

India's Act East Policy and Regional Cooperation

Sabrina Laltanpuii

PG Scholar, Amity Institute of Social Science, Amity University, Noida

Abstract

India's Act East Policy was launched in 2014 by the Indian government, transitioning from 'Look East Policy' which emerged in the early 1990s marking a shift on its foreign policy, showcasing India's commitment to fostering deeper engagement with Southeast Asia across economic, strategic, and security dimensions with ASEAN nation as its core focus. This paper examines on the evolution of Look East Policy to Act East Policy, exploring innovative approaches taken on enhancing regional cooperation under the Act East Policy framework, focusing on multidimensional strategies that encompass cultural integration, economic connectivity, and sustainable development. The study highlights on India's active engagement with ASEAN nation, playing a significant role in shaping it's relations with Southeast Asian countries under the Look East Policy which later evolved into the Act East Policy. Key areas of exploration includes the significant role of Northeast India in the country's Act East Policy due to it's strategic location, having shared borders with several Southeast Asian countries. Through an analysis on the latest developments and initiative taken under the policy, prioritizing on infrastructural developments and connectivity projects in the region, this research aims to provide insights into the progress of India's role in regional cooperation through Act East Policy.

Keywords: ASEAN, Look East, Act East, Waterways, Connectivity, Indo-Pacific, Economic Cooperation, Regional Integration, Security, North East India.

Introduction

The Act East policy is an initiative aimed at the development of the Asia-Pacific region by India. Read here to know about the latest developments in the policy. 'Act East Policy' announced in November 2014 is the upgrade of the "Look East Policy". The focus of the "Look East Policy" was to increase economic integration with the Southeast Asian countries, and the area was confined to Southeast Asia only. On the other hand the focus of the "Act East Policy" is economic and security integration and the focus area increased to South East Asia as well as East Asia. India's Look East Policy was initiated in the early 1990s by then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and this enactment of the policy during his governance marked a significant shift in its foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. The primary focus was on economic cooperation, trade, and diplomatic engagements. In 1992, India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, formalizing its engagement with the regional bloc.

Objectives of the paper

1. Analyze historical progression from Look East Policy to Act East Policy.
2. Evaluate India's economic, geopolitical, and cultural involvement with ASEAN states.
3. Highlight Northeast India's strategic relevance in Act East Policy aims.
4. Investigate infrastructure projects for regional connection and integration.

5. Identify challenges and opportunities for effective Act East Policy execution.

Methodology

The study article uses data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included government records, publications, and reports, including the Ministry of Indian Government's Annual Report. etc. Secondary data sources included books, articles published in national and international journals, and newspapers.

Research Questions of the Paper

1. What impact has the shift from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy had on India's ties with ASEAN countries and the larger Indo-Pacific region?
2. What are the main efforts and projects announced under the Act East Policy to improve regional connectivity and economic integration?
3. How does Northeast India contribute to India's Act East Policy, and what are its strategic advantages?
4. What are the primary obstacles to the full implementation of the Act East Policy, and how may they be overcome?
5. How successful has the Act East Policy been in promoting regional security and collaboration within the Indo-Pacific framework?

Findings and Discussion

India's Act East Policy, established in 2014 as a development of the Look East Policy, highlights the country's more aggressive approach to interacting with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. The policy change prioritizes not just commerce, but also cultural, geopolitical, and security considerations. India has steadily expanded its participation in ASEAN-led initiatives and regional summits, with an emphasis on maritime security and ensuring the region's freedom of passage. Through bilateral accords like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area agreement and institutional procedures, India has improved ASEAN ties. These collaborations have promoted sociocultural interactions, economic connections, and political-security cooperation. Because of its advantageous location bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar, northeast India is essential to furthering the goals of the Act East Policy. The area is positioned to serve as a gateway for improved connectivity between Southeast Asia and India.

