

Integrating Northeast India with Southeast Asia: Promise and Pitfalls of the Act East Policy

Dr. Aaditya Swaroop

Abstract:

The significance and importance of India's Northeast region is a key component of its eastward interaction. Given its geographic closeness and sociocultural ties to India's eastern neighbours, the Northeast region is significant for India's eastward engagement. In addition to strengthening sociocultural engagements, it offers plenty of room and opportunity to advance economic integration and connectivity. Given this potential, Northeast India's involvement and responsibility became stressed as a key element of the Look East Policy. The relevance and importance of Northeast India in India's eastward engagement have been emphasised more since 2014, when the "Look East" policy gave way to the "Act East" policy. Notwithstanding the enormous potential it has, the Northeast region has numerous issues and difficulties that have prevented it from realising its full potential, including underdevelopment, political unpredictability, and inadequate governance. Additionally, the region is under-represented in the creation and implementation of India's "neighbourhood policy." Ensuring the Northeast region's effective involvement and integration in the "Act East" Policy is necessary to turn the region's potential into reality.

Keywords: 'doorway to the east', eastward engagement, transcontinental approach, expansion, neighbourhood strategy

1. Introduction:

The expression that "Southeast Asia begins where Northeast India ends" sums up the importance of Northeast

India's eastward expansion. The Northeast region's geographical proximity, sociocultural ties, and dispersed communities across international borders make it significant for India's eastward involvement. In addition to improving socio-cultural interactions, Northeast India's geographic proximity to other nations frontier regions offers a wealth of opportunity and scope for fostering economic integration and connection. Due to these elements, India's northeast area has a significant edge when it comes to interacting and connecting with the countries of Southeast Asia. However, the Northeast region also has a number of unique political and economic challenges that can be resolved by working with its neighbours. Therefore, the Northeast has been given priority in India's eastward engagement in order to address its problems and ensure overall growth. When Pranab Mukherjee, the then-Minister of External Affairs, stated in Shillong in 2007 that the Northeast "is one region into whose progress and development we can dovetail India's "Look East policy", he brought attention to this. However, because India's Look East Policy did not initially prioritise domestic needs, the Northeast India component was not given priority.

The involvement of Northeast India in the Look East Policy began when India began to incorporate the region's development as part of its foreign policy direction, taking into account the domestic imperative. India started to envision the Northeast as the gateway for fostering economic integration and improving connections with Southeast Asia as part of its attempt to "look east." Northeast India eventually became an

essential aspect of the Look East Policy as a result of the necessity of integrating the Northeast area being stressed as a key element of the policy. The relevance and importance of Northeast India in India's eastward engagement have been emphasised more with the 2014 shift from the "Look East" to the "Act East" policy.

In the years since it was put into force, some have argued that the Act East Policy did not guarantee the Northeast region's effective involvement and did not significantly influence the region's development. What are the contributing factors and likely remedies for these? What chances and prospects do the Act East Policy provide to the Northeast? Furthermore, further research is required to determine whether the Northeast's regional interests and capabilities are uniform and how well they may be incorporated into foreign policy. These are a few of the concerns that require additional research and responses. Examining the Act East Policy specifically for the Northeast and imagining its appropriate position within it is necessary to guarantee the Northeast India's effective participation and benefits. As a result, the study is an effort to assess and investigate the Act East Policy, paying particular emphasis to the Northeast. In light of this, the goal of this research is to further the policy's evolution while also improving knowledge of it for scholarly purposes and possible policy input.

2.Strategic Role of Northeast India In India's Act East Vision:

The ensuing Look East Policy inclusion of Northeast India was clearly predicated on the idea that the region's needs and concerns should be incorporated into India's "neighbourhood policy" in order to address the region's developmental and participation deficiencies. Through increased connectivity, economic integration, and a socio-cultural relationship with India's eastern neighbours, this new strategy aimed to highlight the region's opening up and potential. Being India's

