



Locating the North-East in India's Act East Policy

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Abstract

The paper examines India's Act East Policy and its effects on relations with ASEAN members with a particular emphasis on border trade between India and Myanmar. It analyses historical and contemporary trade agreements and reveals the region's strategic underutilisation, underscoring the need for enhanced infrastructure and connectivity. The paper argues that the North Eastern Region's unique geographical and cultural establishment presents a vital bridge to ASEAN and emphasises the significance of aligning India's regional aspirations with its international commitments to maximise the potential for enhancing economic, social, and diplomatic relations. It concludes that a cohesive approach that integrates border trade, infrastructure development, and policy coherence is crucial for maximising Northeast India's potential as a fulcrum for regional cooperation, integration, and India's broader Indo-Pacific aspirations.

Keywords: Act East Policy, ASEAN, India, Myanmar, Border Trade.

Introduction

The process of globalisation cannot be halted, and no country will be immune to its effects. It integrated the economies and cultures of developed and developing countries, posing both opportunities and challenges (Kumar, 2021, p. 173). It is important to realise that no country can achieve complete self-sufficiency and self-reliance. In multiple capacities, almost all countries throughout the globe are interconnected with economic blocs or groupings. Regional economic blocs like the European Union (EU) in Europe, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia, Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) in Latin America, North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in North America, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in South Asia, and many others at sub-regional levels have emerged due to globalisation and economic interdependence (Deepak, 2018). Regional cooperation and integration characterise the 21st

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century where the global landscape is being swept by the waves of regional and subregional cooperation (Thomas, 2019). The North Eastern Region (NER), situated along the eastern border of India, consists of eight predominantly hilly states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. It has been isolated from the country's dominant political and developmental paradigm, primarily because of its geographical location at India's periphery, as well as its distinct societal legacy, intricate demographic composition, and inadequate infrastructural and economic development (Ghosh & Chaudhary, 2021). The present Act East Policy (AEP), which seeks to enhance economic connectivity between the region and South East Asia, is progressively being presented as the emerging economic development strategy for India's NER. The government of India has implemented numerous initiatives under India's "Vision 2020" and India's "Neighbourhood First" strategy, to foster regional cooperation with its eastern neighbours, within the framework of the AEP. Assam and Manipur have historically served as crucial corridors for substantial commercial and cultural interactions between the Indian subcontinent and countries in Southeast Asia. The NER serves as an indispensable link to both eastern and western neighbours, rendering it of utmost importance in this context. However, despite these governmental policies, Northeast India is not being effectively utilised to its full potential as a regional connectivity hub. Multiple challenges also plague the region. This paper attempts to provide an overview of the significance of Northeast India and its role as an essential gateway to Southeast Asia. It emphasises border trade, infrastructure, connectivity, and the potential it possesses for strengthening relations with the ASEAN. The initiatives and imperatives of policy and collaboration have rendered North-East India, a border region, a crucial and eligible actor for implementation. The region in consideration could not be separated from any measures or initiatives aimed at fostering connections between the eastern countries and the western countries, facilitated by India's land route.

India's Eastward Engagement

Independent India's commercial activity was primarily restricted to its immediate neighbourhood, West Asia, Russia, and Europe until the 1990s (Misra, 2016, p. 59). The Gulf War of 1990–1991 along with the disintegration of the Soviet Union had a negative effect on the Indian economy during the post–Cold War era. The onset of the Gulf War exacerbated India's economy, presenting a significant challenge to the government (Baral & Mahanty, 1992). Crude oil prices spiked after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, which sparked the Gulf War and reduced oil production (Reisdorf, n.d.). An estimated US\$1.6 billion has been lost as a result of the crisis for India (Manuel, 1991). India experienced a significant increase in its oil import expenses, a decline in exports, a scarcity of credit, and a withdrawal of investment by investors (*The Telegraph*, 2009). Moreover, India, as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), engaged in mutual strategic collaboration with the Soviet Union through the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Collaboration (Rajput, n.d.). The financial assistance provided by the Soviet Union to India saw a substantial decline as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It was also regrettable that South Asia, and her regional partnership, SAARC, did not present significant commercial and investment prospects. The realisation of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) proved elusive throughout a critical period. India's involvement

