



Research Article

Re-examining the Implication of Act East Policy in Northeast India: Narratives and Challenges

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Cite as: Inkah, S. (2023). Re-examining the Implication of Act East Policy in Northeast India: Narratives and Challenges, Dera Natung Government College Research Journal, 8, 126-140.

<https://doi.org/10.56405/dngcrj.2023.08.01.09>

Received on: 25.09.2023,

Revised on: 31.10.2023,

Accepted on: 04.11.2023,

Available online: 26.12.2023.

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Abstract: This article provides a brief analysis of the Act East Policy in relation to its implementation in northeast India. It does so by exploring the key narratives of the policy, including economic integration, strategic partnerships, connectivity, infrastructure development, cultural exchanges, and engagement in regional multilateralism. It also highlights some of the challenges surrounding the policy, such as limited economic benefits, infrastructure challenges, concerns about China's influence, a perceived lack of a people-centric approach, and environmental issues.

Keywords: Act East Policy, Northeast India, Southeast Asia, Trade and Development, Indo-Pacific.

I. Introduction

The Act East Policy is characterized by an expansion and intensification of India's involvement with the region. This expansion involves a shift from its original geographical focus on Southeast Asia to encompass a larger area, which now includes East Asia and extends to the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, there has been intensification in the Policy's scope, moving beyond its initial emphasis on economic integration to encompass more significant political engagement and security cooperation (Bajpae, 2017, p.49). Chietigj Bajpae contends that the different stages of the Look East Policy are primarily based on domestic political discourse rather than actual shifts in foreign policy. New government's aim is to distinguish their policy approaches from previous administrations. This highlights that a significant portion of the rhetoric surrounding the Look East Policy is more about aspirations than an accurate representation of India's engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era (Bajpae, 2017, p.349, 364). The renewed vision to seek closer relations with countries in India's extended eastern neighbourhood was essentially India's response to domestic economic challenges and



the changing international order, marked by a unipolar world brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Chakravarty, 2018, p.59).

The Act East Policy (AEP) which was introduced in 2014 builds upon the Look East Policy, which was launched in the early 1990s with a focus on engaging with Southeast Asian countries. The objective of the "Act East Policy" is to enhance economic cooperation, political and cultural ties, and strategic relationships with countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania. The goal is to achieve this through continuous involvement in various dimensions, including bilateral, regional, and multilateral efforts. These efforts are intended to enhance connectivity between the northeastern region of India and neighboring countries. Additionally, the strategy involves seeking out alternative business partners beyond the conventional ones. And to strengthen relations with ASEAN nations, this approach relies on the three Cs: Culture, Connectivity, and Commerce. This means that it places a significant emphasis on cultural exchanges, improved infrastructure connectivity, and promoting economic trade and cooperation as key pillars in building stronger relationships with ASEAN (Sarma and Sarma, 2021). The Act East Policy has made significant progress in recent years with increased economic cooperation, cultural ties, and the establishment of strategic relationships with countries in the region (MEA, 2021-2022, p.22).

In 2018, Narendra Modi emphasized the significance of the Act East Policy, highlighting that the northeastern region is central to its implementation (Jacob and Uttam, 2018). The Policy gives particular importance to the northeast of India and serves as a link between this region and the ASEAN region (PIB, 2015). Addressing this subject, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh emphasized the Pradhan Mantri Gati Shakti Master Plan's role in improving infrastructure in the northeast, including roads, railways, and waterways. He acknowledged advancements in the telecom sector and pledged to expand IT and telecom facilities in the region. The minister underscored the government's commitment to holistic development, covering areas like healthcare, education, environment, sports, rural development, employment, and small-scale industries in the northeast (Anand, 2022). This article attempts to elucidate the underlying narratives of the Act East Policy and the challenges encountered in the execution of India's foreign policy, which has direct implications for the northeastern region. The methodology employed in this article is fashioned on qualitative study, based on review of existing literature, online resources, and government documents.

II. Institutional Support to the Act East Policy

The Act East Policy is a multifaceted strategic initiative that involves the coordinated efforts of various government institutions. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) plays a central role in advancing this policy

by spearheading diplomatic efforts and negotiations with East Asian countries, facilitating dialogue, building relationships, and representing India's interests in the region. Meanwhile, within the Act East Policy framework, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry takes on the primary responsibility for trade and economic relations. This involves identifying economic collaboration opportunities, eliminating trade barriers, and promoting business engagements with East Asian countries. These efforts contribute significantly to enhancing economic ties and cooperation, which are fundamental aspects of the policy's objectives.

