



## **Whither India's Northeast:**

### *Transition from Look East to Act East Policy*

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India's northeast region (NER) comprises of eight small states with a diverse ethno-linguistic population. The region is strategically located sharing over 5300 km of international borders with China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. In early 1990s as a by-product of economic reforms, the Indian government aimed to foster increased economic integration and security cooperation with Southeast Asia as the latter came to be recognized as a key concern for India's national interest. The northeast region was to be the gateway of this outreach and this outlook came to be known as the Look East Policy (LEP).

India realizes that the northeast region, with historical and civilizational ties to the Southeast Asia is key to this policy. However, this region has also been mired in protracted ethnic and separatist conflicts since independence, and while some have been resolved, others continue to fester in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The Look East Policy was to mark a shift from military solutions to thorny issues of nation building in this frontier region to a framework of political accommodation and economic development. The Indian state wished to use trade and commerce to open up this region otherwise connected to rest of the country by a narrow land corridor.

Furthermore, the policy was touted to be a “game changer” for its potential to bring together India, China and the Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The inauguration of the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Initiative is a testament to the opportunities available. The BCIM economic corridor, conceived at the Kunming Initiative, sought to link India’s northeast with the constituent economies, thereby giving India a significant access to Chinese markets. In 2013, PM Manmohan Singh and Chinese Premier discussed the prospects of the proposed initiative and the same year the Kolkata-Dhaka-Mandalay-Kunming car rally was organized. However a closer look at the map would indicate that except two states in the Northeast- Manipur and Tripura- the corridor mostly bypasses the region thereby leaving a big lacuna in the LEP.

However with a change in political dispensation at New Delhi, the policy has received a renewed interest. From merely “looking east,” PM Modi wishes to “act east” and steer an agenda that is result-oriented. Earlier in 2018, India hosted the ASEAN leaders to push for a bilateral trade agreement to the tune of \$100 billion.<sup>2</sup> Another initiative, known as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) that came into being in 1997, has received attention under Modi. BIMSTEC was formed with the aim of facilitating intra-regional integration and shared growth between SAARC and ASEAN members and collectively militate against disruptions caused by globalization. This was also seen as an important platform through which India sought to enhance levels of welfare, infrastructure and development in the northeastern states.

Similarly, since rechristening the policy to Act East Policy (AEP), India has put the Kaladan Multi-Modal project, which aims to connect the landlocked NER to the sea, on a fast track. Upon completion, this project through roadways and waterways will reduce India’s dependency on the narrow corridor that connects the NER with rest of India and hence cut down both cost of transport and time. The route begins from Kolkata through Sittwe port in Myanmar (that India is helping rebuild) to Mizoram, and national highways (NH 54) will further connect Assam and other NE states. This would cut the distance by half.

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<sup>1</sup> Subir Bhaumik, “Look East through Northeast’: Challenges and Prospects for India,” *ORF Occasional Paper* #51 (2014), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/look-east-through-northeast-challenges-and-prospects-for-india/>

<sup>2</sup> Anil Wadhwa, “The North East is key for India’s ties with ASEAN,” *Live Mint*. March 9, 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/o4QSDxyenyvZ0QGwX5mwdL/The-North-East-is-key-for-Indias-ties-with-Asean.html>

To go a step further, it is important that India assesses China's aggressive intervention through trans-national developmental projects bordering the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The Stilwell Road, built in the Second World War period and which connects India with China and Myanmar, has remained closed since. While China is keen to open this route, India is hesitant since it passes through a disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>3</sup> In this light, India has reprioritized road building in this province which involves 1800 km of frontier highway along the Indo-China border (Ziipao, 2018).<sup>4</sup> Again, this will surely boost economic activity and road connectivity along the route.

At the same time some fundamental problems remain in the realization of this vision. As Ziipao argues, creation of physical infrastructure within NER is a prerequisite for AEP to work. Given the particular highland terrain of the region, the Indian state needs to invest in adopt and promote sustainable forms of infrastructure that is both economically productive and ecologically sensitive. Transnational projects, as reiterated by Ziipao, should not merely be concentrated in certain parts of the NER thereby causing inequitable model of growth, the latter being a major reason for conflict in the region. There is a massive incentive to link roads between major urban centres and more rural or remote parts of the region. Road building in the region was primarily a colonial enterprise. Owing to its economic and security imperatives, the British colonial state created modern infrastructure only to the extent that served these purposes. In the NER, this is evident from the fact the hill regions are still lacking in roadways as these areas did not add economic value to the colonial state. Most of these areas were marked as "partially excluded areas" and "excluded areas" whereby laws applicable in other parts of the country were not implemented. Many parts of the region continue to be neglected in the present times due to administrative incapacity and lack of political will. Unless India addresses these internal issues, the NER cannot emerge as a bridge to Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, the Indian state needs to actively involve regional actors as key stakeholders of this policy. This would involve not only taking into confidence political actors, but also influential sections of the civil society, especially among

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<sup>3</sup> Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, "Should the Stilwell Road between India, Myanmar and China be Restored?" *The Wire*, October 13 2016, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-myanmar-china-stilwell-road-restored>.

<sup>4</sup> Raile Rocky Ziipao, "Look/Act East Policy, Roads and Market Infrastructure in North-East India," *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 42, Issue 5 (2018): 476-489.

tribal societies. Goswami rightly observes that the LEP design discouraged historically existing indigenous trades and economic practices.<sup>5</sup> There is a need to move from a technocratic to a more culturally sensitive policy that sees the indigenous population as active economic agents. With historical and cultural ties predating the formation of the Indian state, the AEP should take advantage of ties among borderland communities. The northeast region of India has often been neglected by the Indian state. If India wants its outreach to Southeast Asia to be effective, it will indeed have to prioritize the role of the northeast region within the framework of the Act East Policy.

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<sup>5</sup> Namrata Goswami, "Looking 'East' through India's North East: Identifying Policy Challenges and Identifying Responses," *IDSIA Occasional Paper* No. 2 (2009), [https://idsa.in/occasionalpapers/LookingEastThroughIndiasNorthEast\\_ngoswami\\_2009](https://idsa.in/occasionalpapers/LookingEastThroughIndiasNorthEast_ngoswami_2009).

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