in Southeast Asia and East Asia was prompted by a series of events, including the Balance of Payment crisis in 1991, domestic economic reforms that followed, and the changing regional and international dynamics after the Cold War (Misra, 2016, p. 59). India, in its pursuit of better opportunities, recognised the substantial economic prospects presented by ASEAN and East Asia. The phenomenon of globalisation, accompanied by the ascent of Asian economic superpowers and the formation of the Asian Tigers, has motivated India to establish stronger relationships with these countries to capitalise on their development. India's trade relations are progressively transitioning from Western countries to Eastern counterparts, encompassing China, Japan, Korea, and the ASEAN. Strategically, the Look East initiative was prompted by three developments: a rising China, a volatile Myanmar, and an ASEAN that is experiencing profound transformation (Muni & Misra, 2019, p. 62). India has serious concerns about the growing Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia, particularly in Bangladesh and Myanmar (Muni & Misra, 2019, p. 165). For example, the increasing evidence of China-Myanmar cooperation in the construction of Myanmar's infrastructure and China's actions in the Indian Ocean via Myanmar forced India to rethink her foreign policy towards the East. India's heightened ambition in the East can be attributed to a range of security concerns, both traditional and non-traditional. These concerns include the activities of insurgent groups in Northeast India, the increasing influx of narcotics and contraband across the Indo-Myanmar borders, and the expanding strategic presence of China in Myanmar. Accordingly, India has been driven to take more assertive measures in response to these challenges. Indian engagement with East and Southeast Asia shows a sophisticated and adaptive foreign policy in light of its changing economic focus and strategic goals. India's proactive approach to economic progress and security is shaped by China's rise and regional opportunities. This change shows India's determination to negotiate complex regional dynamics and form relationships that serve its national interests and global economic trends.

India's Act East Policy: Boosting Northeast India's Role

India's Look East Policy (LEP) officially began in 1991 during the Indian National Congress government headed by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. The LEP was renamed AEP by the Modi government in 2014, and academics and observers viewed this as a re-energization of the LEP, as the LEP was not regarded to have exacerbated the potential for industrial and infrastructural growth in the NER. Rubul Patgiri and Obja Borah Hazarika (2016) argue that the Indian NER, which is located between South Asia and Southeast Asia, anticipates benefiting a great deal from the shift from LEP to AEP. The region shares 98 percent of its border (approximately 5,000 kilometres) with neighbouring countries and only 2 percent with the remainder of India (Mukhteh, 2008). The primary focus should be directed on examining and implementing measures for the advancement of several sectors within the Northeast region. India recognised that it could not ignore the globalisation trend and adopted the LEP in the early 1990s to focus on the East. India's NER, which serves as the meeting point of two subcontinents, is referred to as the "northeastern borderlands" of South Asia and the "northwestern borderlands" of Southeast Asia (Touhng, 2018, p. 51). India's economy and strategic security are at a critical crossroads right now. The pillars of AEP are political, economic, and sociocultural cooperation (Bhatia, 2019). These pillars highlight the significance of NER in the implementation of the policy.

The Northeast states of India are regionally recognised as the eastern borderland, exhibiting a distinct set of challenges, underdevelopment, and issues. There exist internal concerns that are both exasperating and crucial, necessitating adequate resolution. People felt discriminated against/prejudiced and had a perception of maltreatment by the centre, based on core and periphery issues. This calls for an academic investigation to be executed. The implementation of India's LEP, which intends to establish comprehensive connectivity to the NER, holds the greatest potential for effectively addressing the diverse challenges faced by the NER in the foreseeable future (Pudaite, 2010, p. 183). According to Pudaite- a former diplomat from Mizoram writes that "The primary component of India's Look East Policy is to provide connectivity and its attendant inflow of investments, both FDI and domestic, to the Northeast Region (NER). In other words, the idea is to transform NER into a linkage corridor between India and its immediate neighborhood of Myanmar and beyond" (Pudaite, 2010, p. 188).