"gateway to the East," Northeast India's involvement, role, and participation are seen as essential to India's eastward interaction. As a result, the Look East Policy gained a fresh perspective by being analysed through the lens of the Northeast. The goal of the 2014 change from the "Look East" Policy to the "Act East" Policy (AEP) was to highlight the Northeast's importance in the strategy. The Modi administration has placed a strong focus on Northeast India being a key component of the program since its inception. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised this point when he said that "India's Eastern journey begins on the Western boundary of Myanmar." The Northeast is a "natural partner in India's Act East Policy" and a "land bridge to ASEAN," with the AEP serving as "a means to strengthen the stability, economy, and prospects" of the Northeast, according to Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, who made this point while speaking to the governors of the Northeast region of India on October 6, 2015. The goal of the "Act East" policy is "to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties, and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels," which will benefit the Northeastern states, according to Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs Gen. V. K. Singh, who highlighted the goals of the AEP with regard to Northeast India in response to a parliamentary question on December 23, 2015. The Minister further emphasised the Northeast region's priority in India's AEP by saying that "steady efforts to develop and strengthen connectivity of Northeast with the ASEAN region through trade, culture, people-to-people contacts and physical infrastructure (road, airport, telecommunication and power), etc." are among the bilateral and regional initiatives between India and ASEAN countries.

Prime Minister Modi reiterated the importance of Northeast India in India's Act East Policy when he stated later in February 2018 at a business conference in Assam that "we created Act East Policy and the Northeast is at the heart of it." As a result, the Act East Policy aims to give the Northeast a clear position and agenda as a key player in India's eastward engagement. The policy places a strong emphasis on reviving the region's historical and cultural links with India's eastern neighbours in addition to fostering connectivity and economic integration. Therefore, by encouraging a multifaceted role for the region, the Act East Policy envisions the region's successful participation in the policy.

2. Prospects and Challenges:

The physical proximity and opportunities for integration with India's transnational neighbours in the East, especially Southeast Asian countries, provide the catalyst for strengthening Northeast India's effective role and involvement in the Act East Policy. In this regard, maintaining transnational connectivity—whether via surface or overland connectivity—is essential to enabling Northeast India's interaction with these nations. It can further the region's development plan in addition to releasing the Northeast's economic potential and enhancing its position as a sociocultural link to the East. In order to ensure that Northeast India is actively involved and a stakeholder in India's renewed push for eastward engagement under the Act East Policy—which can give shape to the rhetoric that emphasises Northeast India as India's "gateway to the East"—connection is therefore essential.

When additional transportation costs and insurance premiums are taken into account, the Northeast's geographical status and physical remoteness from mainland India increase the price and duration of acquiring necessities. Therefore, trading across borders with

neighbouring provinces makes sense as a cost-effective strategy. For example, it will be necessary to take a diversion through the "Chicken's neck" and travel several thousand km in order to deliver crucial commodities from commercial hubs like Mumbai to the many states in the region. Nonetheless, time and money may have been saved by purchasing these goods at the numerous trading posts along international borders, which are comparatively closer. Therefore, it would be economically prudent, for example, to encourage Northeast India's economic integration with the provinces of south-western China and north-western Myanmar, the success of which would depend on maintaining connectivity.

Enhancing Northeastern infrastructure and connection networks will also boost regional product competitiveness, draw in more investment, and unleash the region's economic potential. It may be able to connect the Northeast to East and Southeast Asia's thriving marketplaces, commercial centres, and trade routes. In addition to boosting the region's economic activity and trading possibilities, it can ease cross-border travel, improve interpersonal relationships, and create tourism opportunities. Better access to economic possibilities, reduced prices for goods and services, increased regional connectivity, and easier access to economic hubs and regional and international markets can all lead to regional development. In addition to reducing regional conflict, better access and connections to existing markets and industrial networks may help overcome regional development disparities within a nation.

By encouraging the region's economic connection with Southeast Asia, the Act East Policy offers Northeast India enormous development potential. However, a number of problems are preventing these potentials from being realised. The area remains captive consumers rather than productive hubs due

to inadequate infrastructure development and a dearth of industries. The opening of the region to Southeast Asian economies would seem to just serve as a dumping ground for items from the neighbouring nations if industries are not developed and the region's export capabilities are not improved. One example is the availability of low-cost third-country goods in the markets of various Northeastern states, which are primarily sourced from the border transit point at Moreh (Manipur). Therefore, in order for the Northeast to actively engage in and maybe benefit from cross-border trade and economic cooperation, it is necessary to increase its production capacity before it is fully integrated with the economies of the neighbouring countries.

