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India's Act East Policy and North East India: Opportunities and Impediments



Vaibhav Kullashri is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi. He obtained his Master's Degree in Defence, Strategic and Geopolitics Studies from Garhwal University, Uttarakhand. He concentrates on China's foreign policy, the PLA, internal security, and insurgency in Kashmir and Northeast India.



Anuradha Oinam is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi. **She** is a PhD candidate at the Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament (CIPOD), School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her area of interests covers Foreign Policy, Privatisation of Security, Disarmament, and Northeast Region as a Whole and Manipur.

"The dwellers of Manipur, especially Meitei have culturally and religiously followed the norm of turning towards the east. Even the entrance doors of their houses open towards the east. Thus, Nongpok Thong Hangba (Opening of Eastern Door) was a prophecy in Puya (Ancient Manipuri Script, Chronicle), which predicted 'the opening towards east in future' is somehow metaphorically relevant with the coming of Act East Policy (AEP)."

—Swrang Swargiary (2021)¹

Introduction

India's 'Act East Policy' (AEP) is a diplomatic vitality for promoting economic, cultural, and

Key Points

- India's AEP is of strategic importance in light of China's rise. However, the policy needs to be proactive in giving due consideration to the challenges and demands of North Eastern states while bringing about a change at the grassroots level.
- The feasibility of India's AEP lies in a robust and peaceful Northeast. Thus, improving the Northeastern state's social, political, and economic ecosystem is essential while respecting the locals' interests. Also, other aspects of connectivity like people-to-people contact, emotional, cultural, and traditional connectivity needs to be given equal importance.
- The future of India's AEP lies in timely completion of the projects on ground. Also, the time has arrived to have a thorough blueprint of India's AEP.

strategic association with the countries to its east— enlarging the vision of 'East' to step forward beyond Southeast Asia and create a strategic vision for greater Asia-Pacific.² Rechristened from 'Look East Policy' (LEP) to 'Act East Policy' (AEP) by India's Prime Minister at the 12 ASEAN-India summit in 2014 held at Nay Pyi Taw in Myanmar, saying, *"A new era of economic development industrialisation and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become 'Act East Policy' "*³

Initiated in 1991, the "Look East Policy", formerly mentioned in the Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report in 1996, emphasised a two-track approach: *Firstly*, looking at East Asian nations, primarily Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, for technology and *secondly*, harnessing the high potential market of Southeast Asian countries, mainly ASEAN.⁴ In addition, it emphasises on getting engaged with countries like Nepal, Bhutan, the autonomous region of Tibet in China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh by bridging its eastern land along the international borders. However, with various changes in geopolitics, especially the rise in China's military and economic power, its belligerent attitude at Indian borders, and expansionist approach in the South China Sea, it becomes imperative for New Delhi to collaborate with like-minded partners in the 'East' as part of AEP. Thus, in this context, the LEP can be seen as a more extended version of AEP. The AEP emphasises on connectivity, commerce, and culture as the fulcrum for greater India-Southeast Asian Nations' integration. Further, it also aims to find an alternative business partner in pacific countries and the South East Asian countries.

Historically, India shared cultural heritage with the East and Southeast Asian nations and exerted considerable cultural influence as the birthplace of Buddhism. However, since independence, India's inward-looking policy, non-aligned posture, semi-socialist economy, and cold war rivalry among states have done away with the existing connection with the region. It was only after the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of ASEAN (1967), as a collective entity, that India began looking eastward.

Over the years, focusing on the 'east', India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996 and Summit-level Partner in 2002. Furthermore, India signed several regional trade agreements

(RTAs) namely, the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) (2005), India-South Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) (2009), India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) {2010}, India-Japan CEPA (2011), and India-Malaysia CECA (2011). Further, emphasising on various sub-regional programs and projects like the trilateral highway—Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), are actively contributing to the success of various regional initiatives such as East Asia Summit (EAS), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), ASEAN and many others.⁵

Thus, over the years, India have focused upon various aspects like connectivity, commerce, and culture to enhance the relationship with its immediate eastern neighbours and extended neighbours with an aim to correct historical neglect of the region. With its 'Act East Policy,' 'Neighbours First Policy,' and keeping itself in line with the changing dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region, India is poised to be a net security provider in terms of free and open trade and transit of goods & services in the region. Thus, with this context, India's North East region became the fulcrum to India's outreach to East Asia and the Southeast Asian region. However, the question generally arises: Are north-eastern states ready to bridge the gap between India and Southeast Asian countries?