Due to trade, investment, and trade diversification obstacles, India and ASEAN's economic and trade integration is still below its potential. By concentrating on high-value industries like information technology, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, India has attempted to diversify its trade with ASEAN. Concerned about China's increasing influence, India's Act East Policy lays a strong focus on security cooperation with ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific regional allies. In the Indo-Pacific, cooperative projects with ASEAN, Japan, and Australia seek to prevent piracy and advance freedom of passage. India's increasing involvement in regional security alliances is reflected in its defense exports.

A key component of India's Act East Policy, which aims to fortify relationships beyond geopolitical and economic alliances, are cultural and people-to-people connections. In an effort to strengthen cultural connections, initiatives have been started to increase tourism between India and ASEAN nations. The Act East Policy's full implementation is hampered by a number of issues, such as trade and regulatory impediments, infrastructural constraints, security concerns, and geopolitical difficulties. For the Act East Policy to be successful in the long run, several issues must be resolved. Despite promises of economic

integration with East and Southeast Asian nations, Northeast India has not gained much from the Look East Policy (LEP). Law and order problems, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of investment are some of the region's problems. According to a popular proposal, Northeast India has to improve its infrastructure and technological capabilities in order to expand its commerce. It also recommends that future studies create a model for turning the region from a supplier of raw materials to a maker of final goods.

Look East Policy

After the Cold War, the world entered a new age of serenity, filled with hope for a future free from war. India, like the rest of the world, sought new opportunities to further its national interests. To align with the emerging world, India introduced the Look East policy in the early 1990s, aiming to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific region, particularly through its eastern states. This policy was a significant step in this direction.

India has been actively working towards a more just world order since its independence, focusing on fostering close ties with Asia. This realization was central to its new "Look East Policy," which was further bolstered by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, Foreign Minister Madhavrao Solanki, and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. Since taking charge in May 2004, Singh has emphasized the benefits of intensifying ties with ASEAN and its member countries, particularly in trade and commerce. India recognizes the geo-economic potential of the north-eastern region as a gateway to South East Asia and its value as a bridgehead. The Look East Policy aims to integrate this region with the thriving market across borders. India's economy was growing at 4-5% annually at the time of the policy, while South East Asian nations showed steady growth of 7-8%. As India moves forward with a policy of Open Skies and Free Trade with South East Asia, it is catching up with these nations at a good pace with improved economic growth rates. India's Look East Policy is aimed at promoting a more just world order and fostering a stronger relationship with Asia.

India joined ASEAN in 1992, and it became a sectoral conversation participant in 1996. In 2002, it joined China, Japan, and Korea as an ASEAN summit partner. India has participated in regional projects such as BIMSTEC and Ganga-Mekong Cooperation. In 2005, India joined the East Asia Summit. The first Trans Asian Car Rally in 2004 commemorated India's Look East Policy. Positive projects include the proposed Trans-Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway, and Trans-National Gas Pipeline connecting Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India.

India's Look East Policy has been influenced by several factors, including hesitancy about projecting Northeast India, the possibility of a maritime-oriented policy, the China Syndrome, and security anxieties. India's hesitancy to project Northeast India in its Look East Policy is due to the country's historical ties to South East Asia, such as its maritime ties with Orissa, Andhra, and Tamil Nadu. The China Syndrome has drawn India's South Asian neighbors into its economic orbit, making many Indians nervous. Myanmar's trade with both India and China has expanded since 1989, but trade with China has grown more rapidly than with India. The political uncertainty in North East India has also shaped India's Myanmar policy, with security anxieties focusing on getting Myanmar to act against North East Indian insurgent groups rather than a desire for a continental orientation.

India and ASEAN Relations

India's contacts with the ASEAN region were fruitful until the late 1970s, when political developments hampered progress. India joined ASEAN's Sectoral Dialogue in 1992, and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao

detailed the country's Look East policy in 1994. In 1996, India became a full dialogue partner, and in 2002, it joined ASEAN at the Summit level. The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in 2012 commemorated the 20th anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue collaboration as well as the 10th anniversary of the ASEAN-India Summit level collaboration. The subject of the summit was "ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity."