It is known that the markets and industries in mainland India, as well as shipments made through different ports, account for the majority of India's traded commodities and exports to Southeast Asia. Therefore, even though the Northeast region's closeness to Southeast Asia increases its potential as a trade corridor, it seems more cost-effective to take the sea route through India's eastern ports rather than the land route through the Northeast, which is almost twice as far away. Given this, trade through the Northeast must have an organic connection to the local economy in order for India to participate in its external trade with Southeast Asia. By doing this, Northeast India may stop being merely a transit region and start contributing to India's trade with Southeast Asia. Therefore the development of Northeastern industries based on local resources ought to be the main focus.

Northeast India has enormous potential for food processing industries like organic farming, horticulture, floriculture, sericulture, and bamboo-based industries, among others, based on indigenous tribal handicrafts and handlooms. This is because of the region's natural vegetation and climate. It is important to fully utilise the region's potential in these areas. The

Act East Policy can benefit from the rise of Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) and start-ups in these sectors in the Northeast by giving these industries priority and improving their capacity for export and production. Enhancing talent development and funding for these industries, together with regional infrastructure development and connection network improvement, should be prioritised in order to turn these potentials into reality.

There are a lot of opportunities for cross-border trade and economic interaction in the region due to the international border that Northeast India and Myanmar share. However, it seems that promoting cross-border trade is hampered by Northeast India's inadequate connectivity and infrastructure. Border transit hubs, which act as hubs for promoting cross-border commerce, are devoid of adequate infrastructure, from banking to telecommunication. Therefore, efforts must be undertaken to upgrade banking and financial networks and upgrade transit point infrastructure with cutting-edge technology. Additionally, in order to facilitate improved cross-border trade, the current restrictions on the items that can be traded should be relaxed.

Northeast India could gain the most from its sociocultural connections and geographic proximity to its eastern neighbours in the fields of education and tourism. Northeastern India has the potential to develop into a hub for education for its bordering nations. The Northeast area has the potential to draw students from India's eastern neighbours due to its close proximity to them and the abundance of English-medium educational institutions there. For example, universities in Meghalaya, Assam, and Manipur consistently accept students from Southeast Asian nations like Thailand and Myanmar for postsecondary education. Universities and research institutes can be encouraged to support research and increase knowledge on the ethnic affinities

and cultural similarities of ethnic communities in Northeast India and those in Southeast Asia, which could help strengthen their bond and linkages. This is in addition to student exchange programs and research collaboration between Northeastern and neighbouring universities. The Northeast region needs to build more top-tier research and higher education institutions in order to maximise its potential. Northeast India may so develop into a “knowledge corridor” connecting India and its eastern neighbours as a result of this factor.

There is tonne of opportunities in Northeast India to boost regional tourism. Given the Northeast’s topography, which contains a wealth of flora and animals, the area appears to have a lot of potential for growing ecotourism, adventure, and nature tourism. There is potential for cultural tourism in the Northeast due to the region’s ethnic ties and cultural affinities with Southeast Asians, as well as the existence of sizable tribal populations that offer distinctive arts and culture. For example, events like the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland and the Sangai Festival in Manipur have seen a rise in both the number of visitors from Southeast Asian nations and the participation of cultural organisations. With Buddhism being a popular religion in many Southeast Asian nations, and with sizable Buddhist populations in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in Northeast India, as well as a number of magnificent Buddhist monasteries like those in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, there is potential for religious tourism in these states as well. Northeast India’s geographic location also offers the possibility of medical tourism, especially from bordering regions of Myanmar and other less developed Southeast Asian nations.

Opportunities for the growth of a financially successful health care sector serving these neighbouring regions are created by the region’s physical proximity and the availability of qualified medical

experts. Given their apparent comparative advantages in terms of accessibility, the calibre of their healthcare facilities, and the availability of qualified labour, Manipur and Assam have the potential to become a medical tourism hotspot. Nonetheless, the Northeast region’s infrastructure for tourism and hospitality is thought to be lacking. Enhancing the region’s infrastructural development and connection networks is necessary to fully realise its tourism potential. Priority should be given to developing infrastructure in terms of connectivity, hospitality services, and enhancing facilities at tourist destinations. Tourism in the area would also increase if state capital airports in the area were upgraded to international airport status. In addition to encouraging travel, further liberalisation of the current visa system will improve interpersonal relationships. In order to facilitate visa applications and aid international visitors, more foreign consulates must be established in Northeast India. Unlocking the region’s potential in these areas would also be made possible by ensuring its peace and security.