In addition, the LEP is intended to initiate economic growth in an industrially deficient region, diversification of industrial activity, employment creation, and expansion of trade and markets following the region's potential (Lyngdoh & Rani, 2008, p. 21). The economic benefits of this region are dependent on the trade taking place along the land route under the auspices of the LEP/AEP. The LEP transforms into a new avatar AEP with a more proactive function, larger territory, strengthening ties, and different dimensions, while Northeastern states remain significant propelling the AEP. The strategic reorientation from India's LEP to the AEP emphasises the NER's role in connectivity and industrial development. The shift intends to leverage the NER's unique geographic scenarios, integrate South and Southeast Asia, and address internal issues. A balanced and equitable economic pathway for India is essential to the AEP's success, therefore proper planning, cooperation, and a comprehension of the region's potential and challenges are crucial.

India and ASEAN Strategic Synergy

The bilateral relationship between India and the ASEAN has undergone significant change since the adoption of India's LEP strategy in the 1990s. India eventually followed suit and joined ASEAN as a Sectoral Partner in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996, and a Summit-level Partner in 2002 (Government of India, 2017). The aforementioned initiative was bolstered and rebranded as the AEP in 2014, with the primary objective of forging economic and strategic alliances with the ASEAN. India also established a distinct Mission to ASEAN and the East Asia Summit in Jakarta in 2015, executed with a dedicated Ambassador, to enhance interaction with ASEAN and ASEAN-centric activities (Negi, 2022). India and the ASEAN region celebrated the 30th anniversary of their ASEAN-India dialogue relations in 2022, christened the "ASEAN-India Friendship Year" and marked by many significant bilateral visits and summits.

The bilateral relationship between them fosters significant mobility of people, capital, ideas, and innovations. The ASEAN region has a wealth of natural resources, manufacturing capacity, and technological know-how that can serve as a natural foundation for the growth of synergy and integration between ASEAN and India (Lyngdoh & Rani, 2008, p. 17). India and other Southeast Asian countries need to collaborate primarily to compete with Western

industrialised countries' flourishing economies (Mahanta & Das, 2008). India is actively constructing a transportation network to establish a connection with the ASEAN through Myanmar. The aforementioned initiative pertains to the construction of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral railway alongside the highway, including a distance of more than 1300 kilometres. This infrastructure project aims to connect the town of Moreh in the Indian state of Manipur with Mae Sot in Thailand, through Myanmar serving as the intermediary route. Additionally, projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transportation Transit Project and the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India are being undertaken to facilitate the entry of businesses into the Southeast Asian market. India-ASEAN relations are crucial strategically because several ASEAN members view India as a counterweight to China in contemplating maritime border disputes between China and several ASEAN members, such as disputes over the South China Sea. The adoption of a bolder strategy within ASEAN would accomplish a great deal towards strengthening India's position as a global power. The ASEAN members, including Myanmar, Malaysia, and Vietnam, have the capacity to make significant contributions towards enhancing India's energy security. A few countries within the ASEAN as well as India exhibit a net dependence on hydrocarbon imports. Consequently, it becomes imperative for these countries to prioritise the development and implementation of alternative energy sources. India's fourth major trading partner is the ASEAN, following the EU, the United States, and China. The projected growth rate of India-ASEAN is anticipated to surpass that of the global average due to its advantageous demographic composition and the rising market for various goods and services. India's exports to ASEAN account for 11.2 percent of India's overall exports, and trade with ASEAN has increased over the past decade to a total of US\$ 81.33 billion, which is approximately 10.6 per cent of India's total exports (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

