Foundation

- For the sake of brevity, all the states are referred to under the broad NE. But the 7 states have distinctiveness which is unique but it also brings different types of issues. Even if it is kept under the NE framework, each state is different and they have different sets of issues, opportunities as well as challenges and they greatly differ from one another in size, location, environment not only due to the socio-cultural traditions but also livelihood patterns. It relates to the aims and aspirations.

- The geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region which have hit the global headlines in recent years are an important common denominator especially for both the countries of India and Australia but also of the QUAD arrangement.
- Rise of Indo-Pacific as a global power in the current century has brought cooperation into our neighbouring countries.
- NE geographical location has greater salience in contemporary times on account of 3 broad underlined foreign policy issues. First India's keenness to deepen its engagement with its neighbours both within the South Asian subcontinent and Southeast Asia economies and its new found interest in making regionalism and sub regionalism become effective in an around its neighbourhood but more importantly Indo Pacific in the global power, India is taking rightful claim in the extended laterals and it is impinging on how it manages the NE region and how NE is playing larger leadership role in Bay of Bengal and in the Indian Ocean.
- Look East Policy which is not Act East Policy has substantial engagement with the economies of the East and South East Asian Nations and in the current government of PM Narendra Modi it has a strong developmental plan, which is more of a proactive approach of the previous the Look East Policy including building a network of roads and highways, organizing investment facilities, encouraging tourism and building high level educational institutions for not only establishing connectivity within the region but also with the rest of India and also its immediate neighbours as it is said that NE is the Gateway to Southeast Asia.
- Act East strikes with the local population, because it has certain importance being given to the region to the respective states, there are certain improvements in terms of connectivity, roads, airways, railways and there is exposure to the idea of what the government of India is doing towards the region, for the region and how the other countries are engaging.
- The cross-border infrastructural development including improvement of physical connectivity between the neighbours and the building of an energy grid has seen momentum in recent years.
- Certain pockets of the local population of the North-Eastern Region get a sense that it is going to leave the region as a transit and nothing else and there would be no gain out of it. Therefore, there are two kinds of views in the region.
- To bring these views into contention India along with Japan can be a prominent player in NE. Australia seems to be a new player in the context of the NE local population but they are open to the ideas of Australia coming and engaging with the region and India-Japan-Australia can work together on a common platform.
- NE needs a lot of capacity building, and India-Japan-Australia can work together in bringing capacity building. Many people do not have the idea of Indo-Pacific in the region, to introduce the concept, trilateral capacity building can be introduced to the academics and then to the large networks of the start-ups.

- The women folk in the NE region are very strong but one need to look beyond identifying women with traditional professions of weaving or handicraft rather than that they can be viewed as something bigger since they are connected with youth networks, they are starting skill development centres on their own, they are think tank of their own which is small but it's a kind of a channel through which they can communicate and start the capacity building workshops
- Three important concrete remarks:
  - » Capacity building should be improved on a bilateral basis where India and Australia can work together.
  - » Sports collaboration: Since NE is the sports powerhouse of the country, Australia can help provide its expertise in institutionalising sports diplomacy by establishing institutes and sports centres.
  - » People to people connectivity by taking the experience of Australia. Creation of traditional knowledge centres since many tribal groups are present in NE and the indigenous people in Australia and it would be important to exchange information.

Mr Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury

Diplomatic Editor The Economic Times

- Australian and Indian media have not collaborated as such. Some of the journalists in Delhi focus on the bigger picture but they do not travel to NE.
- MEA should take an initiative to take the Australian journalists along with the Japanese journalists and take them for a tour and also allow them to travel to NE. So, if the journalists travel to NE, they will get an exposure to NE and what it holds for Australia and Australia holds for NE.
- Doing a media round table of journalists from Australia, NE and Japan and also Bangladesh, because the entire connectivity between NE and ASEAN and onwards to East Asia and Southeast Asia would not be complete without Bangladesh. In 1971, Australia had a different approach and position on the independence war in comparison to the US. This did not come out in media or the academic discourses and it has the potential to make things smoother.
- On the diplomatic front, Australian High Commission can consider setting up a consulate in Guwahati, since only Bangladesh has a consulate in Guwahati. Japan has a huge presence in NE and it should also consider setting up a consulate in Guwahati. It is very important to have a consulate.
- NE can also look at starting air connectivity from Guwahati to international neighbours, this would help in media travel in South East Asia and help the writers, bloggers to bring them together and start some kind of workshops or a physical meet to discuss any issues of that particular region.