India's Look East Policy seeks to interact with ASEAN and East Asian countries through an Asianisation lens. India has signed a number of multilateral agreements with these countries, including those with China, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Other regional organizations and venues that assist India's Look East Policy include BCIM, BIMSTEC, SAFTA, ASEAN, EAS, and MGC. The inaugural Trans Asian Car Rally in 2004 marked the beginning of India's Look East Policy. Several government efforts, such as the Trans Asian Highway, Trans Asian Railway, and the 800-kilometer Trans-National Gas Pipeline between Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India, have bolstered India's Look East policy. The strategy assigned a direct role to India's North-Eastern states, enabling for maritime-oriented policies and the development of connections with dominantly coastal nations. The initiative was viewed as a step toward competing with China's position in East Asia.

The ASEAN-India Regional Trade and Investment Area (RTIA) was founded in 2002, with the first summit taking place in Phnom Penh in November 2002. In 2003, a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation was agreed in Bali to fully exploit the RTIA's potential for economic cooperation. At the 2004 Laos Summit, the two sides agreed to promote long-term cooperative partnerships, use their complementarities, and collaborate in a coordinated manner to accelerate sustainable growth and development. ASEAN and India are prioritizing the development of regional infrastructure and transportation links to improve physical connectivity and enable the flow of products and people. They also encourage collaboration in research and technology, trade, and economic arrangements to facilitate the free movement of commodities, services, and investment. They have agreed to fully implement the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area by 2016. The ASEAN-India Partnership document stresses collaborative efforts to solve similar concerns, particularly security issues such as international terrorism and transnational crime, through institutional links and cooperative programmes. The agenda for cooperative action on the Asian and global stages must be rigorously followed, and Asian leaders must collaborate to combat the new monster of global recession and mitigate its impact on their respective countries.

In addition to natural disasters, India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, proposed collaboration in the prevention and management of man-made disasters such as terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, cybercrime, international economic and environmental crimes, sea piracy, and money laundering. ASEAN and India are already working together on a global scale in areas such as general and comprehensive disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction under tight international oversight.

Evolution of Look East Policy To Act East Policy

India's "Act East" Policy, renamed in 2014, intended to develop relations with countries in East and Southeast Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and ASEAN members. The policy aimed to strengthen regional economic cooperation, connectivity, strategic links, and people-to-people contacts. The Look East Policy was implemented in the early 1990s to refocus India's attention on Southeast Asia. The Act East Policy aims to boost bilateral trade and investment with Southeast Asian countries and the larger Indo-Pacific region, encourage two-way commerce in goods and services, and

facilitate investments through bilateral and multilateral agreements. The policy prioritizes the construction of physical infrastructure to promote more efficient trade and investment flows between India and its eastern neighbors. However, the Act East Policy confronts numerous hurdles, including negotiating complicated geopolitical conflicts, dealing with non-traditional security concerns, and overcoming trade and investment integration restrictions. India's Act East Policy is a comprehensive plan for leveraging economic, strategic, and cultural links to strengthen its position as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific region.

Act East Policy

India's Look East Policy was renamed the Act East Policy in 2014, indicating a more proactive approach to regional engagement. The policy aims to promote regional integration while also contributing to the Indo-Pacific region's prosperity and stability. India's relationship with ASEAN has progressed from diplomatic contacts to comprehensive collaborations that span economic, geopolitical, and cultural dimensions. In 2012, the connection was elevated to a Strategic Partnership, with 30 Dialogue Mechanisms covering a wide range of sectors. In 2015, India established a special Mission to ASEAN and the East Asia Summit in Jakarta, and over 60 commemorative activities were held in 2017 to mark the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations. ASEAN and India's strategic collaboration encompasses political and security elements, economic relations, socio-cultural exchanges, and connectivity efforts.

