

India's Northeast: 'Gateway' to Southeast Asia?

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Abstract

The purpose of the Act East Policy is to promote economic partnership, cultural ties, and strategic cooperation with the countries of Southeast and Far East Asia. In this respect, Northeast India is perceived as the gateway to Southeast Asia. In this emerging relationship, the role of the North-east is inevitable. It shares cultural, historic, and ethnoreligious similarities with the Southeast. For India, connectivity and development of the Northeast are central to the success of the AEP. It will bring about peace and prosperity in the region and contribute to broader regional cooperation. In this context, the paper seeks to study the significance of the Northeast in India's Act East Policy.

Keywords: *Act East Policy, Northeast, Southeast, connectivity, development, regional cooperation.*

Introduction

The Northeast is considered as the fulcrum of India's Act East Policy (AEP). History has in records; the region shares extensive socio-economic contact and cultural similarity with the countries of South and Southeast Asia. The region of Northeast covers an area of 255,000 sq. km., connected with the mainland by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, and shares boundaries with countries like China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Apart from its scenic ecstasy and rich biodiversity, the region is culturally vibrant, strategically important, has a vast reserve of natural gas, and is

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inhabited by 145 tribal communities. But despite its strategic importance and availability of rich resources, the region was exposed to development inequality and has largely remained isolated from the mainland. This lack of development has been a major cause of discontent among the inhabitants of the region, giving rise to separatist movements. Moreover, the tough geographic landscape of the region is another major constraint for large-scale industrialization. In such a situation, India's (Look) Act East Policy provides the window of opportunity for the development of the Northeast by engaging commercially with the countries of South-east and Far East Asia.

Under the aegis of AEP, India is making renewed efforts by inviting investment for the development of the Northeastern Region (NER). For this purpose, it has adopted a 3 C's policy (Culture, Connectivity, and Commerce) for expanding its engagement with Southeast Asia. This, India believes, will provide a greater scope of development for the NER. Countries like Japan, South Korea, member states of ASEAN, and BIMSTEC are showing signs of interest in investment in the NER. This can make a significant improvement to the livelihood of the NER. Japan is providing development assistance loans for the development of the NER. The India-Japan Act East Forum (AEF) is involved in the economic advancement of the NER. Like the ASEAN, engaging with the BIMSTEC members can contribute positively to the peace and prosperity of the NER. Furthermore, in the post-COVID period, greater engagement with the sub region can prove to be beneficial for limiting the impact of the virus, promoting greater regional cooperation, the development of the Northeast, and the overall development of India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the centrality of the Northeast in India's Act East Policy.

2. To focus on the role of the Northeastern region in India's engagement with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and Japan.

Methodology & Data

To write this article, I have used content analysis and observation methods. In this study, data have been collected primarily from secondary sources like different published books, journals, internet sources, published research papers and articles, newspapers, etc.

The Centrality of Northeast in India's (Look) Act East Policy

The Government of Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) introduced the Look East policy intending to comprehensively engage with the emerging economies of Southeast and Far East Asia (Japan and South Korea). The primary objective of the policy is to promote economic, strategic, developmental, cultural, and scientific cooperation with the Southeast and the Far East Asian nations, to consolidate India's position in the region as well as to ward off Chinese aggression. Experts opined that establishing commercial links with developing economies of the Southeast under the aegis of the Look East policy will bring about a renaissance in the development of the Northeast. Under this policy, India actively propagated and participated in different arrangements like the ASEAN, BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM), etc. There are two major aspects associated with India's pursuance of the Look East policy – *firstly*, to promote trade, investment, tourism, science, and culture; and, *secondly*, promoting defense and strategic cooperation (Kalita, 2018). The Look East policy was a silver lining in the development hope of Northeast India. However, the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her visit to India in 2011, arguing for India's greater involvement in the Asia-Pacific region (now, Indo-Pacific) favored the term 'Act East' instead of 'Look East'.

Subsequently, in 2014, the Modi government renamed the Look East Policy with the 'Act East Policy' to establish itself as a security balancer along with boosting economic cooperation with Southeast Asia (Brahma, 2018).

