

# North-East India in India's Act East Policy

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**I. Introduction.** In 2014, the Indian government launched the "Act East" policy, which aimed to further strengthen India's engagement with the East and South-east Asia region. This policy included initiatives to enhance connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, and cultural ties with the region. It also involved a greater focus on the strategic importance of the region, particularly in the context of China's growing influence. The Act East Policy is the modified version of India's Look East Policy. The Act East Policy is a continuation of former Look East Policy of India which was introduced by P. V. Narasimha Rao Government in the early years of 1990s.

The Act East Policy places a strong emphasis on the significance of India's North-east and appropriately acknowledges it as the country's entryway to East and South-east Asia. Act East Policy gives the development of the North-eastern area top priority. Five Asian countries share borders with the states of the North-east. Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh all share a lengthy border with Myanmar. With Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Mizoram share an international boundary. Assam, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh all border Bhutan. Thus, the North-East of India serves as a link between South Asia and South-East Asia, two sub-regions of Asia. The location of both might produce the necessary infrastructure for economic expansion and development. In addition to its geographic connections, North-East India has human and natural resource potential. The Act East Policy can be extremely useful in this situation for connecting the North-Eastern Region of India not only to other regions within India but also to foreign countries. Therefore, the Act East Policy also applies to North-East India. Thus, there is a chance for socioeconomic change and growth in this region as a result of the connectivity between North-East India and South-East Asia. Act East Policy gives attention to the development of the North-Eastern region for all of these reasons.

**II. Developmental Programs vis-à-vis North-East India Under the Framework of Act East Policy.** Some of the major ongoing projects which are related to the Act East Policy include Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, Port Connectivity with Thailand and Indonesia, Quick Impact Projects (QIP) under MGC framework, Scholarships and Fellowships, restoration and renovation of heritage cultural sites in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam [CLMV], setting up of Satellite Tracking and Telemetry Centre (TTC) Image Processing Facility in Vietnam, establishment of Centre for Excellence in Software Development and Training in CLMV countries, Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT) in Mandalay and Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE) at Yezin Agricultural University in Nay Pyi Taw, setting up of Centres for Excellence in IT (CEITs) in Fiji, Cook Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Niue and Vanuatu. Government of India has undertaken projects for connectivity of North-eastern states through Myanmar and Bangladesh.

**III. Details of some of the important projects are summarized as follows-**

**Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project:** This project is an important limb of the Act East policy and provides India with crucial access to the region. The objective of the project 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 and provide an alternate route between the landlocked North-East and the rest of India. Ministry of External Affairs is the nodal Ministry for implementation. Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) is the Project Development Consultant (PDC) for this project. Originally, the project was scheduled to be completed by 2014, but end-to-end is expected to be fully operational by March 2023. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) also links Aizawl with Myanmar's Sittwe Port. The project combines an inland waterway and highway project connecting Mizoram with the Bay of Bengal deep seaport in Rakhine state, Myanmar. It aims to develop Sittwe to handle 20,000-ton vessels dredging the River Kaladan from Sittwe to Paletwa, a 158-km-long stretch; and constructing a 109-km-long road that connects Paletwa River terminal to Zorinpui on the Mizoram border, Myanmar.

**ASEAN Highway Project:** The road connection to Southeast Asian countries is also available along with the ASEAN Highway network that can be accessed from the existing NH-39 & NH-

36 of Assam through DIMAPUR –KOHIMA-IMPHAL to reach Myanmar at the border town of Moreh. This route assumes a lot of significance as it has been envisaged to connect Thailand, Laos, Vietnam Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia along with the same highway network. This will definitely change the prevailing status of the economic development of the country. Of the above, 71 km of NH-36 (from km 91/0 to 162/0) has already been developed to two lanes with paved shoulders under SARDP-NE (Phase-A). The route has already been declared as Asian Highway No.1. The 1,360km India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT), will connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The sole aim of IMT, which passes through Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, is to enhance trade in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area.