North East (NE) as a Pivot to India's Act East Policy

India's NE states have tremendous strategic significance as it shares a 5100 km (approx.) long, international boundary, which is about 98 percent of its total geographical area. The region encompasses Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, accounting for 7.9 percent and 3.76 percent of India's geographical area and population.⁶ Further, by their geography, the NE states are India's 'Gateway to Southeast Asia' and beyond. It has excellent opportunities to connect to the four immediate neighbouring nations by road and rail, namely, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal, and the extended neighbouring nations, namely Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia. It also serves as India's linking point to many multilateral organisations in the region like BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and BBIN.

Besides its location, the NE states are bestowed with abundant natural resources and diverse hill ecosystems, and therefore, the majority of its population relies on agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry for their economic activities.⁷ Moreover, Every Individual NE state is famous for some or other specific agricultural product, which, after proper identification, advertisement, and government support, can be developed into a state icon. It will help the states in two different aspects— *first*, it will popularise the local goods and generate employment in the rural areas. *Second*, it will help to provide identity to the specific state, which is essential for building confidence and trust in the people of the NE state. Further, scenic beauty and numerous perennial rivers throughout the NE states provide tremendous opportunities for tourism and hydropower projects. Thus, the tourism industry can be a powerful economic booster for the NE states. Besides this, the NE states have witnessed various battles during the Second World War, one being the Battle of Imphal/ Kohima, and therefore can attract military tourists from abroad, especially from Japan. On the same line, medical tourism also holds excellent prospects, *first*, NE states it shares long international boundary with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and even Nepal. Patients from South Asia and Southeast Asia especially from Myanmar, prefer to come for their health consults in the NE.⁸ In addition, there is a doctor for every 1635 population⁹ which is a good sign for promoting medical tourism in Manipur. *Second*, its natural environment and abundant availability of organic products provides a perfect setting for healing chronic diseases.

Christening the massive potential of the NE states, Prime Minister of India— Shri Narendra Modi, in 2014, while inaugurating the annual Hornbill festival at the Naga heritage village in Kisama, has said:

"In other parts of India, we will find SEZ (Special Economic Zone), a man-made economic zone. In this region it is NEZ (Natural Economic Zone), but unfortunately it is untapped. It is my priority now to nourish this NEZ for NE (North East). NE is meant for NEZ and NEZ is meant for NE".¹⁰

Thus, for a greater goal of uplifting people's lives, generating employment, building confidence, and preserving the identity of NE states, it is crucial to bring the people of the NE states together, within the state as well as with other states. Truly speaking, the future of

India's AEP solely relies on the inter-connectivity of the NE states— connectivity in terms of Physical (Road, Air, Rail, and Internet), Social and Cultural. Further, developing physical connectivity in the north-eastern state is crucial for various reasons— *first*, it enhances NE state's integration among themselves and with the rest of Indian states. *Second*, it enhances India's preparedness for any potential aggression by China in the eastern sector, especially in Arunachal Pradesh. *Third*, it improves India's outreach to Southeast Asian nations via Myanmar. In addition, it has the potential to transform itself into India's economic powerhouse due to the presence of enormous sources of energy, oil, natural gas, coal, and a robust water system in the form of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.¹¹ However, the connectivity via northeast to Southeast Asia is easier said than done as mentioned in the words of Verghese, the region is portrayed as-

“Rainbow country: extraordinarily diverse and colourful, mysterious when seen through parted clouds, a distant and troubled frontier for all too many”.

Thus, overcoming the challenges and significantly developing all the NE states is crucial and a stepping stone in realising the vision of India's Act East policy. In this context, India should follow the footsteps of the Manipuri people, who have always woken up by saying “*Nongpok Thong Hangba*” (*Opening of Eastern Door*).

Opportunities for NE States in the context of India's Act East Policy

Connectivity is the basis of a successful Act East Policy. It comprises roads, railways, waterways, airways, people-to-people connectivity, and connection of local markets with regional, national, and international markets. According to Pushpita Das, “roads not only help to bind the peripheral regions but also open up new areas for settlement and economic ventures”.¹² Therefore, it is essential to improve the sub-regional and intra-regional highways and other related linkages.