Central to India's AEP is India's North-Eastern Region (NER) due to its geographic location and proximity. The Northeast is connected to the mainland through the narrow strategically important "Chicken's Neck" or the Siliguri Corridor. Among the policy-makers, the Northeast is the necessary land link between India and Myanmar, a member-state of ASEAN, and is thus regarded as India's 'gateway' to the Southeast Asian region. Thus, in 1996, realizing the benefits of continental connectivity, India inaugurated the 'Friendship Road' to Myanmar. The NER has a vast reserve of energy resources like coal, natural gas, etc. as well as an extensive presence of diverse flora and fauna. The NER is also a great place for tourist attraction due to its culture, scenic beauty, availability of medicinal plants, art, and handicraft. The region constitutes a 3.8 percent population of India having diverse tribal groups (Nandy, 2020). But lack of employment and socio-economic development has kept the region backward and vulnerable. The 'North Eastern region Vision 2020' emphasized *"to break the fetters of the geopolitical isolation."* (Choudhury, 2017). It stressed people empowerment, promoting investment, capacity building among others.

As a part of the AEP, the Central government has adopted a 3 C's policy to enhance its cooperation with the ASEAN through the Northeast. These 3 C's include – *Culture, Commerce, and Connectivity*. This along with initiatives like Smart city development, Skill India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make-in-India, etc. may be regarded as a deliberate effort to do away with domestic development inequality. The Prime Minister observed that the fundamental aspects of AEP are culture, connectivity, and

commerce (Pulipaka, Singh, & Sircar, 2017). Former Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj also held them as important markers in expanding India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia (Das & Joshua, 2016). Therefore, economic cooperation, cultural contact, and strategic connectivity at both bilateral and multilateral levels will allow the greater scope of development for the NER.

Culture contributes to greater people-to-people contact; it promotes a sense of 'Oneness' (Brahma A. , 2018). There exists a strong socio-cultural homogeneity between the inhabitants of the NER and the Southeast Asian region (Kalita, 2018). Festivals like the Rongali Bihu (Assam), Sanken (Arunachal Pradesh), Pi Mai (Lao PDR), and Songkran (Thailand) are identical in culture and practices. Buddhism is another major link between the two regions. The NER is the home to major Buddhist monasteries and attracts a large number of Asian pilgrims. Similarities in terms of food, dance, language, etc. are also present between the two regions. This sense of oneness in terms of religious practice, history of colonialization, etc. is articulated through the AEP. The ethnoreligious and cultural homogeneity can act as a catalyst in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. Therefore, India was encouraged to use regional culture as a soft power to engage with Southeast Asia.

Connectivity is another precondition for strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations. Since one of the major objectives of AEP is to enhance trade relations, the NER provides the perfect locational advantage as the economic corridor to Southeast and Far East Asia. This connectivity aspect provides a great opportunity for the people of the Seven Sister States to get benefitted through people-to-people contact, trade, investment, pilgrimage, and exchange of culture. India has adopted the 3 R's + 1A (Road, Railway, River, and Air) formula for developing

connectivity in the NER (Thomas J., 2020). This is associated with India's objective to attract investment for the NER. India has already developed the Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo highway. There is also a sense of urgency in the construction of the trilateral highway between India-Myanmar-Thailand. This trilateral highway once operationalize will connect Moreh on the India-Myanmar border with Mae Sot on the Myanmar-Thailand border via Bagan (Kalita B. , 2020). This will allow India to promote connectivity with other ASEAN nations by road (Bhaumik, 2014). India has also proposed an extension of this highway to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam or the 'Mekong-India Economic Corridor', part of which between Thailand to Cambodia and Vietnam has become operational in 2015. These initiatives will reduce the isolation of NER and contribute to the overall economic development of the region in particular and India in general. The development of connectivity in the NER will also allow India to engage with South West China through the Stillwell or Ledo Road, constructed during Second World War. Apart from the road highway projects, India is also considering establishing a railway network for further boosting connectivity in the region. The Indian states of Meghalaya and Tripura are now well connected through the railway. A Delhi-Hanoi railway network connecting Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia is also under Indian consideration. The Government is planning to set up an air connectivity link between the L. G. Bordoloi International Airport (Guwahati) and the countries of South-East Asia. A new airport was built in Sikkim. This will also be a major development boost for the resource-rich Northeast (Brahma A., 2018). Also, to promote intra-regional connectivity, port cities are to be built along the river Brahmaputra and Barak. The Kaladan multi-modal project will offer access to Sittwe port in Myanmar. The Mongla and Chittagong ports in Bangladesh will also allow India easy access to the Southeast Asian market. Under the Sagarmala

initiative, the Indian government is redeveloping old ports and building new ones to strengthen maritime logistic infrastructure.