Financial institutions, such as the Export-Import Bank of India (EXIM) Bank, play a crucial role in supporting international trade and investment activities. They provide financial and credit assistance to Indian businesses and entrepreneurs seeking to engage in trade with East Asian countries. This support facilitates cross-border business transactions and fosters economic cooperation, which is integral to the success of the Act East Policy. Conversely, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is responsible for promoting cultural exchanges between India and East Asian nations. This involves organizing cultural events, facilitating educational exchanges, and nurturing cultural diplomacy, ultimately enhancing cultural ties, fostering people-to-people connections, and deepening mutual understanding between India and East Asian countries. Cultural diplomacy constitutes a significant element of the Act East Policy, contributing to stronger relations and goodwill.

In the context of the northeastern region, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) concentrates on the development of the states located in the region by implementing projects and initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure, boosting the economy, and enhancing social development. The Ministry plays a critical role in improving connectivity and unlocking the economic potential of the northeastern states, aligning with the Act East Policy's goal of enhancing connectivity between India and East Asian countries. The above institutions work in synergy contributing to the Act East Policy's objectives, including regional integration and enhanced economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations.

International institutions also play crucial roles in facilitating regional cooperation and providing platforms for engagement that align with the objectives of the Act East Policy. India is actively engaged with various regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), East Asia Summit (EAS), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Policy emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN in domestic initiatives like infrastructure, trade, urban development, and "Make in India." Additionally, connectivity projects, space collaboration, and people-to-people exchanges are viewed as key drivers for

regional integration and prosperity. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) provides financial and technical assistance for infrastructure development and supports projects aligned with the Act East Policy's goals of regional connectivity and economic integration (PIB, 2015). While these international organizations may not explicitly endorse the Act East Policy, they provide platforms, forums, and resources that support the policy's goals of promoting economic integration, connectivity, and regional cooperation between India and East Asian nations.

III. Setting the Narratives

The Act East strategy is progressively setting itself apart from the Look East Policy (LEP) due to its expanded geographical reach and heightened strategic significance. This broader geographical scope and the extension beyond Southeast Asia likely stem from India's recognition that a strategic vision for Southeast Asia can be aligned with a comparable vision for East Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region (Palit, 2016, p.89). According to M. Ganapathi, the "Look East" approach represents a passive and preliminary outline, whereas "Act East" signifies a more active and dynamic engagement (Ganapathi, 2015, p.66). The Act East Policy, although not explicitly detailed in an official Indian government document like a white paper, can be determined through the prominent features highlighted in speeches given by senior officials. However, the Act East Policy has sometimes been overshadowed by various interconnected strategic initiatives and concepts, such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, embraced not only by India but also by other countries like Japan and the United States, including collaborations like the QUAD (Jaishankar, 2019).

The Policy is focussed on action-oriented approaches and aims to enhance economic integration, forge strategic partnerships, improve connectivity and infrastructure, foster cultural exchanges, with countries in the Indo-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, thereby providing enhanced connectivity in its broadest sense, including political, economic, cultural and people to people relations (MEA, 2023). The Policy emphasizes enhancing connectivity between the northeast and ASEAN countries through trade, culture, people-to-people interactions, and various infrastructure projects, such as the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, Rhi-Tiddim Road Project, and Border Haats (PIB, 2015).

The Act East Policy emphasizes the importance of physical infrastructure, including roads, railways, ports, and air connectivity, as well as digital connectivity and institutional frameworks for regional cooperation. At the regional level, the government is actively developing transportation infrastructure in the northeast, including projects such as National Waterway (NW)-1 on the Ganges, National Waterway-2 on the

Brahmaputra, National Waterway-16 on Barak, the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP), and a multimodal hub in Guwahati with ship repair facilities, tourist jetties, and floating terminals. The ongoing Eastern Waterways Connectivity Transport Grid project aims to provide seamless connectivity within the region and beyond, offering around 5,000 kilometers of navigable waterways (Law, 2023).

Additionally, the government has approved the following projects- NW-2 (Dhubri-Sadiya stretch of river Brahmaputra) at the cost of Rs.461 Crore; and NW-16 (river Barak) and Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route at the cost of Rs.145 Crore to enhance the Inland Water Transport (IWT) infrastructure on National Waterways in the North Eastern Region (NER) for a duration of 5 years, from 2020-21 to 2024-25 (PIB, 2022). And the government has also announced investments worth Rs 1,34,200 crore for rail, road, and air connectivity projects in northeast India to enhance infrastructural connectivity (PIB, 2022; Outlook, 2022). The Central Sector Scheme has sanctioned various projects in recent years which has to be implemented by the respective state governments, including the Loktak Inland Water Transport Project-II (Manipur), the development of Inland Water Transport on the Khawthlangtuipui-Tuichawng river (Mizoram), and the establishment of a linkage with the Meghna river system in Bangladesh by developing the Gumti River in Tripura (PIB, 2022).