The Northeast is a landlocked region where connectivity is imperative to overcome social, economic, and political handicaps.¹³ The region is connected to the rest of India through the ‘chicken's neck’ at Siliguri (Siliguri Corridor), West Bengal. Northeast is often speculated as the expansion of Southeast Asia.¹⁴ In other words, it is considered to be the connecting

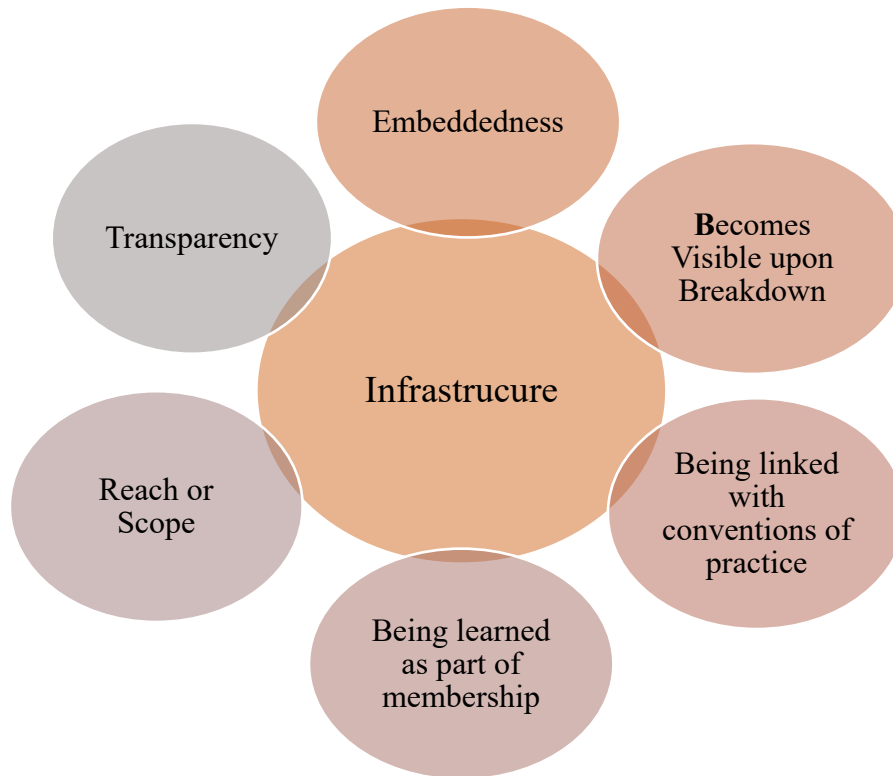
bridge between India and Southeast Asia. “Geography is an opportunity and the very geographical location of the North East makes it the doorway to Southeast and East Asia and vice versa, a door to economies into India”.¹⁵ Therefore, its proximity with the South Asian and Southeast Asian Countries could benefit Act East Policy as the region shares 98% of its borders with South Asian and Southeast Asian states, which makes strategic geopolitical importance to India and the rest of the country.¹⁶ In addition, strengthening relationships with these countries will uplift the people living in the border areas from poverty, economic backwardness, and so on.

In order to do so, development in transportation and communication are the two crucial wheels to steer for a successful implementation of Act East Policy. However, currently it is not up to the required standard to bear a fruitful policy in the region. Infrastructural development and construction of all kinds of connectivity projects are vital. For this, both the central and state governments should initiate building up roads and other related requirements. In addition, there should be a proper channel to coordinate four critical transportation systems: road, rail, river, and air to contribute to the country’s GDP from the AEP.¹⁷

Nevertheless, many infrastructure development projects are initiated to boost the connectivity within the Northeast Regions and with Southeast Asian countries—for instance, the 160km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road, which connects Tamu and Kalaymyo-Kalewa. Like the ASEAN-India car rally event, if the road connectivity is improved, there will be free flow of trade between the northeast and Southeast Asia, tourism, and other investments in various sectors.¹⁸

Northeast India is not just a landlocked region but also faces difficulties in connectivity because of asymmetric terrain—its hilly and mountainous ranges. Infrastructure is essential generally to improve connectivity and expand trade in the region. Star and Ruhleder assumes infrastructure as a relational concept, which has dimensions/properties, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Star and Ruhleder Model on Infrastructure



Source: SL Star and K. Ruhleder (2013)¹⁹

However, infrastructure is interpreted differently by different scholars. For instance, for B Larkin, infrastructure is perceived as networks that stream capital flows, including goods, people, or ideas, in addition to their swap over space.²⁰ One of the impediments of Act East policy is the lack of infrastructure and its related development.