India's trade with these countries, however, mainly flows through sea routes. As a result, coastal states like Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh etc. are benefitted. The land connectivity between these countries and India through the North Eastern Region fails to earn attention in Look East Policy. Hence, according to the authors, the North-East India although having land borders with ASEAN, failed to realize the benefits. Under the Act East Policy, however, the North-East of India is assumed to play a significant role. The land connectivity between India and ASEAN is recognized. The India-ASEAN physical connectivity projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project can facilitate the North-East India by providing direct trade corridor between the regions. By connecting India and Thailand via Burma, this highway will offer a different path for trade and business between the two nations. By 2024, the project is anticipated to be finished. Via the construction of a 1,360 km motorway that travels through India's northeastern provinces, Myanmar and Thailand will be connected to India. The initiative is anticipated to increase trade and business between ASEAN nations and India. The first part of the three-phase project, from Moreh in Manipur to Kalewa in Myanmar, has been finished. In Myanmar, the second segment from Kalewa to Yargyi is now being built.

**Comprehensive Project for Development of National Waterway (NW)-2 and NW-16 Project:** The Government of India has sanctioned the Inland Water Transport (IWT). Infrastructure on national waterways projects in the North Eastern Region for development of infrastructure on national waterways for a period of five years from 2020-21 to 2024-25.

Government is carrying out development of Inland Water Transport (IWT) projects on National Waterway-2 (River Brahmaputra) from Dhubri to Sadiya (891kms) at the cost of Rs.461 Crore for a period of 5 years (2020-25). The salient features of the projects being taken up are development of navigable fairway with day and night navigation aids and terminals. The development of NW-2 enables waterway connectivity of North East region with Kolkata/Haldia ports via Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route. The major interventions under this project are (i) Construction of Jogighopa Terminal; (ii) Alternative road to Pandu Port; (iii) Ship repair facility at Pandu; and (iv) Construction of Tourist Jetties at Biswanathghat, Jogighopa, Pandu & Neamati.

**Comprehensive Project for development of NW-16&IBP route:** The development of IWT projects on National Waterway-16&IBP route at the cost of Rs.145Crore for a period of 5 years (2020-25) is being carried out with fairway maintenance and Least Available Depth (LAD) along with navigation aids. Action for upgradation of Badarpur and Karimganj terminals including customs and immigration facility at Karimganj terminal has been initiated. The major interventions under this project are (i) Construction of Terminal at Sonamura on Gumti river; (ii) Construction of terminal at Maia on Ganga river; and (iii) Upgradation of Badarpur and Karimganj terminals. In line with the Act East policy, Prime Minister, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways (MoPSW), Govt of India have taken up several infrastructure projects on National Waterway-1, Indo-Bangladesh Protocol route and National Waterway-2, through the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), to improve the connectivity with North Eastern Region (NER) through waterways.

**Trans-Arunachal Highway:** This highway will connect the remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh with the rest of India and will provide access to markets and improve connectivity in the region. The project is expected to be completed by 2022.

**North-East Road Sector Development Scheme:** This scheme aims to improve the road infrastructure in the northeastern states and provide better connectivity within the region and with the rest of India. The project is expected to be completed by 2024.

**Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link:** The Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link is a railway line that will connect Agartala in Tripura, India, with Akhaura in Bangladesh. The railway line will improve

connectivity between Northeast India and Bangladesh and promote trade and tourism in the region. As of March 2023, the Indian government has completed 70% of the work on the project, and the project is expected to be completed by 2023. This project aims to connect the Indian city of Agartala with Akhaura in Bangladesh through a rail link. The project involves the construction of a 15 km rail line between the two cities, and it is expected to boost trade and people-to-people contacts between the two countries.

**Bamboo Development Project:** This project aims to promote the bamboo industry in the northeastern states, which have a high potential for bamboo cultivation. The project will provide employment opportunities to the local population and boost the economy of the region. The project is ongoing and is expected to be completed by 2025.

**Centre for South East Asian Studies:** This centre has been set up at the Gauhati University in Assam to promote research and academic collaboration between India and Southeast Asia. The centre will focus on promoting cultural and academic exchanges between the two regions.

**India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement:** This agreement allows coastal vessels of both countries to ply in each other's waters and carry cargo to and from the northeastern states of India. The agreement is expected to reduce transportation costs and time and boost trade between India and Bangladesh.

**India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline:** The India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline is a 130-kilometer-long pipeline that will connect Siliguri in West Bengal, India, with Parbatipur in Bangladesh. The pipeline will transport diesel from India to Bangladesh and promote energy cooperation between the two countries. As of March 2023, the Indian government has completed 80% of the work on the project, and the project is expected to be completed by 2023.

