
Act East Policy: Northeast India as a Strategic Catalyst

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For many years now, since 1992, when it laid its seed and slowly gathered momentum in policy circles, the “Look East” policy has been oft repeated in New Delhi’s strategic and policy circles as one of India’s foremost long-term policy visions to open up its economy for investment and trade with Southeast Asia. Increasingly now, the reference has changed from “Looking East” to “Acting East” by which one would expect that the policy is in its implementation phase. In augmenting the “Act East” policy, the northeast of India emerges, by the criterion of geography, as the region which will act as the ‘strategic catalyst’ or ‘game changer’ in accomplishing the vision that the policy aspires to embolden. Situated between China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and with an international border stretching up to 4,500 km, the region has held the promise of acting as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia for years. Its history vindicates such a role as its people have traded and travelled across the Southeast Asian region and Yunnan for years through the ancient Silk Road, trading in Himalayan salt, spices, handicrafts, food items, silk and other goods. This region witnessed migration of people from Southeast Asia and Yunnan to Assam and its surrounding hills, the most prominent being the Ahoms tracing their roots to the Tai race in

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Yunnan and Thailand. The Ahoms led by Sukapha arrived in Assam in 1228 A.D. and ruled over this region for 600 years. It is significant to note that the Ahoms under Lachit Borphukan successfully prevented Mughal expansion into Assam by defeating the Mughal Army in the much revered Battle of Saraighat of 1671.¹

India has recognised the strategic significance of its northeast with regard to its “Look East/Act East” policy. Several measures were undertaken by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao who envisioned and crafted the policy. First amongst these measures were proposals to build the Asian Highway and Asian Railway Link and natural gas pipeline. The proposed geographical niche for the Asian Highway is the Imphal (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) road going on to the Kalemmyo railway and then to Mandalay in Myanmar. A four-lane Asian Highway is sought between New Delhi-Singapore linked to Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Pen, Bangkok, Vientiane, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalemmyo, Tamu, Dhaka, and Kolkata. Road construction has already started from Tamu to Kalemmyo, Myanmar. There is a plan to construct a 1,360-km trilateral highway from Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Bagan (Myanmar).² Moreh in Manipur is seen as the key to India’s “Look East” policy.³ According to Manipur Chief Minister Ibobi Singh, “Moreh is the most strategic international trading point in the region”.⁴ His view was reiterated by former External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee during his visit to the region in June 2007.⁵

On November 29, 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during a visit to the northeastern region of India, tweeted on how he was eagerly looking forward to attending a wide variety of programmes and connecting with the people of the northeast. Invoking *Vaastushastra* (the Indian traditional system of harmonising energies for architecture) to highlight the importance of the northeast wing of a house for the prosperity of its occupants, Modi dreamt big for the region as India’s

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gateway to Asia in the 21st “Asian Century”. In a whirlwind tour covering Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, the Prime Minister coined a new acronym: NEZ, or Natural Economic Zone, and called for the region to be developed through economic corridors to Southeast Asia. Modi announced a slew of much needed projects, including scholarships for students, a national sports university, agricultural colleges, upgraded power and digital connectivity

and new railway lines. He addressed regional police chiefs, waved off the first train from Guwahati to Meghalaya, laid the foundation stone of the first railway line to Mizoram and inaugurated a power plant in Tripura. With a nearly US\$10 billion budgetary allocation for the northeastern region, Modi's focus is on infrastructure, both within India and on projects linking the northeast regionally, including the road from Imphal to Mandalay in Myanmar. During his visit to Myanmar, preceding the northeast India visit, Modi had highlighted in the 12th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Summit on November 12, 2014, the significance of regional connectivity for economic prosperity through projects like the Kaladan-Multi Modal Transit Transport Facility, and so forth.⁶

On the surface, the various agreements, and bilateral and multilateral frameworks appear poised to succeed. The incentives for increased trade are enormous, given the contiguous landscape, common lifestyles between the peoples overlapping borders as well as the promises of a better life once the Asian highway and railway are set in place. There are, however, a few pressing challenges, which have to be dealt with simultaneously for the people of the northeast to truly benefit from a massive opening up to

Southeast Asia. At present, the greatest impediment to the development of the northeast is the challenge of armed ethnic insurgencies.

This article is primarily geared towards filling this critical policy gap: to identify and list out the challenges as well as outline the plausibly best policy response. In the light of that backdrop, the following questions are addressed in the article.

- What are the policy measures that have been undertaken under the aegis of the “Look East” or “Act East” policy concerning the northeast?
- What are the challenges facing the Centre and especially the states towards implementing the “Act East” policy?
- What could be the best policy responses to these challenges?