As discussed above, NE is not just landlocked, hilly, and mountainous terrain; the region also lacks good infrastructural development, suffers from bad roads that connect the different cities as also the remote areas and bad intra-state/intra-regional highways. The situation worsens in the monsoon season, wherein many highways are not drivable, and rural road construction projects under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) require special attention. Further, careful reconsideration of new infrastructure projects needs to be

done keeping in view the geo-specific context such as topography, the region's climatic conditions, and the local resources; otherwise, the project will not yield a fruitful result.²¹

When it comes to sub-regional connectivity, much more infrastructural development is required. It is the correct time to make the Asian Highway functional, that connects Imphal (India) to Tamu (Myanmar), and connects the Kalembo railway via Mandalay.²² The proposal was made in which both India and Myanmar agreed to start a bus service from Imphal to Moreh (India) via Tamu and Mandalay (Myanmar). This 821 km long road is part of Asian Highway No.1, connecting India, Thailand, and Myanmar. This trilateral highway has come up with a proposal with two routes:

- Moreh (India)-Tamu-Kalewa-Chaungma-Yinmarbin-Pale-Kadet-Lingadaw-Pakokku-Bagan-Kyaukpadaung-Meiktilabypass-Taungoo-Oktwin-Payaghi-Theinzayat-Thaton-Hpaan Kawkareik-Myawaddy (Myanmar)-Mae Sot (Thailand).
- Moreh (India)-Tamu-Kalewa-Yagyi-Chaungma-Monywa-Mandalay-Meiktila bypass to Taungoo-Twin-Payagyi-Theinzayat-Thaton-Hpaan-Kawkareik-Myawaddy (Myanmar)-Mae Sot (Thailand).²³

The cultural linkage between northeast and southeast Asian states again plays a vital role in promoting AEP. Local actors also play an essential role in implementing this policy. For instance, the Mizo (Zo) community of Mizoram can act as local actors as people across the international border (Indo-Myanmar border) consist of the same community. They have similar cultures, traditions, and languages. That is why Zo can be a stakeholder in AEP. The border trade centres at Zokhawthar, Champhai district of Mizoram on the Indo-Myanmar border, and also the Kaladan river can be used as a transit route to Southeast Asian countries and India. Thus, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), which was initiated in 2008, is yet to be completed. If implemented in time, then it will provide a transit route through waterways to Mizoram. Likewise, Meities staying in Moreh do play the same role as Zo tribes in Mizoram.²⁴

Figure 02: Trilateral highway connecting India's Northeast to Myanmar and Thailand



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India%E2%80%93Myanmar%E2%80%93Thailand_Trilateral_Highway#/media/File:India%E2%80%93Myanmar%E2%80%93Thailand_Trilateral_Highway.svg

Despite several beneficiaries from AEP, there are challenges as well. For instance, drug trafficking, influx of illegal migrants, infectious diseases, and trafficking of other small arms, will become easier through this route.²⁵ Therefore, before implementing the AEP, proper measures should be taken to curb such possible misuse and threats emanating from these channels.

Impediments to India's Act East Policy

- **India's Strategic Culture.** As mentioned, India's Act East policy encompasses a broader goal of reaching Southeast Asia and South Asian countries. However, in achieving so, India's strategic culture remains one of the prominent challenges.²⁶ India is known to employ strategic autonomy and is a significant proponent of non-alignment posture; this reduces India's credibility as a reliable security partner. Over the years, New Delhi's focus mainly remained on uplifting economic engagement with the ASEAN and other surrounding nations by engaging in low-key defence

cooperation and playing up the civilisational ties. Further, it is committed to defending free and open access to the Indian Ocean for trade. However, beyond this geographical theatre, how much will it commit itself is questionable.²⁷ Thus, lack of commitment in forging any security alliance is the biggest hurdle in India's ambition to 'Act East'. Therefore, India's support to ASEAN nations, especially during a crisis, is seen as rhetoric and quickly discredited, as the former failed to put any formal commitment on security issues.