India's Act East policy (AEP) focuses on strategic interests and alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, with the goal of countering Chinese dominance. The policy's focus has shifted from East Asia to the Indo-Pacific, with ASEAN serving as the key region. India has improved its multilateral and regional ties with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, ACD, and IORA. It has also strengthened institutional engagement with the United States and its allies, including Japan, Australia, and South Korea. India has also taken a proactive approach to defense diplomacy and exports, with the Philippines becoming BrahMos' first export target for shore-based anti-ship missiles from India in 2022. India has also stepped up connectivity initiatives, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

India's foreign policy and Act East Policy have a strong relationship with ASEAN, which was elevated to a Strategic Partnership in 2012. The relationship includes 30 Dialogue Mechanisms and a dedicated Mission to ASEAN. India-ASEAN cooperation extends to political-security, economic ties, socio-cultural exchanges, and connectivity initiatives. India-ASEAN trade and investment relations have grown, and socio-cultural initiatives aim to boost people-to-people interaction.

The ASEAN-India Plan of Action for 2016-20 seeks to increase political-security, economic, and socio-cultural ties. India is concentrating on strengthening connections with regional and multilateral organizations, as well as improving communication and transportation infrastructure. The ASEAN-India Agreement on Trade in Services and Investments has gone into effect for India and seven ASEAN countries. India has also encouraged ASEAN member states to join the International Solar Alliance. Strategic interests include strengthening collaboration in the fight against terrorism, promoting maritime security, and working together to achieve regional peace and stability.

Initiatives, Projects and Development under Act East Policy

The Act East Policy has resulted in a number of initiatives, including the Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link between India and Bangladesh, multimodal transportation links, and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit

Transport Project in Myanmar. The Trilateral Highway Project connects the Northeast to Myanmar and Thailand. Road and bridge development, as well as hydroelectric power upgrades, have been carried out under the India-Japan Act East Forum program. The Mahabahu-Brahmaputra inland waterway project is poised to begin, with the Dhubri Phulbari bridge becoming India's longest bridge over a river. India is also carrying out Quick Impact Projects in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam to assist grassroots people with development needs such as education, water resources, and health. The National Bamboo Mission intends to promote comprehensive bamboo sector growth through an area-based strategy. The Bru-Reang resettlement agreement was struck in 2020 to address the 23-year-old Bru refugee issue. The Digital North East Vision 2022 focuses on using digital technology to improve the lives of northeastern residents.

Projects And Development under Act East Policy

Projects financed by the Ministry of External Affairs to connect NE with countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar

1. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project's goal is to provide alternative connectivity to the North East Region from the Kolkata/Haldia port through Sittwe Port- Kaladan river up to Paletwa in Myanmar by waterway and Paletwa to Zorinpui by road in Mizoram, as well as an alternate route between the landlocked North-East and the rest of India. The Ministry of External Affairs is the focal ministry for implementation. The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) is the project's Project Development Consultant (PDC).
2. North Eastern States are linked to the eastern part of India via the rivers Brahmaputra (NW-2) and Barak (NW-16), the Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghli river system (NW-1) via Sundarbans (NW-97), and the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route, which has been in place since 1972 under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWT&T) between India and Bangladesh. Under this Protocol, inland vessels and cruises from one country may operate on the specified waterway routes of another one.
3. The Memorandum of Understanding and Standard Operating Procedure for using Bangladesh's Chattogram and Mongla Ports for the transit of goods to and from India have been finalized. It connects Agartala (Tripura) via Akhura, Dawki (Meghalaya) via Tamabil, Sutarkandi (Assam) via Sheola, and Srimantpur (Tripura) via Bibirbazar to Bangladesh's Chattogram and Mongla ports.

Projects sanctioned under the Central Sector Scheme

1. Assam: Construction of floating terminals on NW-2 and NW-16
 2. Manipur: Loktak Inland Waterways Improvement Project for Loktak Lake
 3. Mizoram: Development of IWT on river Khawthlangtuipui- Tuichawng in Lunglei District.
 4. Tripura: Setting up of linkage with Meghna river system in Bangladesh by developing Gumti River.
- All the above projects aim to comprehensively develop the northeast region and as well as boost India's Act East policy by extending the connectivity and trade eastwards.