Commerce and trade are also key to the economic development of a region. India's increased involvement with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, BCIM-EC are crucial for the development of NER. As former Indian President Pranab Mukherjee argued that India's cross-border trade with Southeast Asia will help to elevate people of the NER from poverty while promoting '*entrepreneurial freedoms and skills*' (Ahmed, 2019). Also, investment from Southeast Asia will create employment opportunities for the tribal youths. As the region is industrially and infrastructurally backward, FDI from these neighboring countries will be beneficial for the development of the NER. Inward-Outward trade and business can be enhanced through the successful implementation of the AEP. Underdevelopment and isolation have given birth to many separatist movements in the Northeast, the pursuance of AEP is, therefore, a necessary step towards curbing those movements and, promoting a sense of inclusion through development and economic prosperity. Though there have been initiatives and investments by some Southeast and Far East Asian nations, still border trade is yet to gain momentum.

In recent times, the Central government is undertaking initiatives for "*fast pace development of the North East*" to make it an economic corridor and a trading hub with the countries of the Southeast and the Far East (The Times of India, 2016). Apart from connectivity development, sensing the strategic vulnerability of the region, India is also stressing the development of telecommunication, power, and infrastructure in the NER (MEA, 2016). The shared cultural and historical links among the people can further contribute to India's close ties with the ASEAN members. To put it in a nutshell "*Southeast Asia begins where*

North East India ends" (Choudhury, 2017) and is thus an essential component of India's AEP.

India-Japan Partnership for the Development of Northeast

As discussed in the preceding section, central to India's AEP is the development of the NER. The NDA regime under PM Modi has shown great interest in the infrastructural and connectivity development of the region. On the other hand, the strong historical linkage between Japan and the NER has contributed to building consensus between India and Japan to collaborate for the development of the region. In recent years, several new developments in the bilateral relationship between India and Japan highlight the growing tendency of convergence for partnering in the NER. In 2014, when Prime Minister Modi was hosted in Tokyo by the then Japanese Prime Minister Abe, the importance of the NER was stressed upon. The Tokyo Declaration accentuated Japan's commitment to the development of the NER and also emphasized the need to connect the region with a broader South Asian economic network (MEA, 2014). In 2015, when Abe visited India for the India-Japan summit, he conveyed his desire to provide Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) loans for connectivity development of the NER. The Japanese extension of ODA for the development of the NER began in 2010. It became much more enthralling under the Modi regime.

In 2017, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) extended a loan of \$ 610 million for the 1st phase of the Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project, stressing development projects in Mizoram and Meghalaya (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2017). Also, in the same year, a major push towards India-Japan collaboration in the NER was achieved with the establishment of the AEF. The AEF is a collaboration under the aegis of India's "Act East Policy" and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy". The AEF was

tasked with the responsibility to identify projects for the economic advancement of the NER with a major focus on *“connectivity, developmental infrastructure, industrial linkages as well as people-to-people contacts through tourism, culture and sports-related activities.”* (MEA, 2017). The AEF stressed the speedy implementation of connectivity projects in Meghalaya and Mizoram and biodiversity and environment protection projects in Sikkim and Nagaland. Several new projects like the Dhubri-Phulbari bridge project and forest management projects were also looked upon by the forum. Apart from government-to-government collaboration, Japan has also engaged with NGOs operating in the NER to fund projects related to primary health centers and vocational training centers. As per a media report published by PIB in 2019, Japan has decided to invest 205.784 billion Yen in projects for the development of the NER. Some of the notable projects among them include *“Guwahati Water Supply Project and Guwahati Sewage Project in Assam, North East Network Connectivity Improvement Project in Meghalaya, Bio-diversity Conservation and Forest Management Project in Sikkim, Sustainable Forest Management Project in Tripura, etc.”* (PIB, 2019). The 5th round of AEF discussion held in January 2021 reviewed the ongoing projects in the areas of hydro energy, sustainable development, skill development, etc. while emphasizing the need to cooperate in other areas like healthcare, development of value chain for bamboo production, tourism, agro-industry, etc. (MEA, 2021). The Indo-Japan connectivity projects in the NER will greatly contribute to national economic growth and are expected to further integrate the subregion into a broader economic corridor.

Apart from development cooperation, India and Japan are also making cooperation to use culture and history as tools of soft power to build the bridge of friendship to promote people-to-

people contact. A large number of Japanese tourists throng the NER for its ecstatic natural beauty, exotic flora and fauna, and the Japanese remaining from the days of World War II. An increase in the number of tourists also provides an opportunity to the local youths to make a profit through tourism business as well as resort and hotel business. Meghalaya can emerge as a bridge of cultural contact between India's Northeast and Japan. Of late cherry blossom trees are grown in Meghalaya which symbolizes *"a charming catalyst to enhance people-to-people and cultural linkages between Japan and the North East."* (Ambassador Hiramatsu, 2018).