Under the NDA government, road construction in the northeast experienced significant growth. The daily average of laying national highways increased from 0.6 km under the UPA government to 1.5 km between 2014-2019, reaching an all-time high. Moreover, various central agencies, including the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and the Border Roads Organization (BRO), constructed a total of 2,731 km of national highways across the eight northeastern states during the same period (Outlook, 2022). In April 2023, Union Home Minister Amit Shah paid a visit to Kibithoo, known as "India's first village," situated near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh. During his visit, he launched the Vibrant Village Programme (VVP), which seeks to promote the idea of staying in one's native village, thereby reversing the trend of out migration and contributing to border security (The Hindu, 2023). However, Rajiv Sikri opined that developing infrastructure within the state should be prioritized over establishing a road connection with China as this may result in an increase in Chinese goods in Arunachal Pradesh. Investment in remote region infrastructure should be viewed strategically rather than solely as economic ventures, indicating the need for a mindset shift in India (Strachan et al., 2009). In April 2023, Union Minister L. Murugan visited some of the border villages in Nagaland and announced the construction of a two-lane road connecting Meluri in Phek district to Avangkhu along the India-Myanmar border (Outlook, 2023). Such constructive policy and infrastructure intervention are desirable in the border areas.

The northeast and Southeast Asia is linked through various geographical and cultural connections. Mani Shankar Aiyar highlighted that northeast India is where South-East Asia begins (Sinha, 2007). The Act East Policy also put emphasis on cultural diplomacy and leveraging India's soft power to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian countries. The Act East Policy has effectively promoted educational collaborations, exemplified by initiatives like the India-ASEAN Scholarships program, Study in India scheme etc. thereby providing a conducive environment for fostering academic partnerships. This encompasses collaborative research endeavors, joint projects, and faculty exchanges involving universities and research institutions in India and ASEAN nations. Moreover, to facilitate cultural interaction and celebrate the multifaceted traditions and art forms in both regions, a range of activities, including the ASEAN-India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Ramayana Festival, Northeast India Festival, various art exhibitions, musical and dance performances, film festivals, and academic conferences are regularly organized.

For the northeastern states, the Policy represents an opportunity to attract investments, stimulate trade, and foster economic growth. However, the responses can vary among states based on their geographical locations, and interests and internal dynamics. Those involved in sectors such as export-import, manufacturing, and services perceive potential benefits in terms of improved market access, job opportunities, and business expansion. The Act East Policy has also facilitated increased cross-border trade opportunities for the northeastern states through initiatives like the establishment of border *haats* in International Trade Centers (ITC), Integrated Check Post (ICP), the development of new trade routes, and the enhancement of border checkpoints. These measures have eased the movement of goods and created favorable trade prospects, benefiting various industries such as agriculture, horticulture, textiles, and handicrafts. The people in the northeast anticipate job prospects and initiatives for skill development and capacity-building programs that can improve their livelihoods and living standards.

The Act East Policy has strengthened India's ties with regional institutions such as ASEAN, East Asia Summit, ARF, Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, BIMSTEC etc. For Instance, the ASEAN-India Agreement on Trade in Services and Investments was implemented in 2015, promoting economic cooperation. India also invited ASEAN countries to join the International Solar Alliance. India is aligning its security interests with partners and working on counterterrorism, regional peace, and maritime security based on international norms and laws (PIB, 2015). These platforms provide opportunities for India to collaborate with regional partners on common challenges and opportunities. However, the degree of success in terms of enhancing regional integration and addressing geopolitical challenges is an ongoing process.

The Policy has bolstered India's strategic influence in the Asia-Pacific region, providing a counterbalance to China's influence and promoting regional integration. Furthermore, it has diversified India's economic partnerships and positively impacted the development of the northeastern states. India and China employ strategic hedging and balancing strategies in the regional context, with the Act East Policy serving as India's counterbalance to China's influence. While diplomatic engagement and security cooperation are pursued, effectively countering China remains a complex challenge. Both countries have overlapping strategic interests in Southeast and East Asia. India's Act East Policy competes with China's initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic corridors in Southeast Asia. The policies reflect a level of rivalry and geopolitical competition. The BRI involves substantial Chinese investments, while India's Act East Policy relies on government funding, partnerships, and bilateral agreements (Wang, 2023; PIB, 2022). Despite the competition, collaboration between the BRI and AEP is possible on specific projects.