Details of infrastructure projects on National Waterways in North Eastern Region (NER)

1. Comprehensive Project for Development of National Waterway (NW)-2: The government is developing Inland Water Transport (IWT) projects on National Waterway-2 (River Brahmaputra) from Dhubri to Sadiya (891 km) at a cost of Rs.461 crore over a five-year period (2020-25). The main elements of the projects being undertaken are the creation of navigable fairways with day and night navigation aids and terminals. The building of NW-2 offers waterway access between the North East area and Kolkata/Haldia

ports via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route. The primary interventions under this project are (i) Construction of Jogighopa Terminal; (ii) Alternative route to Pandu Port; (iii) Ship repair facility in Pandu; and (iv) Construction of Tourist Jetties at Biswanathghat, Jogighopa, Pandu&Neamati.

2. Comprehensive Project for the Development of the NW-16 and IBP Route: IWT projects on the National Waterway-16&IBP route are being developed over a five-year period (2020-25), including fairway maintenance, Least Available Depth (LAD), and navigation aids. Action to upgrade the Badarpur and Karimganj terminals, including a customs and immigration facility at the Karimganj port, has been begun. This project's key interventions are (i) the building of a terminal at Sonamura on the Gumti River; (ii) the construction of a terminal at Maia on the Ganga River; and (iii) the upgrading of the Badarpur and Karimganj terminals.

Under the India-Japan Act East Forum, initiatives such as Road and Bridges and the up gradation of hydroelectric power projects have been undertaken.

Role of Northeast India in Act East Policy

The Look (Act) East Policy (LEP) was launched in the early 1990s by India to deepen economic, cultural, political, and strategic ties with East and Southeast Asian countries. It was launched as a response to various national and international incidents, including the end of the Cold War, the rise of regionalism, East Asia's notable performance, and the China factor. The LEP has since been rechristened as Act East Policy (AEP), which goes beyond ASEAN to reach out to other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It also strengthens political, strategic, security cooperation, and people-to-people connectivity. AEP focuses on integrating Northeast India with its neighbouring countries by developing both physical and digital connectivity.

India's LEP completed a span of three decades, and during this period, the magnitude and intensity of India's economic engagements with East and Southeast Asian countries reached new heights. It is often claimed that the LEP could become an instrument of economic prosperity for Northeast India through the expansion of trade and commercial links with Southeast Asian countries. The claim is made not only because of its strategic location but also because of its abundant resources and potential for trade in the region. However, many experts from within the region also argue that the LEP would serve as an "instrument of exploitation" of the region's resources, similar to what the colonial imperialists did, without any remarkable impact on the real economy of Northeast India.

Northeast India, the easternmost region of India, is a diverse land with a vast international border of 5,182 kilometers. It shares borders with several neighboring countries, including Tibet Autonomous Region, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The region's geographical location offers greater opportunities for economic integration with South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. The Look (Act) Policy has been considered a suitable policy instrument to integrate Northeast India with Southeast Asia to expand economic activities. Historically, Northeast India was often argued to be economically backward due to its inaccessible geographical location. However, in today's globalized world, this argument may not be true. With 99 per cent borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the region appears to have a better scope for development through regional and sub-regional integration.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Imphal-Mandalay 579-kilometer bus service are major AEP projects in Manipur, aiming to increase trade and business within the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. The highway is crucial to China's Belt and Road Initiative and may serve as Myanmar's and ASEAN's entrance to South Asia and India's gateway to Southeast Asia. However, the project has faced

several delays, including the addition of Vietnam and Laos. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) in Mizoram, a key project under the AEP, has faced criticism for its environmental, social, and social impacts. The Kaladan Movement, an alliance of civil society organizations, has criticized India for opacity in the project's implementation, claiming that local communities were not consulted or included in its benefits. India has denied these allegations but suspended the construction of hydropower projects in Myanmar. The lack of compensation to local communities has led to a deadlock in March 2018, with landowners demanding a complete blockade.