Intra-Regional Linkages:

The focus of intra-regional cooperation is on surrounding countries integration and cooperation. Promoting collaboration in the creation of cross-border connections and infrastructure, as well as facilitating trade and improving interpersonal interactions, are the primary goals of intra-regional cooperation. Northeast India has the potential to lead India’s intra-regional cooperation with its eastern neighbours due to its close proximity to them. This could also be a practical strategy and possible mechanism for guaranteeing the Northeast region’s development. Through intra-regional initiatives like collaborating on projects to enhance cross-border infrastructure and connectivity networks, encouraging economic integration through increased trade and commerce, and

encouraging state and private investments across borders, Northeast India's connectivity and economic integration with Southeast Asia could be guaranteed. Northeast India may be able to improve its connectivity and economic integration with India's immediate neighbours by joining organisations like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation (BCIM) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In addition to the advantages that come with building cross-border infrastructure, it also appears to have the ability to unleash the business potential of the Northeastern states and accelerate regional economic growth. In addition to helping Northeast India integrate economically with its immediate neighbours and the expanding ASEAN economies, it might guarantee the region's connection and economic interaction with Bangladesh and southern China. As a result, Northeast India can lead India's intraregional interactions with its eastern neighbours, thereby enhancing the region's position and involvement under the Act East Policy.

In this respect, demilitarising the Northeast's international border areas is a crucial step in ensuring that Northeast India can effectively participate in the Act East Policy. Northeast India may be able to fully benefit from its geographic proximity to Southeast Asia by opening its borders and encouraging cross-border cooperation and interregional efforts with its neighbours. The old Stilwell Road, for instance, which links the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with China's Yunnan Province and the northwestern provinces of Myanmar, is thought to have a lot of potential for connecting Northeast India with Southwest China and Northeast Myanmar on an economic level. However, it is thought that India's security worries have prevented these potentials from being fully realised. The improvement of border regions

general peace and security, their consequent de-securitization, and its potential as a conduit for regional growth and development are therefore urgently needed. Moreover, the beneficial connection between Northeast Indians and their neighbours should not be restricted by the coordinated approach to guaranteeing development and security. In any endeavour to promote cross-border interaction and collaboration, residents of border regions ought to be considered significant agents and stakeholders.

Conclusion:

The Act East Policy, which was introduced in 2014, aimed to prioritise the Northeast as a key component of the policy. The Northeast is emphasised as the "heart" of the Act East Policy. It is still unclear, though, if this emphasis has been implemented successfully or if it is still merely rhetoric. Even though commerce between India and ASEAN increased to over 86 billion US dollars in fiscal year 2020, there has been little discernible progress in Northeast India's attempts to integrate economically with Southeast Asia. It asserts that the goal of integrating the economies of Southeast Asia and opening up the Northeast region's enterprise has not yet been realised because the region's enormous potential is still outweighed by ineffective policy implementation, infrastructure and connectivity bottlenecks, and other factors. Likewise, it is noted that even under the Act East Policy, many of the transnational connection projects started under the previous Look East Policy are still unfinished and have gone beyond their projected completion dates. In Northeast India, intraregional connectivity projects are also perceived to be proceeding slowly, with several still in the planning and proposal stages. India must therefore continue to "act within" in order to improve connectivity in the Northeast. For Northeast India to effectively participate in the Act East Policy, the policy must be

implemented with greater vigour and the growth of connection networks and infrastructure must be accelerated.

The possibility of a transnational strategy to guarantee development in Northeast India has frequently been emphasised by experts and commentators. Still up for debate, though, is whether the Act East Policy's execution over the years has had a major impact on Northeast development. Although trade and investment with Southeast Asian nations have increased significantly over the past thirty years as a result of India's Look East Policy and more recently under the Act East Policy, there is no indication that these gains will serve as a catalyst for the growth and development of Northeast India. The Act East Policy seems to have mostly remained a policy initiative that benefits the rest of the country rather than the Northeast region, given the levels of underdevelopment and issues that the region presently faces. Furthermore, attempts to include the unique interests and concerns of the Northeast in India's neighbourhood policy appear to be mainly on paper; for them to succeed, they would need to be made with genuine effort as well as innovative ideas and answers.