The article is divided into three sections. The first section highlights the measures undertaken under the Look East/Act East policy for the northeast. The second section highlights the policy challenges with regard to the implementation process of the “Look East/Act East” policy. The third section offers certain policy responses to these challenges.

Look East/Act East and Northeast: Measures Underway

Several measures have been undertaken under the aegis of the “Look East/Act East” policy to uplift northeast India. First amongst these measures has been a proposal to build the Asian Highway and Asian Railway Link and the natural gas pipeline, as mentioned earlier. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility aimed at establishing connectivity between Indian ports on the eastern side and Sittwe port in Myanmar through a riverine transport corridor and road in Mizoram is envisaged as providing an alternate trade route to the northeast.⁷ For purposes of Burmese gas transfer through the northeast, India is investing \$100 million in improving the old colonial Burmese port of Sittwe on the west Burmese coast.⁸ It is expected that with deeper ties between

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these countries, the largely illegal flow of goods through Moreh (Manipur) into other northeastern states from Southeast Asia will become legalised.⁹ In this context, it is arguably possible for the northeastern states to develop individual economic relations with, for instance, Thailand or Vietnam. Many analysts are of the firm belief that this kind of a two-way model will create a truly federal system of democracy in India.

The region could benefit immensely from water sharing. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Kunming Initiative have been undertaken by India and China respectively to reach out to ASEAN.¹⁰ The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation was launched by India on November 10, 2000, at Vientiane, Laos, to boost cooperation in tourism, culture and education. The signatories were India, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.¹¹ These countries agreed to undertake joint transportation projects, including the trans-Asian highway. This initiative is India's most significant venture in the region. The best part about the Mekong initiative is that it has the potential for direct flights between Guwahati- Ho Chi Minh City-Imphal-Hanoi. For China, the Kunming Initiative linking the Chinese province of Yunnan with Myanmar, India's northeastern states, and Thailand, holds promise of greater economic interaction. Northeast India, by reviving its old historical, cultural and traditional ties with Southeast Asia will profit, if one is to take a hint from other significant trans-border linkages like those of Basque, Catalonia, and Ireland, where the European Union allows "transnational politics of recognition", which empowers them from a marginalised existence in their own states.¹² In this context, the old Stillwell Road connecting Margherita-Ledo in

Assam through Myanmar's Hukawng and Magaung valleys to the Yunnan province in China, built by Joseph Stillwell and the 14th Allied Army during World War II could be a potential road link.¹³

On July 02, 2008, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released the *North-Eastern Region Vision 2020*, a document which identified various challenges as well as the strategies required to bring about peace and prosperity in the northeastern region by 2020. In one of its chapters, *Vision 2020* specifies the benefits of the "Look East" policy for the

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northeast. According to the *Vision*, "the LE (Look East) policy should be an important factor in promoting economic ties of the NER (North-Eastern Region) States with its neighbours with a view to ending its economic isolation".¹⁴ The document posits that since the people of the northeast share cultural ties with the Southeast Asian countries and China, strengthening relations with them is going to assist development.¹⁵ Some of the recommendations of the *Vision Document* include the removal of restrictions on border trade via Moreh, Nathu La, and other entry points; unrestricted trade with neighbouring countries in agriculture and meat products; activating of land customs stations; and integrating IT facilities in promoting trade with the ASEAN countries.¹⁶

The bottom line for outlining the several measures and the *Vision Document 2020* is to bring home the fact that there has been an effort at the conception and policy levels to craft the idea of "Acting East" via the northeast. This by itself is laudable. However, any field visit to the northeast region, especially the areas which have been identified as gateways via land to Southeast Asia, starkly reveals a completely

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different reality that counters the rosy picture portrayed by the “Act East” policy. The roads are non-existent; the markets dilapidated; there is hardly any respectable financial transfer system or trade outlet for serious trading in border towns; and economic activity is at best illegal and haphazard with no predictable charts to help businesses from Southeast Asia plot their investment plans. The next section will identify the policy challenges facing the implementation process of the “Act East” policy. The idea behind this

exercise is to outline the challenges so that they can be meaningfully addressed.