This Indo-Japan cooperation in the NER is also significant from a strategic perspective. This collaboration with Japan for the development of the NER perhaps provides the opportunity to open new avenues for balancing the growing Chinese influence along India's Eastern and Northeastern boundaries (Bhatia, 2019).

Significance of Northeast in India's Relationship with the ASEAN & BIMSTEC

Among the Indian policymakers, the NER is the gateway of intercontinental trade and commerce with the ASEAN and BIMSTEC. Also, with Southeast and Far East Asia, it constitutes the 'physical and cultural' bridge (Thomas, 2017). The Government of India has taken several initiatives over the year to consolidate and enhance India-ASEAN ties. The development of the NER has been one of the crucial aspects of India's AEP. The policy also promotes the cultural and historic confluence of the NER with the countries of the ASEAN. But despite India's efforts to bring investment from the ASEAN for the development of the NER, the growth rate remains below the national average. However, the region is full of potential to evolve as a major economic corridor and source of hydro-energy and natural gas.

To address this potential, fresh initiatives have been undertaken by both the Central and Provincial governments to improve road and rail connectivity, infrastructure development, creating an environment for investment, emphasis on border trade, etc. Major projects like Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, Rih Tedim Project in Myanmar, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar), connectivity to Bhutan and Bangladesh are being operationalized. Cultural tourism like Sangai Festival (Manipur), Hornbill Festival (Nagaland), Pangsu-Pass festival (Arunachal Pradesh), Assam International Trade and Industrial Fair, and Manipur Polo International are also being promoted to encourage greater people-to-people contact. The similarities between the people of the NER and Southeast Asia in terms of religion, food habits, and culture are also an advantage. States like Manipur and Assam are pursuing their own AEP to realize development. Assam has a dedicated ministry (Act East Policy Affairs Department) to expand cooperation with the ASEAN member states. The Government of Manipur and Sikkim is urging the Central government to consider providing visas on arrival to people coming from Myanmar, as part of medical tourism. In the words of N. Biren Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur, *"We have taken up the challenge to develop the state. And to reap maximum benefits from the Act East Policy, Manipur has its own policy to materialise this dream."* (Siddiqui, 2017). As Buddhism is a major religion among the ASEAN members, Sikkim provides an opportunity for enhancing Pilgrim tourism. The 5th edition of the Northeast connectivity summit organized by FICCI was held in 2018. The focus of the summit was on rail, road, and air connectivity with the operationalization of landing grounds at Tezu and Ziro, inland waterway transport development, river tourism, eco-tourism, and investment for harnessing power. Based on its cultural affinity and economic potentiality, the NER

can emerge as the fulcrum in the India-ASEAN relationship (IANS, 2017).

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was formed in 1997 to promote rapid economic development and social progress of the sub-region (BIMSTEC, 2016). From an Indian perspective, the AEP lays a major focus on engaging with BIMSTEC apart from the ASEAN. Since its inception, BIMSTEC was considered a platform capable of promoting economic prosperity and connecting people of South and Southeast Asia. It was believed to help transform the land-locked region into a land-linked region for developmental gains (Thomas J. , 2020). Greater contact between the NER and BIMSTEC can contribute to opening new avenues of cooperation based on shared culture and history. Various kinds of tourism like eco-tourism, pilgrimage or religious tourism, medical tourism, wildlife tourism, etc. can help to establish the Northeast as a tourism hub. This will push the North-East towards economic prosperity. Along with tourism, Festival diplomacy can be a turning point in promoting the shared cultural bond among the people of the sub-region. At the 4th Summit of BIMSTEC (2018), Modi remarked, *“India is committed to working with the BIMSTEC member states to enhance regional connectivity. I believe that there is a big opportunity for connectivity – trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity.”* (PTI, 2018).

The trade routes between India's North East and Bangladesh like Goalpara- Mankachar-Bengunbari-Dhaka, Karimgunj-Sutarkandi-Sylhet, Ghasuapara-Koraitalai-Hahiaghat, Borsora-Cherragaon-Sherpur, Aizwal-Marpara-Mamit-Rangamati-Chittagong, etc. provide a huge opportunity for the development of the NER. The Bengal-Bangkok connectivity under the BIMSTEC can become a landmark for creating a new regional developmental discourse.