Northeast India is essential to India's Act East Policy, according to statements made by the Narendra Modi administration on numerous occasions. The government needs to have a workable plan for incorporating the Northeast into the Act East Policy framework rather than just stating the obvious. Long-term remedies to the region's isolation and developmental deficit may be found through initiatives to better incorporate the needs and concerns of the area into the Act East Policy. Northeast India's involvement and active participation are vital to the success of India's Act East strategy, and hence the "acting" component of the strategy should begin and first demonstrate results in the region.

References

- (1) Bajpae, Chietgi. 'Dephasing India's Look East/Act East Policy', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & Strategic Affairs*. 39(2):348-378. (2017).
- (2) Dutt, V.P., 'India's Foreign Policy in a Changing World'. *Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. Printed in India*, pp. 237-238. (2016).
- (3) Devare, Amb. Sudhir T. (Editor). 'India's Look East-Act East Policy: A Bridge to the Asian Neighbourhood', *International Conference: Symbiosis Institute of International Studies*. pp. 1-66. (2014).
- (4) Dubey, Rajeev. 'Northeast India in India's Look East Policy: Constraints and Opportunities', *Social Research Foundation*. pp. 120-128. 2(2) July-December (2014).
- (5) Ganguly, Sumit. 'India's Foreign Policy Retrospect and Prospect', *Published in India by: Oxford University Press, Printed in India by: Repro Knowledge Cast Limited, Thane*, pp.107- 123. 2018.
- (6) Goswami, Namrata. 'Act East Policy: Northeast India as a Strategic Catalyst', *CLAWS Journal, Institute Defence Studies and Analyse, New Delhi*. pp. 70-83. (2015).
- (7) Haokip, Thongkholal. 'India's Look East Policy and Northeast India', *Thesis submitted for the Degree of Philosophy to North-Eastern Hill University, department of Political Science*, pp. 1-10. (2010).
- (8) Horam, Mungreishang. 'Northeast India's engagement with Myanmar and its impact on India's Act East Policy'. *International Research Journal of Social*

Sciences. Volume6 (12), pp. 16-19 December (2017).

(9) Kalita, Sanghamitra. 'India's act east policy and north-east: Prospects and Challenges', International Journal of Advanced Research and Development. Vol.3, Issue1, pp. 268-270. 2018.

(10) Khashimwo, Pamreiher., 'India's Act East Policy and the Northeast Region: Role of Connectivity Boost, Skill Development, and Capacity Building in Northeast Region', The Morung Express. 17 May (2018).

(11) Khanna, V.C. 'Review: Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India's Northeast', China Report 53,1 (2017), SAGE Publication. pp. 61-64. (2017).

(12) Laxmikanth, M., 'Indian Polity' Published by: McGraw Hill Education (India) Private Limited, p. 70.4. (2016).

(13) Mir, Javid Ahmad. 'India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution, Objective and Approach', International Journal for Social Studies, Volume 3, Issue 4, pp. 8-18, March (2017).

(14) Nath & Kumar. 'India's Look/Act East Policy and the Northeast region: A critical Perspective', Space and Culture, India. pp. 7-20. (2017).

(15) Paul, Kripesh Chandra., Paul, Nita & Konwer, Shubhrajeet, 'Contemporary World Politics',

Published by: Smt. Jolly Guha, Arun Prakashan, Guwahati, pp. 68-69, (2011).

(16) Pulipaka, Sanjay., Singh, Antara Ghosal & Sircar, Saranya.(Editors) 'India and Connecting Framework', Delhi Policy Group: Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power. pp. 1-72. (2017).

(17) Sajjanhar, Ashok. 'Taking Stock of India's Act East Policy', ORF Observer Research Foundation: Issue, Volume-142, pp. 1-6. (2016).

(18) Singh, Lairenjam Niranjana., 'Geo-Politics & Role of Skill Development in India's Act East Policy', (Article is carried in the July-August 2017 issue of India Foundation Journal). (2017).

(19) Sundaram, A. 'Look East Policy', International Journal of Advancements in Research & Technology, Volume 2, Issue 5, pp. 169-185, May (2013).

(20) Surjitkumar, N. 'India's Act East Policy: Problems and Prospects for North-East India', Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, Two Days National Seminar, 12-13 February (2016).