Policy Challenges

Issues of Infrastructure and Lack of Local Support: The “Look East/Act East” policy was largely conceptualised at New Delhi in the 1990s, primarily as a response to the vacuum created in Indian foreign policy with the sudden demise of the Soviet Union. In that light, the policy was originally crafted more as a response by India to the systemic changes in international politics rather than a policy aimed primarily at uplifting its rather backward northeastern region. The idea that the northeast could be the prop for the Southeast Asian-Indian economic linkage was pushed to the back stage in the early years. Once it was realised around 2000 that the “Look East” policy was a viable way to develop the northeast, policy/decision-makers started arguing for a proactive engagement of northeast India with Southeast Asia. However, the idea has not yet fired the imagination of the local people across the states since they were/

are not briefed clearly about the policy by the state actors. Significantly, India's conceptualisation of the "Act East" policy has no room for the unique local ways of doing trade. The trade envisioned is of a high order, which ethnic societies are ill equipped to handle.¹⁷ Worse still, when policy-makers and crafters of the *North-Eastern Vision* talk about great industrial exchange between the northeast and Myanmar and further towards Southeast Asia, it appears absurd as there is no industry in Myanmar.¹⁸ Even with regard to border trade, the Indo-Myanmar trade agreement of 1994 does not provide for trade in agricultural goods, and, hence, it does not account for the needs of the northeast, which is heavily dependent on agriculture.¹⁹ Further, there are far too many administrative restrictions on trade, with no motorised vehicles allowed for border trade, which is restricted to barter trade under the Reserve Bank of India barter mechanisms and subjected to strict customary documentation.²⁰ Hence, trade can only be conducted by the border residents.

Added to this is the state of roadways all across the northeast. The NH-39 (envisioned as Asian Highway 1) appears more like a primitive potholed road than one maintained by the state Public Works Department.²¹ Road connectivity to towns and villages gets completely cut off during the monsoon months of April-August due to rains and landslides. The railways face equally hazardous conditions and it has become a routine affair for railway bridges in the northeast to collapse during the rains (some of these bridges date back to the British colonial period). The road to Moreh and Champai, significant border towns for potentially huge border trade in the future, are in worse conditions.

The Crisis of Insurgency: Almost all the states in this geographical area, barring Sikkim, Mizoram, and, to a large extent, Meghalaya and Tripura, suffer from militant violence. Meghalaya is, however, infested by militants belonging to the National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) and United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), and small arms are routed in through the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border into

other states of the northeast.²² Assam is affected by armed groups like the ULFA, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)-Songbijit faction who routinely use violence in the strategic corridor of Kokrajhar district connecting the northeast to the rest of India. Manipur, where the border town of Moreh is situated, is affected by nearly 32 insurgent groups, including the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, the People's Liberation Army of Manipur, the Kuki National Army (KNA), etc; these armed groups impose illegal taxes on local businesses and people, and collect them by coercive methods. Across the border in Nagaland, the NSCN-IM, NSCN-Khaplang (NSCN-K) and NSCN-Khole-Kitovi factions levy enormous taxes on business establishments and extort money from the common people. In such a situation, where the state is unable to provide basic security to the people, one should question the logic of the "Act East" policy being implemented based on such weak state foundations.²³

The States' Incapacities: At the level of states, institutions like the North-Eastern Council (NEC) and the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) have been given the responsibility to facilitate the opening of the northeastern states to Southeast Asia. However, the present functioning of both bodies is not optimal. People are forced to settle for sub-optimal results and lacklustre development projects. Local industries rarely function in an efficient manner and have failed to empower the locally skilled people. An example is the Fruits Preservation Factory in Haflong, the headquarters of the Dima Hasau district in Assam. For nearly 19 years since 1996, this factory has not been functioning. Earlier, the factory used to make locally produced fruit juices and fruit preserves, providing a constant source of livelihood to the local people. However, neither could the district administration provide it with a stable flow of funds nor did the state government ever send an inspection team to find out why the factory had stopped functioning.²⁴

Financially, northeast India is in a dismal condition with regard to

locally generated revenues in order to sustain a decent living for the locals. The union government contributes nearly Rs 35,000 crore every year for a population of say 32 million: 85 per cent of Arunachal Pradesh's funds is given by the Centre, Assam is provided 51 per cent of central funds; Manipur, 80 per cent; Meghalaya, 70 per cent; Nagaland, 80 per cent, Sikkim, 40 per cent; Tripura, 72 per cent and Mizoram, 70 per cent. Therefore, the ideas of local financial autonomy and future burgeoning local trade with

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Southeast Asia are far-fetched. Indeed, without generating enough local resources, it will prove difficult for most of these states to suddenly hope for redemption across the mountains from Southeast Asia for their economic development. In Sikkim, 2006 witnessed the opening of the Nathu La Pass for increased trade with China.²⁵ However, during a visit to the Nathu La, Sikkim, in 2002, it was observed that the roads were narrow, mountainous and steep and one could not really envision heavy trucks passing through those narrow lanes at regular intervals carrying high volumes of goods. Therefore, the opening of Nathu La was more symbolic and should, rather be viewed through the larger geo-political prism of Indo-Chinese relations than as a precursor to increased trading activities across the India-China border. Most of the present trade between India, China and Southeast Asia is conducted through the sea route, a cheaper and by far easier means of transportation.

