

The Northeastern States in India's Act East Policy: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The article examines the existing ground realities and vigorously analyses the Northeast's importance in the Act East Policy. The policy, which came into existence only to engage for the national interest with the vast Asia-pacific region, also made the Northeastern states a crucial area for their foreign diplomacy. The policy has acquired broad areas of active participation, including but not limited to commerce, communication, culture, tourism, finance, defence, the marine climate, and has extended its presence to include the entire Indo-Pacific region. The effectiveness of the policy depends on the progress of economic, connectivity, and other factors affecting India's Northeastern states. The Development of the Northeast is also another aspect of the policy, instrumental in assisting the Act East Policy itself. The paper also analyses infrastructure, connectivity, a stagnant economy, development, and other challenges in the region that need addressing effectively in acting towards the East to harness possible maximum positive outcomes.

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1. Introduction

India's relation with the neighbouring eastern countries is evident since the pre-colonial period. The evidence of cultural and commercial engagement until the 12th century is credited to the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism to the East. The spice trade route running from West Asia and the Persian Gulf stretching to Indonesia and even beyond brought traders and travellers from one part of Asia to the other. Later under colonial rule, the Second World War engulfed East Asia rather extensively. The war added a strategic dimension to India's (then British India) relations with Southeast Asia. The British realised

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the strategic centrality of India in Asia and upheld its colonial presence. They built India as the centre of their power and influence in Asia that protected their colonies as far in the East as possible, up to Hong Kong. Even during the early independent period, the Eastern neighbours constituted one of the priority areas in India's commitment to work for Asian resurgence¹. Decolonisation and Asian solidarity were the motives of the Nehruvian vision of engagement with the Asian community. However, these aspects were emotional and ideological and lacked economic content.

India did not show much interest in formulating a policy until 1991 concerning the neighbouring Eastern countries. Instead, India maintained a closer rapport with the Western and Middle East countries. Firstly, as colonial habitats of the British-India, India's entire attitude was influenced by Western powers' socio-economic ideas. Secondly, India maintained close ties with the then USSR during the Cold War era. Thirdly, India had to trade for most of the imported goods from defence equipment to petroleum products or crude oil and natural gas from the Western and Middle East countries. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict period came to an end when most governments accepted the age of globalisation, liberalisation, and privatisation in their economy and other socio-cultural fields. The international community has realised that attaining prosperity is by developing international trade and encouraging foreign investments. As a result of economic reforms, economic growth in Southeast Asian countries has been significantly fast. Thus, India looking at its eastern neighbours, opened its door to trade and other socio-economic engagements². The Act East policy (earlier Look East Policy) gained momentum when PV Narasimha Rao, the Indian Prime Minister, delivered a lecture in Singapore in 1994, addressing the relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. India felt the need for a new partner in the neighbourhood due to certain factors, i.e., the disintegration of the USSR, containment from West and Central Asia due to situation of political unrest there, growing dominance of China in the region and the Southeast Asia was a growing market (successful stories of Asian Tigers). These are critical factors responsible out of many that determined India to 'look' East.

During the early phase of the Look East Policy, the focus was primarily on trade and investment relationships. The policy marked a transition from trade to broader political and security issues later, expanding its engagement from ASEAN to include the whole Asia-Pacific region. The recently declared 'Act East' is the latest development in India's Look East Policy. Early foreign policy decision-making of the Narendra Modi government pointed to the prioritisation of relations within India's neighbourhood. The Act East Policy is the government's new outlook for India's role in the Asian region. The Act East Policy is a rebranded version of the Look East Policy which seeks to provide impetus and focus by "acting" rather than "looking" or having it just in theory. The policy signals a more proactive and substantial engagement for India in the Southeast Asian region. In pursuit of lending, a significant momentum Prime Minister Narendra Modi formally unveiled India's Act East Policy at the 12th ASEAN Summit held in Naypyidaw, Myanmar on November 12, 2014³. The governing BJP government has shown interest and willingness to engage with its neighbouring countries since it came to power in 2014. The interaction with the countries of the East was indeed a primary concern.