The southern corridor of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR), a project of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), passing through Mandalay-Imphal-Jiribam-Silchar-Agartala-Dhaka may contribute to economic development by exporting local handicrafts and goods from the NER to Bangladesh and the rest of Southeast Asia. Many Bangladeshi companies are also interested in investing in the Northeast. Malaysia is also considered a potential investor in the NER. For Malaysia, the NER can emerge as a “food basket”, as varieties of food items are imported from the region by it. An MoU was signed in 2011 with the Malaysia-India Business Council (MBIC) to explore future possibilities of trade and investment, education, tourism, etc.

In recent times, energy security has become an emerging issue in Indian foreign policy. The Government of India is intending to make India an environment-friendly ‘gas-based economy’ by increasing the share of natural gas consumption by 2030 (PIB, 2018). Domestically, the gas pipeline network has been expanded to different states and an additional 14,239 km of the gas pipeline is under development (Press Information Bureau, 2019). The states of the Northeast are believed to have a vast reserve of natural gas. Electricity from the gas-powered Palatana plant in Tripura is exported to Bangladesh (Kulkarni & Pimpalkhare, 2019). The Government of India has taken the initiative to connect the NER with the National Gas Grid. In this respect, the Indian Oil Corporation Limited and GAIL have entered into an MoU with Dhamra LNG Terminal Private Limited for receiving and storing 5 MMTPA of LNG at Dharma port in Odisha (Press Information Bureau, 2016). This will also allow India the opportunity to import natural gas from Myanmar in the future. Here too, the North-Eastern states can play a crucial role in a possible natural gas pipeline between India and Myanmar, as they share a land

boundary with Myanmar. This would make India's import of natural gas cost-effective. Such a gas network will also enhance broader regional cooperation. The states of the NER can emerge as a potential market for Myanmar gas.

Conclusion

Until the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19, the countries in South and South-East Asia were making efforts to promote greater regional cooperation. The increasing people-to-people contact of different communities residing along the Bay of Bengal based on a shared or different culture, history, cuisine, and ethno-religious practices have been instrumental in enhancing cooperation and promoting benevolence. But the beginning of the pandemic has changed this practice. Lockdowns, the closing of borders, and non-allowance to the grounding of international flights have significantly affected the economy of most of these developing nations. The growth rates have slowed down. In the face of shrinking western economies, the development assistance received is expected to get reduced, pushing those countries at the bottom of the development pyramid towards a serious economic challenge. In the first two quarters of the 2020-2021 financial year, India's revenue collection fell by 27 percent. Regional tourism is at an all-time low. The pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of over-dependence and global supply chains. In this situation, with India being the 'pharmacy of the world', capable of producing a large volume of vaccines annually can be of much relief for the countries of this subregion. India providing medical assistance and equipment to Southeast Asia highlights India's commitment towards the region. With India helping all its neighbors by providing medical assistance and the Covishield vaccine doses under the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, it can utilize the Northeast to further support the sub-region through medical diplomacy. Since the NER is crucial to India both strategically and

for the economic prosperity of the East, greater efforts must be made to transform it as a development corridor in engagement with multilateral frameworks like the ASEAN and BIMSTEC.

In this post-COVID situation, there are numerous opportunities to work upon the already undertaken initiatives to boost regional connectivity. Minister of DONER Jitendra P. Singh observed, “*New paradigms would emerge post COVID-19 crisis, with a potential for new breakthroughs in economy, trade, scientific research and several other diverse areas, catapulting the Northeast as the economic hub of the country and a preferred destination for startups.*” (PIB, 2020). This reaffirms the centrality of the Northeast in India’s AEP. Early implementation of the 3R’s+1A formula is necessary to diversify regional connectivity. In recent times, Bangladesh is allowing India to transport goods from the Northeast through its borders. A consignment of cement was sent to Tripura via a river in Bangladesh. The early completion of the trilateral highway and the Kaladan multimodal transport project is significant for the NER. The border haats between Bangladesh and India’s North-Eastern states of Tripura and Meghalaya are under operation. This has reduced the cost of transport of goods. This model of economic connectivity can be replicated in the post-pandemic period between India and Southeast Asia through the India-Myanmar border (Price, 2020). The Prime Minister’s call for ‘Vocal for Local’ can greatly benefit the SMEs of the NER. In the post-pandemic period, the resource-rich NER is expected to be a connecting point in the success of the AEP.

Furthermore, as China continues to flex its muscles in the post-pandemic period in the South China Sea and its expansionist design towards the neighboring countries to divert global attention over its role in the outbreak of the pandemic, it is a blessing in disguise for India. The recent military coup in Myanmar is a matter of concern for India, given the fact that Myanmar is

the only continental link between India and the ASEAN. An unstable Myanmar is a threat to the security of India's NER (Wahlang, 2021).

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