**Air Connectivity:** The Indian government has been working on improving air connectivity to the northeastern states of India to facilitate tourism and trade. The government has launched the UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik) scheme to promote regional air connectivity, and several airports in the region have been upgraded and new airports are being built.

These projects are at various stages of completion, and their progress is being closely monitored by the Indian government. These projects are expected to bring economic and strategic benefits

to the northeastern states of India and promote closer ties with ASEAN countries. Overall, the Act East Policy has led to significant progress in improving connectivity and promoting trade and tourism in Northeast India. The completion of the above projects is expected to further enhance the region's economic growth and prosperity.

Union Minister of India for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari in October, 2022 announced sanctioning of upcoming new projects worth Rs.1.6 Lakh Crores in North East. At a press conference of the review of NH projects in North East Region in Guwahati, Assam, he said these projects include Roads, Ropeways, RoBs, Major Bridges across River Brahmaputra and other water bodies. Gadkari said Multi Modal logistics parks have been also proposed at Udaipur in Tripura and Silchar in Assam. It needs mention here that on 9 November, 2022 Chief Minister of Assam Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma while interacting with newsmen stated that Union Minister Nitin Gadkari has approved construction of ropeways in 5 places of Assam including Cachar. Gadkari approved construction of ropeway at Bhuvan Hills in Cachar. Gadkari said under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi they are working towards bridging the connectivity gap in North East India and giving momentum to transport infrastructure in the region. The Minister said around 50 Way Side Amenities and 50 View Points are also being developed. Once completed, it would give significant boost to the Tourism sector and economy in North Eastern region. It needs mention here that Silchar MP Dr Rajdeep Roy in June 2020 stated that the Union government has approved a plan to build 34 mega Multi Modal Logistics Parks (MMLP) at an investment of Rs 2 lakh crore. The projects, for which land is already available with state governments, will be taken up through public-private-partnerships (PPP Model). Out of the 34 places earmarked for building the MMLPs, Silchar in Assam has also been selected. In April 2022, MP Dr Roy tweeted, "Reviewed the proposed MMLP (Multi Modal Logistic Park) project site at Borkhola LAC under my Silchar Lok Sabha Constituency with officials, party karyakartas and locals."

**IV. Observations and Conclusion.** There has not been any remarkable outcome of the India's growing engagement with the South East and East Asian countries for North East India yet. Development of economic and security situation in North East India is must and it should be recognised as a key objective of the Act East Policy. North East India is an integral part of the Act East Policy and hence more suitable schemes and project need to be developed. The ongoing

schemes and projects need to be implemented efficiently in a time and budget bound manner. The North East India was mostly disconnected in previous years. It was almost neglected in the implementation of Look East Policy. Hence, the Act East Policy will not realise its full potential unless and until the economic development of North East India is ensured. The Act East Policy should accelerate economic development of the North East and improve the linkages between North East India and neighboring states like Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Act East will not only shifts the engagement paradigm from economic issues to the broader agenda including security cooperation but also envisages up-lifting of Northeast India through multiple linkages. India and Myanmar have recently agreed on the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility, which envisages connectivity between Indian ports on the eastern seaboard and Sittwe Port in Myanmar and then through riverine transport and by road to Mizoram, thereby providing an alternate route for transport of goods to Northeast India. Efforts are also underway to improve infrastructure, particularly road links, at the second India-Myanmar border trade point at Rih-Zowkhathar in Mizoram sector. Apart from developing road links, efforts are underway to have a rail link from Jiribam in Manipur passing through the border town Moreh to Hanoi in Vietnam via Myanmar. With the Ganga Mekong initiative there is potential for direct flights between Guwahati and Ho-Chi Minh city, Imphal and Hanoi. What still remains to be done, however, is the real infrastructure development work at the state level. That is a primary prerequisite for the Northeast to benefit from the Act East Policy. And there is a need to increase trade between India's Northeastern states and the ASEAN countries, given their geographical contiguity. There is also a need to involve the people of this region in any initiative to foster closer ties with the ASEAN countries. The Central government should also take into confidence the Chief Ministers of this region while framing policies as part of India's Act East Policy. Once Northeast India begins to reap the benefits of the Act East Policy, it will also help in the establishment of peace in this militancy-hit region.

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