Best Policy Responses

In the current age of economic interdependence and growing global connectivity, it is progressive to envision opening of borders for greater

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trade and transit facilities. Legalising border trade can bring about a great deal of thaw in neighbourly relations (India and China) as well as create convergence of ideas for common development. However, as pointed out in the previous section, there are challenges at present, which are, however, not permanent conditions in the geographic space termed

the northeast.²⁶ It is, therefore, pertinent to start with a smaller set of policy ideas as effective interception points to overcome the challenges.

A few policy suggestions are as follows:

- The first important step is to build up the population skill base. If one is to go by the *Census of India 2011* data, in another 15-20 years, the population of the region will be dominated by the age group 19-20 and a strong pool base of 35-50 years. Consequently, the second population base (35-50), which is in their 20s and 30s now, should be inculcated with vocational, entrepreneurial and managerial skills so that the northeast's dependency on skilled population from other parts of India is decreased.
- The literacy rate of most northeastern states, except Mizoram, is below the national average of 74 percent. In order to increase the literacy rate and ensure that the rate of college dropouts decreases, the education system must be made vocation-centric and not just limited to impartation of theoretical knowledge at the graduate level. Most importantly, the primary school educational system must be improved so that children are imparted the right educational skills in the beginning. The level of English education must be improved.
- The roadways suffer due to precarious weather conditions. Given the nature of the terrain, the roads need to be maintained on a monthly basis. What could be done is to set up small village level bodies, which utilise local labour to keep the roads functioning.

- At the rate insurgency is operating in the northeast, with the consequent extortion rackets, it is almost impossible to get local entrepreneurs started without giving insurgent groups a sizeable part of the income to guarantee security. The state authorities need to crack down on the parallel governments run by the insurgent groups by activating state institutions and ensuring basic security.²⁷

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- Border areas have to be made safe from violence, extortion, smuggling rackets, drugs and arms transfers. There is an urgent requirement to increase well trained and effective border policing.
- Moreh serves as a point of cross-border activities for the insurgent groups and drugs flows. Northeast India has many HIV/AIDS patients due to drug abuse, with Manipur having the highest numbers. In this context, the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and the International Narcotic Control Board have warned about the northeast becoming a hub for the drug mafia as the routes along the border are not adequately checked. Unless the border areas are made secure by additional special units and trained drug control bodies, normal trade may remain a distant possibility.
- The trade between Southeast Asia and the northeast is on the decline. Officials claim that border trade through Champai (Mizoram) has dropped to 20 per cent and through Moreh (Manipur), to 10 per cent. The problem stems from the trading items on the list of goods to be traded. For instance, the Indo-Myanmar Border Traders' Union (IMBTU) had requested the inclusion of more trade items, especially those in demand in Myanmar's market.

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At present, under the Indo-Myanmar pact of 1994, the 22 items allowed do not enjoy local patronage. The union government needs to do a realistic assessment of the goods to be traded, especially those that are required across the border like locally made textiles and woven tribal items.

- In order to facilitate easy movement of people and goods, the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 and the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) required for foreigners to gain entry to states like Arunachal, Manipur, Nagaland, etc, must be revoked

on a permanent basis. Such regulations contradict the grand vision of opening up via the “Act East” policy.

In conclusion, it can be argued that in the present age of globalisation, no region in the world can remain immune from outside influence or from opening itself up. Towards this end, the resolution of all internal issues has become a prime imperative to prepare the region for its role as India’s “Gateway to Asia in the 21st Asian Century.” The immediate challenge is to provide a personal leadership to resolve the festering issues that have long plagued the region. What needs to be done now is a follow through, with binding political and administrative decisions to secure the region and ensure harmony amongst its multitude of ethnic groups and communities to truly becoming “India’s gateway” to a share of prosperity in this “Asian Century”. This would require a different conceptualisation than just state-driven approaches based on a “synthetic” sense of unity. Rather, it will require the meeting of cultures, of peoples, of hearts, of a feeling that being part of the “Indian dream” is truly emancipating

for individuals and for ethnic communities. It will require a sense of organic natural unity in diversity, not something forced down from Delhi, but something spontaneous, lively, and inspiring.