- In terms of small economic fronts Australia and Japan have been working on renewable and Arunachal has a lot of potential in hydel power. If Australia and Japan come together to help Arunachal it can be called as the powerhouse for not only NE, but also for Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- Some publications can also be done which can lead to P2P connectivity.
- Author in Residence program in Shillong to invite Japanese and Australian authors to spend 6 months-1 year and focus on the region.

Session III

Trade and Connectivity and value chains in India's Northeast Region and Eastern Neighbourhood

Amb. Anil Wadhwa

Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

- QUAD countries have expressed intention to work together in the Indo-Pacific, for the infrastructure projects by pulling the resources this includes the one-billion-dollar credit facility announced for digital and infrastructure projects by India.
- India has a number of ongoing projects - of which the main ones are the trilateral highway, which will connect Northeast to Thailand via Myanmar.
- Second is the Kaladan Multimodal project which will enhance connectivity with Kolkata with Myanmar, Northeast and eventually with Bangladesh.
- All these projects are designed to raise the resilience of the Northeast region so that they can develop and economically.
- Supply Chain Resilience Initiative was formally launched on 28th April 2021 between India, Australia and Japan and other countries in the region have been called upon to participate in this initiative, there is a recognition that business organisations, think tanks and individuals will all need to contribute to the success of this initiative.
- If the initiative of India-Australia agreement on critical minerals is successful the partners can also look to replicate this model in the QUAD context.
- Ministers of India, Japan and Australia have identified the need of using the full capacity in the digitalization space, and adopting electronic documents for improvement of facilitation of trade and making sure resilience is built up in the supply chain.
- Australia can look to partner the Northeast region in developmental, manufacturing and service-related projects so that the region can get better connected with the world and can benefit from appropriate technologies.

- Indian Northeast also require critical infrastructure and, in this context, Australia can play a critical role, things like energy efficiency and production techniques, water and great technologies, mining technology, entrepreneurship, skills development, capacity development, health care management and agriculture, horticulture production and storage technique, food preservation.
- Also, Australia can look at investments in road transportation, power and water projects in the North East.

Mr Tim White

Trade and Investment Commissioner, Austrade.

- One of the key recommendations, from the India Economic Strategy report by Peter Varghese, was to upgrade the Austrade office in Kolkata into a Consulate-General, which is a clear recognition by the government, of the strategic importance of Kolkata itself as a major point of trade and investment but also as the gateway to the North East.
- Mining and resources is an area where Australia has strongly established a partnership with India, but more than that, it is still one of the fastest-growing areas in the commercial relationship.
- Even during the COVID-19 period, some other sectors have faced challenges in terms of growth and investment, but in mining, there has been significant growth in the last couple of years between India and Australia. A lot of it has been linked to India's reform agenda.
- One knows that India is implementing reforms in the mining sector to boost productivity to increase efficiency. Australia is a natural partner for India in this area.
- Australia can bring in particular equipment technology and services that can support that productivity agenda.
- In recent months they have seen new commercial deals signed in commercial areas like mineral processing, environmental management in the mining sector, where significant Indian mining operators are partnering with Australian companies to as I say boost efficiency and productivity in that area.
- Critical minerals have emerged as a key strategic priority in the commercial relationship, the northeast will be a big part of this given both the minerals endowment in the Northeast and the surrounding region, but also of the downstream industries which are emerging in the North East.
- The PMs recognised this is a strategic sector for cooperation. Last year MoU on critical minerals cooperation was signed. A lot of work is going on to try and connect individual companies in this sector.

- There are clear challenges in terms of supply chain gaps and vulnerability at the moment. This is an area where trilateral models under the SCRI would be the natural fit.
- The infrastructure sector is a top priority including for Australia's relationship with Northeast India.
- It's unlikely that Australian infrastructure providers will come in and build highways or airports in India, but what Australia can provide is service and technology to support infrastructure projects developing here. So, in areas like road safety Australian providers are already working in India to support those infrastructure projects.
- Based on direction from PM Modi and PM Morrison we are also focused on looking to attract Australian equity investment in infrastructure projects as a way to support the new growth agenda.
- There is a real opportunity for growth in energy sector partnerships. Bangladesh for example is already a key energy market for Australia in terms of LNG. We (Australia) think there is also an opportunity for us to partner with India in that area too.
- Another emerging area is hydrogen. Both India and Australia for example have strategies to develop the hydrogen sectors in two countries. There is some way to go in terms of developing the technology that will allow us to extract, store and efficiently transmit hydrogen but it is a shared priority between India and Australia.
- The final sector for cooperation is agribusiness. Looking at Bangladesh, Australia's export to Bangladesh of wheat is higher than export to India. Australia sees it as a growth area for India; Northeast again can be a key partner in that area. And given the Northeast's sizeable agriculture sector, there is an opportunity for Australian agriculture technology to be brought into this market to support efficiency in India's Northeast.