2. The Northeastern states in India's Act East Policy

Central to India's Act East Policy is the Northeast, a gateway for India to Southeast Asia. The Northeastern states have an essential role in the policy because of their geographical location. The Northeastern states of India share 98 per cent of its boundaries with the

neighbouring eastern countries, i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal, and two per cent of the land area connects with the rest of India. Due to its geographical location, the Northeast is vital for India's Act East Policy. Moreover, with Southeast Asian nations, Northeast India has a similar history with the cultural, linguistic and colonial background. The former Manipuri Kingdom, which is now in Northeast India, has had a long history of contact with Burma (now Myanmar), which marked the two overlapping, autonomous kingdoms through cultural encounters, commerce, marital relations, and invasion. In northern Burma, the Valley of Kabaw once belonged to the Kingdom of Manipur until it was donated to Myanmar in 1952, as a token of the peace treaty between the two nations, by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The different ethnic groups in the border regions of the two countries also converge ethnically. Whereas the Nagas live in the three Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, Nagas in Myanmar live in Sagaing Division and Kachin state in north-western Myanmar bordering India. The Kuki-Chin group is in the states of Manipur and Mizoram in India. In contrast, in Myanmar, they live in the Chin state in western Myanmar, bordering India's Manipur and Mizoram states. Meitei diasporas from the Meitei community in Manipur in India are part of Myanmar ethnic groups, and they are well incorporated into local society⁴.

The 'Act East' tactic aims to tap Southeast Asian countries searching for a partner on economic, political and security grounds. Second, a concerted attempt to develop Northeast India is being made. The two primary reason that pushes India to establish constructive ties with Southeast Asian states. The "North Eastern Region Vision 2020" document released by Manmohan Singh on July 02, 2008, visualise the Look East Policy as an indispensable factor in endorsing the Northeastern states' economic ties with its neighbouring countries to end its economic isolation. The 'Vision Document' emphasises that since Northeast India share cultural relations with the Southeast Asian countries, this cultural affinity can be a critical foreign policy driver. The Vision Document remarks, "South East Asia Begins where North East India ends"⁵. Northeast India is an integral part of India's Act East Policy and a crucial component for the actual implementation and success. Concerning the Northeast and its role in Act East Policy, it would not be wrong to say that 'looking,' and 'acting' east should begin from here. The Act East Policy also brings an opportunity for the development and progress in Northeast India through improving connectivity and better economic relations with immediate neighbouring countries. Boosting connectivity to Southeast Asia is also critical to unlocking India's northeast states' economic energies and enterprise, which borders the region⁶. A thrust for better relation with Southeast Asian countries is an essential part of India's steps towards the Northeastern states' development and stability, critical for India's Act East Policy to take off.

3. Overview of Ground Realities

There has been much discussion on how the Look/Act East Policy will benefit the region and debate how the Northeast is a significant part of the policy due to its geographical location. The Act East Policy cannot skip the Northeast while pursuing its relation with the Eastern countries. However, various impediments have led the region into darkness and should be a concern for the Policymaker. Because without any solution to the issues faced by the Northeast, the success of the Act East Policy is a distant dream. So, addressing those problems for the effectiveness of the policy is crucial. Therefore, some critical issues have been analysed here.

3.1 Issue of Connectivity

Connectivity is at the forefront of the Policy of Act East. In the end, the infrastructure relations between India and Southeast Asia need to pass through the Northeast. The initial steps undertaken under the Look East Policy include the 'Asian Highway', the 'Asian Railway Link' and the 'Natural Gas' pipelines.

The proposed Asian Highway is the Imphal (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) road going on to the Kalemmyo railway via Mandalay in Myanmar. The construction of the road from Tamu to Kalemmyo, Myanmar is completed, and the other part is under construction. Trans-Asian Railway Network aims to build and connect the Northeast railway with the rail network in Myanmar, linking with the ambitious 80,900 km Trans Asian Railway network connecting Thailand to Bulgaria. Under this initiative, there is a proposal to build railway links to Tripura, Manipur, and Mizoram, linking them with Myanmar. The government of India plans to connect all State Capitals of North Eastern States by 2020. The capitals of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura state's connection by Broad Gauge (BG) rail network is complete, and the remaining states are under construction.⁷ Flight Services started to address connectivity, Imphal to Mandalay, Guwahati to Bangkok (by Nok Air), and Dhaka (by SpiceJet). Also, Guwahati to Paro in Bhutan is connected.

A plan to construct a Trilateral Highway 1,360 km distance joining Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Bagan (Myanmar) proposed in 2002 is under construction which is a part of the broader Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).⁸ The ambitious Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility connecting Indian ports on the eastern side and Sittwe port in Myanmar through a riverine transport corridor and road in Mizoram is underway. The proposed project since 2008 provides an alternative trade route to the Northeast. Also, the Stilwell route connecting Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India with Yunnan province in China are under progress.