Companies from India and ASEAN are establishing new relations in trade and investment in a variety of industries, including energy resources, agricultural products, electronics, and information technology (IT). To enhance private sector engagement and public-private partnerships (PPP), both parties have agreed to foster business-to-business relationships. There is a shared fear of terrorism and organised crime between the two countries, although both have increased censorship in recent years (Kumar, 2021, p. 182). They have joined forces on non-traditional security challenges, particularly in the fields of natural disaster management and climate change (Kumar, 2021, p. 182). The India-ASEAN relationship is characterised by the convergence of economic, strategic, and cultural interests, with the potential for a profound regional transformation. The establishment of enhanced collaboration among many sectors lays the foundation for a mutually beneficial path of development that may effectively address global issues and facilitate a fresh era of integration. The enduring dedication to these collaborations will not only influence the local environment but also, have a crucial role in defining Asia's role within the global framework.

Indo-Myanmar Border Trade: A Pillar of Act East Policy

AEP incorporates Indo-Myanmar border trade as a constituent component. The credibility of countries or the realm of international relations is compromised in the absence of cross-border trade. The interactions between countries are also subject to the influence of

trade dynamics and the outlook thereof. Likewise, international trade has a significant role in shaping or determining the scope of international relations. The Indo-Myanmar border, spanning 1,643 kilometres in length, is constituted by four Indian states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. The presence of physical topographical limits does not hinder the feasibility of border trade and interaction between these adjacent countries. The proximity of the countries facilitates the viability and functionality of cross-border trade, despite its relatively low volume. The initial agreement on border trade was officially ratified in Delhi in January 1994 and subsequently came into effect in April 1995 with the establishment of a trading point between Moreh, Manipur, and Tamu, Sagaing Division, Myanmar (Singh, 2016). The inauguration of the Indo-Myanmar second Border Trade point at Zokhawthar – Rih Sector took place on January 30, 2004 and the Office of the Land Customs Station at Zokhawthar began its activities on the same date simultaneously (Directorate of Revenue and Customs, 2022). The provisions outlined in the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement of 1994, the import and export of domestically produced items were authorised. The exports and imports were categorised based on a traditional exchange, barter trade, and normal trade. The practise of normal trading was non-functional, whereas traditional exchange and barter trade was in existence, initially including 22 articles and later increasing to 62 items. The trade arrangement had a significant transformation starting from the first of December, 2015. This shift involved the replacement of the barter system with a normal trade system that included all commodities to be settled in any permissible currency, along with the utilisation of the Asian Union Clearing Mechanism. This action has resulted in the revocation of the tariff reductions that were previously granted under the 1994 agreement (Directorate of Trade, Commerce & Industries, 2022).

The establishment of the land customs station at Nampong (Pangsau Pass) was approved and notified by the Indian government in 1951 however, it is laying non-functional (*Arunachal Times*, 2019). The Indo-Myanmar Joint Trade Committee decided to create an LCS in Avankhu, Nagaland in 2008 that would be comparable to Somara, Myanmar; however, it is worth noting that no official announcement on the establishment of the Avankhu LCS has been made thus far (Taneja et al., 2019, p.8). Moreh in Manipur and Zokhawthar in Mizoram are the only two LCSs for cross-border trade between customs posts that have been notified and are operational, both of which are compliant with the applicable laws, regulations, and procedures in each state. It is crucial to acknowledge that in comparison to the total magnitude of international trade between India and Myanmar, the formal border trade conducted through the North East region is of minimal significance. While India and Myanmar share a 1,643 kilometres border with the Northeast States, more than 90 percent of all trade between the two countries occurs by sea, with the land border trade accounting for a statistically insignificant share of less than 1 per cent (Taneja et al., 2019, p.5). The establishment of border trade between the two countries fostered not just physical connectivity, but also social and cultural interconnectedness.