Dr K.K Dwivedi

IAS, Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam Industries & Commerce Department, Assam

- Presently India-Australia has huge business and a lot of trade going on. The present data show that trade between India and Australia is about 29 US billion dollars. Australia is also the fifth-largest trade partner of India.
- Unfortunately, export from the Northeast region to Australia is almost negligible. Over 60 Australian companies are doing their business in India, but unfortunately, none of them have any kind of presence in the North East.
- There are over 1500 Japanese companies registered in India but not a single company has a production facility in the Northeast region.

- Assam is strategically located and very close to ASEAN. Japanese and Australian companies who are in Gujarat and exporting their products to Bangladesh, Myanmar and other regions. If they shift their production facility to Northeast region particularly in Assam, they can do better business, and it will make more competitive.
- Assam is one of the fastest-growing economies in the country, presently its GDP is about 50 billion USD and by 2025 one is expecting it to go up to 75 billion USD. Presently about 500 million USD export is taking place which ABP has estimated will grow up to one billion USD by 2025.
- To support the business and trade Assam provides rich natural resources and lot of inputs that are available in the region.
- Assam is the highest tea producing region in the world, produces more than 52 per cent of the total tea in the country and 50 per cent of the global tea, we are exporting to 100 countries.
- Assam is one of the highest producers of hydrocarbon, natural gas, and crude oil and has more than 510 million tons of reserve of coal and a huge reserve of natural gas.
- Assam is also the pioneer of food items particularly ginger, spices and jute; these all are the bases to support any kind of manufacturing and processing business.
- Apart from all bamboo is one area which is yet to be explored, Northeast produces 60 per cent of the total bamboo stock of the country. Assam is also the leading state producer of silk in the country, 90 per cent of total production.
- Assam has also created a very enabling ecosystem where we have brought out a lot of legislation, acts, and rules to create a legal framework so businesses and industries can flourish and do their business smoothly.
- Recently the government has brought up the Ease of Doing Business Act and MSP facilitation under this act no license and permission clearance is required to set up an industry in the initial three years. This is a very progressive development.
- Assam has also brought out ten policies covering exports of bamboo and another kind of specific thematic products under which the government will provide a lot of incentives and subsidies to any business who wants to set up their production line in Assam.
- Apart from the legal framework, Assam is developing logistics and infrastructure very aggressively, recently they have started construction of a multimodal logistic park which will connect not only the Northeast region but also other parts of the world.
- They have also started an air cargo facility to meet the needs of perishable food items through air linkage. We got a thematic park-like bamboo technology park, to support the specific requirement of the particular industry.
- To promote and highlight all these infrastructure facilities, they had organised Advantage Assam in 2018 which was attended by more than 20 countries and 200 MoU were also signed with different companies and industries, out of which presently 65,000 crore investment is going on in the state as the outcome of the global summit.

- Apart from all those things Assam has also signed an MoU with Sakhalin, Malaysia, and other regional centres and organizations.
- A stakeholders meet with Bangladesh in which about 100 Bangladesh businessmen led by the commerce minister came to Guwahati, which was a very fruitful interaction. Together we are focusing on how one can enhance the trade with Bangladesh which is very close to us.
- Upcoming projects like Kaladan Multimodal project, Trilateral Asian highway and Trans Asian highway project will connect Assam with ASEAN, BBIN countries and will provide a very good platform and opportunity for any business and trade.
- Business leaders of Australia and Japan can take see and explore the opportunity of how we can work together and take advantage of these opportunities.

Ms Debdatta Nandwani

Lead Consultant, East India Trade Advisors

- In the backdrop of the unprecedented pandemic and its consequences, the fragility of the global supply chain has been revealed. Governments, including border agencies, logistic companies and the trade as a whole have been exploring ways to leverage existing ways to keep goods moving across the border.
- Many governments have gone beyond the rule book for the sake of trade and transport facilitation.
- However, one would see this adversity as an opportunity not to let go. The new normal has new aspirations, players and also revised allegiances which perhaps will help in strengthening further facilitation and recovery effort that we as a region are making to make it more sustainable and streamlined.
- One must also bear in mind that economically the perception was that two supply chains which were developing in the region. One is driven by the USA and the second by China, however, with the turn in the trend there is an opportunity for India as a whole to plug-in for integration and supply chain and with that the Northeast region as well.
- From the perspective of building a resilient supply chain in the Northeast region and a stronger trade facilitating system we are ahead of where we were a few years ago.
- Custom procedures and documentation have been digitized, made user friendly and interactive.
- Respective state governments work in promoting international trade is indeed recognizable. However, there is always room for improvement
- The growing demand for supply spices, fresh food, and vegetables with the development of ICPS in the recent past, and the promotion of inland waterways are also some of the favourable factors.