Indian policymakers now consider the Look (Act) Policy as an instrument to integrate Northeast India with ASEAN nations. However, studies show that India-ASEAN economic relations have bypassed Northeast India since the initiation of the LEP. India's trade expansion with ASEAN, East Asia, and Asia-Pacific countries mainly took place through sea routes, benefiting states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal. The Act East Policy (AEP) has given importance to Northeast India and taken concrete steps in this regard. The AEP has focused on the North Eastern Region (NER), which has been described as a "natural partner" and a "land bridge to ASEAN." The AEP proposes to develop border trade, connectivity, people-to-people contacts, and cultural exchanges to enhance the capabilities of the NER.

Impact And Challenges on Implementing Act East Policy in Northeast India

A. Socio- economic and Political Impact of AEP for Northeast Region

The AEP has significantly improved infrastructure in North-East India, with a 50.06% increase in road connectivity and a 62.8% increase in internet penetration. This has improved transportation, facilitated cross-border trade with neighboring countries, and reduced travel time. The expansion of highways has also reduced trade costs and boosted goods and services flow. This aligns with the national agenda of enhancing the region's integration into global supply chains, particularly by positioning North-East India as a gateway to Southeast Asia. The AEP has significantly improved employment and income levels in North-East India, with 37% of respondents stating it has improved employment prospects. The policy has also led to a 51.2% growth in per capita income across the region. This is attributed to the AEP's focus on trade and foreign investment, which has led to a 213% increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in sectors like agriculture, textiles, and tourism. However, rural and marginalized populations need more targeted policies to ensure equal access to these job opportunities, especially for those without higher education or specialized skills.

The Act East Policy aimed to address socio-political instability in North-East India, focusing on insurgency and ethnic conflict. The policy has led to a decrease in insurgency-related incidents, largely due to improved cross-border relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh and enhanced joint border patrols. However, concerns remain over unresolved ethnic tensions, particularly regarding resource distribution and cultural preservation. Minority groups in Tripura and Nagaland feel marginalized by the rapid pace of development and fear the dilution of their cultural identities. This highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that focuses on economic integration and ensures the cultural and social rights of the region's diverse ethnic groups. Governance has also been a focal point, with an increase in joint center-state projects and e-governance initiatives. However, concerns remain about the balance between regional autonomy and national initiatives, with local stakeholders emphasizing the need for more localized decision-making power. Local governance and community participation remain underdeveloped in many parts of North-East India, with respondents from rural areas and minority communities feeling excluded from the policy-making process.

B. Challenges and Limitless

Northeast India's Northeast States, accounting for over 2.5% of GDP, face economic underdevelopment due to high transaction costs, transport bottlenecks, and lack of essential infrastructure. Despite efforts by Prime Minister Modi to establish Special Economic Zones, mismanagement of funds, and the Look/Act East policy, the region remains economically backward and ponders development and connectivity projects.

Strong business ties between Northeast India and its neighbors are severely hampered by the region's inadequate infrastructure, import and export regulations, and cross-border insurgent prohibitions. The majority of commerce is still conducted informally; thus, efforts must be made to upgrade the networking and transportation systems. Due to the low cost of Chinese and Thai goods, India's portion of Myanmar's border trading partners is small, and Indian items are in short supply. Strict implementation of food safety regulations and monitoring the flow of low-cost but subpar items are essential.

Issues including seasonal labor, a greater reliance on contract and casual labor, and the informalization of work have been brought on by the development of a project in south Mizoram. Seasonal work results from the labor force often being released during the monsoon and re-enlisted in October. Daily wagers have historically been unwilling to work, which has led to searches for new employees from other regions of the nation, like Bihar, which discriminates against labor that is accessible in the northeast. About 2,700 people, including engineers and operators, have been hired for the project; nevertheless, this figure is well below the project's budget. Local communities' disagreements and delays have lessened the project's impact.