Notes

1. For more on cross-border history, see Thant Myint-U, *Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia Where China Meets India* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. 225-247.
2. See *North-Eastern Region Vision 2020*, Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region and North-Eastern Council, Agartala, May 13, 2008, p. 275; also see, Namrata Goswami, "Looking 'East' Through India's North-East", *IDSA Occasional Paper*, No.2, June 2009, pp. 5-30.
3. Field visit by the author to Moreh, Manipur, August 09-12, 2008; Moreh was showcased as the connecting links in interviews with local communities, including the Kuki Hill Tribal Council, representing the major Kuki tribe in that area, the Moreh Chambers of Commerce, the Tamil Sangam, local policy-makers as well as security personnel.
4. Graham Lees, "Burma is the Key to India's 'Look East' Economic Strategy", July 19, 2007, available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=941>
5. Speech by Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee, cited in Avtar Singh Bhasin, ed., *India's Foreign Relations-2007 Documents, Part II*, Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs (New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2007), p. 1479.
6. "Remarks by the PM at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit", Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, November 12, 2014 available at <http://www.narendramodi.in/remarks-by-the-pm-at-the-12th-india-asean-summit-nay-pyi-taw-myanmar/>
7. For more on the Kaladan project, see Ashok B. Sharma, "India, Myanmar Expects Kaladan Project to Increase Border Trade", *The Financial Express*, April 04, 2008, available at <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/India-Myanmar-expects-Kaladan-project-to-increase-border-trade/292285/>
8. Ibid. Also see Eric Draitser, "Race on for Ports, Pipelines in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, March 28, 2013 available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-280313.html
9. Jairam Ramesh, "North-East India in a New Asia", *Manipur Online*, available at, <http://www.manipuronline.com/NorthEast/January2006/northeastindia12>
10. Chandrajit Banerjee, "Let's Flow Along with the Mekong", *The Hindu Business Line*, November 18, 2013 at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/lets-flow-along-with-the-mekong/article5364665.ece>
11. For more details, see Chandan Irom, "What Happened to India's Look East Policy: The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation", available at <http://www.manipuronline.com/Features/January2002/mekongganga19.htm>
12. Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

13. See “Stillwell’s Road” available at <http://www.chindit.net/stillwell.html>
14. *North-Eastern Region Vision 2020*, n. 2, p. 271.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 285-86.
17. Author’s interview with H. Mate, Vice President, Hill Tribal Council, Moreh, Manipur, August 14, 2008.
18. *Ibid.*
19. “Barter Trade with Myanmar under the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement”, Reserve Bank of India, October 16, 2000 available at <http://rbdocs.rbi.org.in/rdocs/notification/PDFs/16423.pdf>
20. “Barter Trade with Myanmar under the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement” available at http://www.rbi.org.in/scripts/BS_ECMNotificationUserView.aspx?Id=266
21. Field visit by the author in August 2008 and in March 2012.
22. Field visit conducted by the author in July 2007 and in January 2008; the area around Nongrill Hills, Shillong, Meghalaya hosts many NSCN (IM) functionaries.
23. Namrata Goswami, “Where Armed Insurgents Roam About Freely”, *The Hindu*, December 31, 2014.
24. The author’s visit to the Food Preservation Cottage Industry, July 18, 2007, Haflong, Assam.
25. Nathu La, situated at a height of 14, 420 ft was known as the ancient Silk Route between India and China. Both countries have identified Changgu in Sikkim and Renqinggang in autonomous region of Tibet as trade markets. The *North-East Vision 2020* asserts that the road from Gangtok to Nathu La is being expanded to accommodate container traffic with a funding from the Centre of Rs 18.88 crore in 2006-2008 (see *North-Eastern Region Vision 2020*, n. 2, p. 278); 44 trade items are allowed through Nathu La Pass like agricultural implements, blankets, copper, textiles, cycles, coffee, tea, barley, rice, flour, dry and fresh vegetables, oil, jaggery, cigarettes, local herbs, spices, watches, shoes, goat skin, yak tail and hair, butter, etc, with a transaction value of Rs 25,000 per day.
26. The author disagrees with arguments which assert that the term northeast equates all states into one common homogenous sphere. To the author’s mind, such arguments are spurious because the term “northeast” indicates a common geographic space as one designates the West or the ‘Middle East’. Yet we are all aware of the acute sense of difference between France and Germany. Only the misinformed will believe that the northeast is a culturally homogenous entity.
27. Interview with Jacintha Lazarus, IAS, Sub-Divisional Officer, Chandel District Headquarters, Manipur, August 19, 2008.