- On the other hand, challenges like infrastructure and connectivity with the neighbouring countries and the issue of every state having heterogeneous terrain with different levels of trade infrastructure for each North Eastern state perhaps need a different handling approach.
- When mentioning connectivity, one would not just include logistics, transport but also a large gamut, which would include a comprehensive policy framework, having a correct blend of Centre and State policies,
- Capacity building, financial and digital system is a must for creating a resilient supply chain in the region.
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Horticulture has launched a central sector scheme called Mission Organic Value Chain and Development for Northeast Region. The objective of this scheme was to develop certified organic products and to link with consumers to support the entire value chain, starting from seeds, certification facilities for collection and aggregation and brand building.
- However, with the formation of the producer's organisation in Nagaland, the aggregation process has not been the problem, the problem lies in perhaps the connectivity and logistic chain, moving the goods from the place of origin to the borders. Specific products need a specific logistic chain, like reefer vans and cold storage facility
- In Arunachal Pradesh, there is a growing sector of wineries and one of the first suppliers for IKEA bamboo furniture being appointed from the state.
- Now for all of these upcoming manufactures, what is most important is to have control over their transaction, cost, and time. One needs to enable this otherwise they will be incoherent in this global supply chain.
- In the food processing segment, which has huge potential for the North-East region, aligning the packaging with the international standards is most essential to have international acceptance.
- Technology gaps, quality products have quite often acted as a barrier in exporting these products from the North-Eastern states.
- Act East Policy morphs into the Act Indo-Pacific with India's expanding horizon for convergence and collaboration with ASEAN and Indian and the Pacific Ocean retain their centrality of Indo-Pacific.
- Considering the terrain and transaction time and cost, apart from promoting inland waterways, smart connectivity like Iron highway is the need of the hour, which will provide an efficient model and will take care of terrain challenges
- Australia's engagement with BIMSTEC will surely help, but half of the world's ships and two-third of the world's oil passes through the Indian Ocean and emerging economies will ensure the importance of the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Australia should consider active engagement in the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Mr Rudra Chatterjee

Managing Director Luxmi Group and Chairman Obetee

- Luxmi Group is the largest producer of tea not only in India but also in Rwanda
- What is important to know is remembering that people do not drink tea because there are many varieties of tea available in the market.
- What is strong about Assam is that it produces good quality tea leaves. The focus has to be on quality.
- After quality, what is important is that tea that goes out of Assam should be sold in a way that people can afford to buy it. For this what one needs is marketing skills, infrastructure, packaging and branding.
- Quality is important along with the certification that ensures the tea is made through fair trade and organic means. The need is to promote the certification and the tea estate where the tea leaves have been grown.
- Northeast is home to many indigenous plants and herbs where the essential components of the plants can be dried, transferred to tea bags and marketed. With the world slowly coming out of COVID-19 and the focus being on health first mass propagation of these medicinal plants can become a means of livelihood and economic sustenance of the people of the region.
- We still have the infrastructural challenges but that does not only mean building buildings, bridges etc.
- For companies in the QUAD there is a huge consumer of good healthy food and produce. Assam has the tea leaves and indigenous herbs which can be consumed as a beverage. It should be the focus of the government.
- Assam needs a proactive forestry department which would work towards prevention of deforestation and establish and conserve afforestation. This should be started by taking the area of Assam which is facing deforestation. After ten years, five percent of the forest can be used for timber which will support the local community.
- It requires a lot of time and effort to make furniture. Both Australian and the US companies were mainly expanding in China, but after the tariff changes, they started expanding in Vietnam and in some parts of India.
- Assam is a huge producer of wood and has a huge advantage, but what is important is to have a policy that enables furniture hubs to come in and also be FSC-certified.
- The policy of natural capital is a huge hope for the Northeast and the region, there needs to be some kind of credit given to build back forest. Produce like honey, fruits timber can be used and marketed and promoted.
- Assam can also build on eco-tourism culture. Assam needs a policy on tourism in tea estates like in West Bengal and Rwanda, but it is important to make sure it is not impacting the natural environment but building the natural environment.