There is a proposal to build the BCIM Economic Corridor, which runs from Kolkata (India) to Kunming (China) via Bangladesh, Northeast India, and Myanmar. The corridor touches Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh, Silchar, Imphal, and Moreh in the Northeast India and Mandalay and Northern provinces of Myanmar.⁹ The India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (MIEC) proposed at one level, and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)-a development project implemented in 1992 by the World Development Bank and consists of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and China on the other level. Once completed, the road connects the MIEC and GMS, thereby helping to grow its trade relations and build a stronger relationship between the people in the region.

For purposes of Burmese gas transfer through the Northeast, India is investing 100 million dollars in improving the old colonial Burmese port of Sittwe on the west Burmese coast. The region could benefit immensely from water sharing. ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) agreed with Vietnam to prospect in oil blocks 127 and 128 of the Paracel Islands, which fall within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.

A mere assumption at ground level remains for all the development mentioned earlier and connectivity project initiatives to link India and ASEAN via Northeast. As far as these networking and growth initiatives are concerned, nothing much has been accomplished or realised. These projects are still at the early stage of preparation, and only the groundwork has been done for some of them¹⁰. There lie more challenges and obstacles ahead in successfully implementing these projects in the Northeastern states. In translation, the aim

to unlock the locked region seems to have been lost. The immense capacity remains compensated by inadequate infrastructure and retarded projects. Most of the cross-border roads scheduled for linking India and Myanmar are still under construction. Heavy rain conditions, the roughness of the soil, complex road building and repair, transport, kidnapping for ransom, and intimidation of persons engaging in various projects by insurgents operating in the zone contribute to high project costs, leading to delays.¹¹

3.2 Issue of underdevelopment in the Northeast States

The States of Northeast India remains one of the most economically backward regions, accounting for a little over 2.5 per cent of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2009-10. High transaction costs due to bottleneck in the transport systems connecting the Northeast states with the other regions of India and the neighbouring countries and the lack of other essential infrastructure have perpetually pushed the region backwards.

P.M Modi stated that while other parts of the country have Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which are human-made, the SEZ in the Northeast is natural. Priority is to tap this Natural Economic Zone (NEZ). The Indian Agricultural Research Institute at Gogamukh in Assam was inaugurated, and the creation of other Agriculture Institutes in other northeastern states is being planned.¹² The first National Sports University was established in Manipur. Special scholarships are given to 10,000 northeast students through Ishan-Uday, and Ishan Vikas scheme to encourage annual exposure to other parts of the country from 2000 students and 500 teachers in the region.

The government is setting up an Apparel and Garment making centre in every state and engendering textile enterprise in the North Eastern Region. The Minister of Textiles has already inaugurated the units in Nagaland and Tripura in April 2016. In the remaining states (except in Sikkim), the infrastructure is ready, and entrepreneurs have been identified for handing over the units. The first Northeast-ASEAN Business Summit took place at Imphal in April 2016¹³.

The pattern of developmental assumptions is visible in the Northeast region than in another part of India. Although it is commendable to complement the government's endeavour to facilitate development and business in the region, it has failed to exercise any such reality. Even after more than two decades, the region remains backwards economically and ponders development and economic projects. In most cases, the government has been responding to the initiative. However, there is mismanagement of the funds and the sponsored schemes practically on political grounds at the local level. As such, this brings us to question the very objective of the Look/Act East policy that proposed to bring development and connectivity projects.

3.3 Issue of Cross-Border Trade

India's trade with ASEAN has grown from US dollar 2.3 billion in 1991-92 to US dollar 75.86 billion in 2012-13, US dollar 76.53 billion in 2014-15, and US dollar 81.33 billion in 2017-18. From April 2000 to March 2018, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) equity inflows into India from ASEAN economies stand at US dollar 68.91 billion. Over 97 per cent of total FDI inflows into India are from Singapore, with other Southeast Asian countries accounting for 3 per cent. The share of ASEAN FDI in India's total FDI is approximately 21 per cent¹⁴. Despite an increase in India's total trade with Southeast Asian Countries, the transaction taking place through border points in the Northeast fails to prosper.

The poor state of infrastructure, from road connection and telecommunications to border transit facilities and banking and other financial networks, export and import restrictions and cross-border insurgency restrictions constitute significant barriers to developing a more robust commercial partnership between Northeast India and neighbouring countries. The dominant stream of merchandise trades around Indo-Myanmar continues to be informal trade. Efforts are also required to develop the transport and networking infrastructure and expand the border transit banking and finance networks. With state-of-the-art facilities, existing border trade posts can be further improved. To increase cross-border trade, steps to minimise limitations on export and import should be explored. The share of India among Myanmar's border trading partners is the lowest, accounting for just one per cent of the overall border trade of Myanmar. Indian goods are scarce because they cannot cope with low-priced Chinese and Thai goods in the Myanmar local market.¹⁵ In the Northeast, inexpensive Chinese and Thai items are being dumped. The movement of such third countries goods, often cheap but quality-impaired, needs to be monitored urgently. The nature and descriptions of the packaging of foods and Myanmar food goods, which pose a health danger, are frequently considered without specification. Stringent enforcement on certain goods at the border should be ensured before they are passed, or through complying with strict food safety enforcement, they can be legalised. The Northeast needs to industrialise, as Myanmar primarily imports manufactured goods¹⁶.