Other significant issues and governance concerns include the difficulties in issuing and using Inner Line Permits (ILPs), the difficulties in dismantling the class and ethnicity matrix in the northeast due to the existence of various micro-indigenous communities, the prevalence of migrant communities, illegal immigrants, and refugees, the lack of coordination and ideological differences between the government and local policymakers in the area, gender inequality, and many more. Long history of insurgency, territorial disputes, ethnic conflicts and border disputes are other few challenges present in the northeast that could hamper the outcome of the policy and hinder the growth and development in the region.

Conclusion

An extension of the Look East Policy (LEP), India's Act East Policy (AEP) seeks to improve India's relations with Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific area. Due to obstacles including poor infrastructure, limited investment, problems with law and order, and a lack of industrial growth, Northeast India has not seen the expected economic change despite thirty years of work under the LEP. The AEP places a strong emphasis on enhancing connectivity through projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, but these alone won't be enough to realize the region's full economic potential. The study criticizes the export-led growth model that has been suggested for Northeast India, emphasizing its reliance on the production of raw materials and its limited viability.

The possible exploitation of Northeast India's resources under the pretense of connectivity and commercial integration is also examined. Instead of becoming just another symbolic policy, policymakers should make sure the AEP is customized to the unique socioeconomic circumstances of Northeast India.

References

Journal Articles

1. Farooqi, Z., & Teckchandani, J. (2024, March). Act East Policy & its impact on North East India. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research.
2. Dev, Y. J., & Singh, T. G. (2024, April). India's evolution from Look East Policy to Act East Policy. International Journal of Novel Research and Development.
3. Inkah, S. (2023, December). Re-examining the implication of Act East Policy in Northeast India: Narratives and challenges. Dera Natung Government College Research Journal.
4. Alam, H. I. (2018, October). The Northeastern States in India's Act East Policy: A Critical Review. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences.
5. Ahmed, Z. (2019, September). India's Act East policy and North East India: A Critical Review. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences.
6. Nath, S. (2019, October). Act East Policy and connectivity in North East India. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention.

Conference Papers & Reports

1. Kesavan, K. V. (2020, February 14). India's 'Act East' policy and regional cooperation. Observer Research Foundation, Raisina Debate.
2. Singh, B. (2024, February 16). Act East policy boosts regional cooperation: Northeast India's economic corridors explored in roundtable conference. The Economic Times.
3. Chowdhury, K. (2021, November 20). India's Act East Policy and its impact on the Northeastern States. Northeast Now.
4. Rahaim, S. (2018, December 26). India's 'Act East' Policy: Impact on Mizoram and Manipur. Mantraya.

Government & Institutional Sources

1. Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, PIB. (2022, March 29). Retrieved from [Press Release: Press Information Bureau](#)
2. CLEARIAS. (2023, September 14). Act East Policy: Latest developments. Retrieved from <https://www.clearias.com/act-east-policy/>
3. INSIGHTIAS. (2024, July 30). A Decade of India's Act East Policy (AEP) . Retrieved from [Act East Policy](#)

Books

1. Jha, G., & Shekhar, V. (2012). Rising India in the changing Asia-Pacific: Strategies and challenges. Pentagon Press
2. Pant, H. V. (Ed.). (2019). New directions in India's foreign policy: Theory and praxis. Cambridge University Press

Research Papers

1. Faheem, M. (2019, February). Strengthening India's Act East Policy through sub-regional organization BIMSTEC: New regional cooperation approach. ResearchGate.
2. Ganapathi, M. (2015, January - March). 'Look East - Act East' dimension of India's foreign policy. Indian Foreign Affairs Journal.
3. Swargiary, K. (2024, September). The Act East Policy's socio-economic and political impact on North-East India. ResearchGate.
4. Doungel, J. (2022, January - April). The role of Mizoram as a significant actor in India's Act East Po-

lity. Rising Asia Foundation.