Ms Jahnabi Phookan

Director, Assam Bengal Navigation Company, JTI Group

- Northeast states are economically important on two fronts: the strategic location and the presence of the input market. The social, physical, human capital needed is available in the region.
- But we find that since the 2010 ASEAN-India FTA was activated, trade between the two partners is going to reach 86 billion USD. But according to NITI Aayog 95 per cent of products are not from the Northeast but from some other region therefore not any single North-eastern player is a significant player in this trade.
- We need to develop the Northeast as an education destination, because we have seen Bangladesh, Myanmar and CLMV countries come to India for education. The Northeast can provide a cheaper and better alternative.
- Likewise, North-East universities can leverage the Act East policy by inviting more universities from South East Asia and Australia. This would help us to develop and grow our region.
- Northeast should be developed as the medical destination for Myanmar and other South East Asian nations. They are already coming here for treatment and with a better infrastructure the chances will become even more popular to promote medical tourism
- Information and Technology is also another area for development. Agartala is the third only gateway point for fibre optic. This will help us to develop our IT talent and training institutions. Assam and Northeast can become the IT partner for South-East Asia.
- E-games are very popular in Northeast India. People have shown technical knowledge and skills set for it which can be capitalised.
- Agriculture, horticulture, fisheries are the future of the Northeast as this productive economy really boosts the rural sector and is also the bedrock of our economy.
- While the cities are still small and growing, one should get the expertise of our South Asian neighbours and Australia to help provide an example of more liveable and smart cities, which would help develop our sustainable architecture.
- Unless we integrate Northeast with adequate and efficient air connectivity, tourism will not flourish.
- Southeast Asian tourism experience could help us in developing a sustainable infrastructure, which architecturally is similar to that of South East Asia.
- Ecotourism can be promoted and we should know how to promote our fragile ecosystem. A lot of learning is needed from South East Asia on this subject.
- As for the Australian market, they are fascinated with the festivals like the Hornbill of Nagaland, and this would encourage them to come to the area, and help more people to contact.

- The Buddhist circuit is very strong in the South East Asia, but it has not been developed.
- The region needs a specialized institution to develop a regulatory framework and good practices for responsible tourism. A lot of learnings can be taken from Australia and Southeast Asian countries.
- Climate change is an issue that cuts across all sectors. Australia could lend us environmental knowledge in its management and its protection.
- In terms of the carbon footprint, river tourism and river cruising is a friendly way to see the country and is environmentally conscious.
- Another focus area is Bamboo, our "green gold "
- The eight states that lie at the foot of the Himalayas together make up about two-thirds of India's total bamboo production.
- The current demand of bamboo in India is estimated at 28 million tonnes. Though the country has 19% share of the world's area under bamboo cultivation, its market share in the sector is only 6%.
- There is a demand for environmentally friendly products of bamboo.
- There is the need to provide processing techniques to the bamboo growers in the region because this can be a huge livelihood generation for our people.
- We need joint ventures and technology transfers to empower the community and encourage the circular economy.
- The limitation of Northeast is the lack of finished products. We have the raw products but the production of the finished goods is not up to the mark.
- As a stakeholder in a social objective Start Up (LLP), I have seen the opportunity it provides in improving rural livelihoods through: (i) Direct procurement and marketing of traditional Agri-based products, (ii) Innovative product development and standards setting, (iii) Eco-friendly packaging, (iv) GI tagging unique products from Northeast and is now looking to promoting to our neighbouring countries as well.
- 70% of the NE people of the Northeast are tied to the farm sector. One of the constraints to our Act East policy is the lack of products from the Northeast that can be marketed nationally and internationally. With this initiative and others like this, we hope to change that.
- Industry is critical if we are to turn Assam from a net importing state to a productive state capable of driving an 'Act East' policy for the Northeast economically so we need to add to value to natural resources and primary products, we need to generate employment and absorb surplus labour from farms, and contribute to trade, especially exports.

Ms. Rowan Ainsworth

Australian Consul-General Kolkata

- The Consulate is responsible for expanding people to people connections, economic links in Eastern and North-Eastern states.
- Today's dialogue covered a lot of ground and had some very fascinating insights which gave a better understanding of the North-Eastern states, which will contribute to ensuring an open, resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- We look forward to working together and taking forward the recommendations of the dialogue.

DIVYA JEEVAN
FOUNDATION

ASIAN
CONFLUENCE
ENGAGING THE THIRD SPACE

India East Asia Center
Lady Veronica Park, Laitumkhrah
Shillong, Meghalaya - 793 003
/AsianConfluence | @asianconfluence
www:// asianconfluence.org