- ***China's Rise and Its Expansionist Posture in the Region.*** China's phenomenal rise, its hegemonic design in the Indian Ocean, its emergence as "the face of the East" during the 21st century, and its growing military might have led to the subjugation of India's national interest and posed a severe threat to regional stability.²⁸ China's growing assertiveness in terms of developing friendship, providing aid, developing ports as a part of 'string of pearls strategy' and mingling in the internal affairs of the South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar is posing a serious threat to India's economic and political interest.

China's vision emphasises building "communities of common destiny", which indicates building military alliances. Whereas India, through its 'Act East Policy', and extraordinary vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), aims for "shared destiny".²⁹ Thus, this contradictory vision of both nations is the most significant bone of connotation between them. On one hand, through its 'Act East Policy,' India aspires to develop inclusive projects for more excellent connectivity—Physical, Commercial, and Social— in the region. On other hand, China aims to revive its historical legacy of ruling and controlling the region; thus, creating a contested environment.

- ***Instability in the Northeast and Myanmar.*** India's NE states are at the fulcrum of India's 'Act East Policy,' and Myanmar is India's pillar stone for connecting with southeast Asian nations. Without proper stability in the region, India's vision of a "shared destiny" will be jeopardized. The future of 'India's Act East policy' goes beyond building better roads and physical infrastructure and relies heavily on developing peace and trust within and outside the region. The NE states have a history of ethnic conflict, separatist movement, and alienation. However, over the

period, with various peace processes, the region is yet to experience complete peace and stability. The idea of a peace process is not simple as it appears, because of its highly complex and divergent interests, and emotions between different ethnic, linguistic and tribal people staying in the NE states.³⁰ The recent Assam-Mizoram border dispute brings fresh images of conflict, confrontation, bandhs, and violence, causing impediments to the prospects of developing economic cooperation, enhancing connectivity, and creating a better livelihood in the region under the aegis of India's AEP.

Further, the sudden takeover of power by 'Tatmadaw' in Myanmar resulting in the fallout of refuge in the NE state has also pushed policymakers to contemplate the repercussions of the incident on India's vision of 'Acting East'. In the words of Myint Thant, author of *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, "Myanmar will be a gateway to other parts of Asia from the east of India...In future, if Myanmar has to be a gateway for anywhere, an imaginative focus on northeast India is going to be critical".³¹ Thus, any instability in Myanmar directly impacts India's interest in the east, so is the importance of Myanmar for India.

- **Delay in the infrastructure projects.** India's AEP is based on the prospect of shared connectivity and physical connectivity; building rail, road, water, air, and internet networks, remain the basis of all. Unfortunately, the track record of India in terms of building infrastructure is abysmal. The major pitfall remains the land acquisition, settlement & rehabilitation policy, poor project planning, and inadequate funds. The ambitious and multi-crore Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, that was viewed as a critical component of India's AEP, scheduled to be completed in 2014, is still far from completion. Similarly, the trilateral highway with Myanmar and Thailand (IMT Highway) is yet to be completed from the Indian side. Such delay in India's infrastructure project makes it less attractive than China. After putting countries under massive debt, China gave space to smaller nations to sell their valuable assets with its 'Check book diplomacy'.³² Thus, bringing China close to the Indian boundary, like the lease of Hambantota port for 99 years, has led to security

concerns for India in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the Southeast Asian nations want delivery rather than promises from the Indian side when it 'Acts East'.

Conclusion

India's Act East Policy can potentially change the geopolitical and geo-economic scenario of the region, especially during China's rise. It is more inclusive and based on the 'shared destiny' principle where every nation has an equal role. The North East region fits right at the centre of AEP, and the future of AEP lies solely on the peace, tranquillity, and development of the North East region. It calls for a more significant share of the Northeastern state in terms of funds and infrastructure development. Thus, India should work more proactively to unleash the true potential of the East and keep in mind the prophecy '*Nongpok Thong Hangba*'.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in