The inhabitants of the borderland or borderline are interconnected, intermarry, and share the same ethnology, notably in the Indo-Myanmar borderland. The border trade serves as a conduit connecting these two entities. The political hindrances between them do not change

their status as they are siblings. For instance, there exists a resemblance between the Kuki, and Mizo communities in India and the Chin community in Myanmar. The Meiteis/Meeteis in Manipur and the Meiteis/Meeteis in the Kabaw valley of Myanmar also resemble one another, as do the Nagas in both India and Myanmar. The observed similarities, albeit exhibiting subtle differences, can be ascribed to geographical disparities and other pertinent elements that have endured throughout history.

The importance of border trade is intricately linked to the rise of regionalism and India's recognition of the relevance of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region as a cohesive entity. It also underscores the imperative for India to actively engage with the East, rather than merely gazing from a distance. The achievement of the AEP will be realised through the gradual integration of border trade, infrastructure development, connectivity, and people's contacts. The Indian government, as a corollary, consistently engages in proactive measures and allotted millions of rupees. The AEP also incorporates construction activities in Myanmar and Northeast India to further facilitate cross-border trade and improve connectivity. It is imperative that the Northeast states have the overland logistics and infrastructure requirements necessary to support investment and the movement of people and goods across the border to participate in it and become a stakeholder in the AEP. It is also pertinent to realise that the effectiveness of the intra-Northeast transport infrastructure cannot be surpassed. In a nutshell, it is imperative for the national government to make genuine efforts to effectively uphold the maintenance of the National Highways. The same logic applies to the state's obligation to keep its highways in proper maintenance. A portion of unpaved roads has no prospect of improving road conditions in practise, despite being designated as a National Highway on paper (Golmei, 2020). Greater infrastructure connectivity throughout Northeast India will strengthen cross-border production chains, particularly with Southeast Asia and Bangladesh (De, 2020). However, the existing state of road conditions in Northeast India does not adequately support the objectives of the AEP. The synergy between border trade and India's AEP is mutually reliant and significant in bolstering regional connectivity. This necessitates a collaborative effort to overcome existing challenges and promote an integrated and prosperous trajectory.

Conclusion

The strategic position of Northeast India as the gateway to Southeast Asia has progressed from mere geographical observation to a crucial element of India's foreign policy and economic development strategy. This study stipulated an assessment of the multifaceted aspects of Indo-Myanmar border trade, including infrastructure connectivity, cultural interactions, and the challenges encountered in accomplishing the region's potential. The outcome emphasises the imperative requirement for a comprehensive strategy that not only prioritises the enhancement of physical infrastructure and streamlining of trade processes, yet acknowledges and incorporates the socio-cultural affiliations established among people residing on both sides of the border. It reveals a diverse array of historical, economic, cultural, and geopolitical elements that are influential in shaping the current state of affairs. The presented scenario reveals a distinct portrayal of favourable prospects contrasted with obstacles. The current application of the NER as a crucial trade route is still in its nascent

stages, and it is crucial to carefully address the multiple issues that exist, including political instability, insurgency, regulatory complications, and inadequate infrastructure. The region's full potential could be unlocked through strategic investments in human resources, proactive regional cooperation, security assurance, and effective policy implementation. The transition from barter systems to formal trade, in tandem with the pressing requirement for improved connectivity, underscores the complex complexity of achieving the objectives of the AEP. The successful implementation of this initiative necessitates a collaborative effort involving both national and state governments, business enterprises, and civil society. This collective effort requires being meticulously integrated to account for the distinct dynamics ingrained in the region. This review underscores the significance of Northeast India as more than just a gateway, but rather as a dynamic link between India and Southeast Asia. The region has great potential and a crucial role in India's strategic move towards the east. The development of the region is not merely a domestic concern; it is also a key aspect of India's regional integration and international obligations. It is imperative to transcend traditional barriers and establish a more integrated and dynamic Indo-Pacific region, with Northeast India at the centre of growth, connectivity, and cultural harmony. The roadmap is obvious, but complicated. The journey ahead demands more than policies and investments, it requires vision, collaboration, empathy, and a profound comprehension of the intricate tapestry that links India to its eastern neighbours

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