India is a strong advocate for an Indo-Pacific region that is characterized by freedom, openness, and inclusivity, and one that is built upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based framework (De, 2020). Through the Act East Policy, the strategic partnership between India and Japan has also reached unprecedented heights, emphasizing the significance of Indo-Pacific cooperation. Shyam Saran (2020) commented that a credible Indo-Pacific strategy necessitates meaningful engagement with ASEAN and East Asian nations, rather than solely relying on security partnerships in the region and should also prioritize a robust economic dimension. Overall, the Act East Policy has enhanced India's global image and contributed to a proactive and dynamic role in the region. However, challenges remain in addressing trade imbalances and diversifying exports.

IV. Challenges in Implementing the Act East Policy in Northeast India

The northeast region has long been neglected in terms of effective policy. This is partly because it is geographically isolated and has been seen as perpetually peripheral to the rest of India. Policymakers have often oversimplified the region's complex conflicts as mere law and order problems, further contributing to this neglect (Das, 2010, p.344). The region is characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity, which, coupled with policy shortcomings, has fuelled insurgencies and militant movements. This has negatively impacted security, hindering development and regional connectivity (Sahni, 2019, p.118). The ambitious Act East Policy (AEP) is susceptible to policy and implementation difficulties, which manifest both on an international and regional scale. And one of the main criticisms is the presence of implementation gaps, where there is a disparity between the policy's ambitious objectives and its actual execution. Critics argue that the Policy lacks a clear and comprehensive roadmap, concrete action plans, a coherent strategy, and effective

coordination among different government departments, asserting that the Policy primarily prioritizes high-level diplomatic engagements and does not adequately address concerns such as trade barriers, connectivity challenges, and cultural understanding. And various societal groups perceive the LEP/AEP as an externally mandated developmental endeavor that has the potential to transform the Northeast region into a mere conduit for regional trade and logistics (Barua, 2020). Although the Modi government successfully improved regional institutional cooperation, capabilities, and connectivity, numerous Act East projects have faced delays and remain in the conceptual stage. Nevertheless, the Act East Policy (AEP) has established an ideological foundation for Modi's overarching goal of challenging China's regional dominance (Roy, 2022, p. 43). Sanjay Baru pointed out that Indian diplomacy must take a fresh look at its Southeast Asia policy and the constraints being imposed on it by unsatisfactory economic performance and sectarian and communal politics at home (Baru, 2021).

The Act East Policy has faced limitations in achieving tangible outcomes such as trade expansion, investment flows, and infrastructure development. Inadequate infrastructure, including transport connectivity such as road, airports, ports, railway etc. and logistical challenges, hampers the smooth flow of goods and services. And concerns about delays, cost overruns, and insufficient progress in infrastructure projects have raised doubts about the policy's effectiveness. For instance, in response to an RTI application, the Ministry of External Affairs stated that the development of the important 109-kilometer Greenfield road in Myanmar has been affected by factors such as COVID-19, security concerns, and the bankruptcy of the current contractor (Bhattacharya, 2022). The Policy has not yielded significant economic benefits for India. Efforts to enhance trade and investment have not resolved trade imbalances with certain countries in the region. In the fiscal year 2022, the trade between India and the ASEAN region exceeded 110 billion U.S. dollars. Singapore accounted for the largest share of this trade, with a value exceeding 30 billion dollars. In the India-Singapore trade, the value of imports into India surpassed the value of its exports (Minhas, 2023). And despite the India-ASEAN trade volume amounting to approximately \$70 billion, only a mere 1 per cent of this trade transits through the North East region of India (Jacob and Uttam, 2018). To address this, the Policy should prioritize actions to tackle non-tariff barriers, enhance competitiveness, and facilitate greater market access for Indian goods and services. Trade barriers, including tariffs and complex regulations, hinder smooth trade between India and Southeast Asian countries. Addressing these barriers is crucial for deeper economic integration. Measures must be taken to promote balanced trade, expand market access, and encourage export diversification.

The Policy's emphasis on economic considerations may not fully consider evolving security dynamics and China's growing influence in the region. Political instability and conflicts in Southeast Asia, including the

coup in Myanmar, pose challenges to the Act East Policy. Furthermore, China holds the title of being Myanmar's primary investor and lender, with a significant presence in the country. It has put forward a total of 38 projects as part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal acknowledges that China possesses significant strategic influence in Myanmar. He recognizes that China has the capability to provide assistance and serve as a buffer against Western sanctions imposed on Myanmar (Bhusan, 2021). Meanwhile, India, while participating in the United Nations Human Rights Council's consensus in condemning the events relating to military coupe unfolding in Myanmar, made it clear through its permanent representative in Geneva that it would not endorse any coercive measures against Myanmar (Nair, 2021).