3.4 Issue of Governance and Security

The government's nation-building and integration scheme have aggravated the complicated situation of the Northeastern region in the past and present. The Northeast comprising seven states, inhibits peoples who vary in language, race, tribe, caste, religion, and regional heritage. Therefore, integrating and club the region to underpin India's concept as a prosperous and functioning democracy has brought conflicts and violence in the region.¹⁷ Underground outfits like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), United Liberation Front (ULF) of Manipur has been in existence for decades and continues to be a source of persistent challenges to the Indian state with new methods and tactics.

The central government has failed to comprehend the region's political and administrative frameworks. Instead of a legitimate democratisation process and autonomy, the government has established many authority centres in the name of law and judiciary. The introduction of AFSPA, which was passed in 1958, a short-term measure to allow the army's deployment to counter the armed separatist movement, has been in place to date. It has escalated a genuine problem to the military level, making the situation more complex and dynamic. The AFSPA brought regular human rights violations, including rape and torture. The Human Rights Watch Report of August 2008 states that the law violates Universal Human Rights laws, including the right to life, the right to protection from arbitrary detention and imprisonment, and the right to protection from torture and brutal, inhuman or degrading punishment. It also ignores the right to remedy for victims of crimes.¹⁸ Many cases of extra-judicial killings (fake encounters) reported are as an example of misuse of AFSPA. The Supreme Court called upon the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in 2017 to probe 1,528 killings in suspected encounters with the army and the police between 2000 to 2012 alone. For silence on this issue, the court has even pulled up the Manipur administration. The unreported number of such cases stated to be far higher. Irom Sharmila won the name of Iron Lady for her 16-year hunger strike against this law, which is yet another exemplary protest¹⁹.

The insurgency has plagued India's northeastern states for a long time, which has hindered the region's development and stability. As of now, the security issue still presents a critical bottleneck in the projects. Almost most of the development and connectivity corridors prospered as a part of subregional initiatives passes through the volatile and militancy prone areas.²⁰ The ULFA, the NSCN, the ULF insurgents who demand reimbursement, taxation, and percentages for the projects to be implemented essentially control such areas. Besides, particular militant gangs are also constitutionally responsible for securing commercial roads and operating legitimate and unlawful businesses. Apart from the security concern, it is a broader complication and hence needs to be better understood. For decades in Northeast India, rebellion and militarisation affected tough people's lives. The state should reduce the use of force in the region's security situation to introduce normalcy and instil a sense of security. The planned development and security strategy should not limit healthy contact between the northeast Indians and neighbouring countries²¹. The Northeastern chaos can not only be seen through the lens of law and order but rather from a political viewpoint.

4. Conclusion

The development of the Northeastern states is another facet of the Act East Policy instrumental in assisting the policy. The policy can solve insurgency and other menace existing in the region through regional co-operation with the neighbouring countries. The promotion of the Northeastern region in terms of trade, connectivity, and development is vital to give impetus to Act East Policy. The Northeast is an asset and a frontrunner for 'Act East' but can also become a liability if the region is not emphasised or put on board. The developmental efforts for Northeast India are crucial to India's Act East Policy.

Nonetheless, so far, the policy lacks a clear vision to be pursued either for the Northeast or the Act East in foreign diplomacy. Often, different government ministries and departments work separately without proper coordination with different agendas and visions. At the earliest, a well-processed plan needs to be sorted out. The successful incorporation of the Northeast into the approach of 'Act East' ensures a mechanism for the successful inclusion of Southeast Asia under the influence of China, which is not in favour of India. In its recent 'Act East' reiteration, the Narendra Modi government announced that Northeast India would play an important role. Aside from rhetoric, the government needs to develop a feasible plan to incorporate the Northeast region within the Act East Policy framework and make the region a partner and stakeholder. Northeast India should not only be regarded as a corridor linking India to Southeast Asia, but the Act East strategy should be at the heart of it. The Indian policymakers should also bear in mind that active participation and a positive presence in Southeast Asia are failures without economic development activities in the Northeast region. Hence, in India's northeast region, sincere efforts should be made to turn the wheels of progress and usher in growth.

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