The northeast faces various security challenges, including ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes and cross-border insurgency. These concerns can impact the implementation of the Act East Policy, requiring India to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics carefully. In this region, non-state actors compete with the Indian state for control over two essential aspects of statehood: political representation and the monopoly of violence (Kolas, 2017, p. 99, 100). The ethnic violence is exacerbated by the socio-psychological dynamics of positive in-group identity coupled with negative perceptions of out-groups, increasing the likelihood of hostile actions (Basedau, 2011, p.6). The Indian government view the granting of statehood and autonomous district status as a means to devolve decision-making and maintain the “demographic uniqueness” of northeast India, in effect providing ethnic “homelands” to certain groups (Baruah, 2003; Baruah, 2005) The Sixth Schedule grants extensive powers to district councils, including justice administration, control of schools, taxation, and more. However, a lack of oversight and financial transparency has turned these powers and associated funds into sources of violent disputes in "homeland politics "(Kolas, 2012, p. 2-7).

Southeast Asia comprises a wide range of cultures, languages, and social norms, which present challenges for Indian businesses and policymakers when engaging with countries in the region. The Act East Policy has faced criticism for not placing enough emphasis on people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy. Consequently, the Policy may not be widely recognized or comprehended by stakeholders in both India and Southeast Asian nations. It is crucial to raise awareness and conduct effective outreach efforts to ensure active participation and support for the Policy. Understanding and navigating these cultural differences is essential for successful engagement in Southeast Asia. Indian businesses and policymakers need to invest in cultural understanding, forge stronger people-to-people ties, and actively promote cultural diplomacy.

Enhancing connectivity and transportation infrastructure form integral aspects of the Act East Policy. The development of robust road networks, railways, air connections, and waterways is expected to stimulate

trade, tourism, and overall progress in the region thereby benefiting multiple sectors and promoting regional integration. However, the implementation of the Policy has had ramifications for local communities, specifically indigenous groups in the northeast. These communities have expressed concerns regarding land rights, environmental preservation, and the safeguarding of their unique cultures and traditions. The construction of railways and national highways has raised concerns about the potential negative effects on ecosystems, biodiversity, and local communities. In 2022, a major landslide occurred in Makhuam, Noney district, Manipur jeopardizing the Rs 14,000 crore Imphal-Jiribam railway projects and leading to the unfortunate loss of more than 60 lives. The affected villagers highlighted the absence of public consultation by railway officials, despite the completion of an Environmental Impact Assessment (Chakrabarti, 2022). This disaster has prompted the railway authorities to look at monitoring mechanisms of cut hill slopes in sensitive areas and set up an early warning system (Das, 2022).

Hangsing and Tonsing (2022) contended that although the Union government supports the Act East Policy for conflict elimination, regional security, and development, it neglects the negative impact of securitization on indigenous people, especially during crises like the Myanmar coup. The implementation of the Policy lacks sufficient consultations with indigenous stakeholders such as the Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, etc. further reinforcing the perception of the northeast as a geopolitically ignored region due to its unappealing terrain and cultural disconnect from the mainstream. Indigenous stakeholders in the Act East Policy are integral to its success, given their cultural significance, cross-border ties, and the potential for development and conflict resolution in the region. The Act East Policy has several faced various challenges in its implementation. These challenges include insurgency, infrastructure deficiencies such as road, electricity, healthcare, security concerns, AFSPA, ethnic conflicts, bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, political resistance from local stakeholders, economic disparities and lack of awareness of the Policy within the northeastern states. Additionally, cultural diversity, geopolitical competition, drug trafficking, trade barriers, and limited public awareness present obstacles to the policy's success (Singh, 2023). The Indian government must adopt a comprehensive and region-specific approach to address these challenges and ensure the policy's goals of enhancing regional integration and strengthening India's relations with Southeast Asian countries are realized. Effective implementation, regular policy evaluation and adaptation, a well-balanced economic engagement strategy, regional cooperation initiatives, a strong strategic focus, building trust and cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and an emphasis on people-to-people exchanges are all integral parts of this approach. Rajiv Sikri pointed out that private sector companies will consider investing only when they are confident that their investments will yield profits. Prior to private investors committing their funds, the state must take the initial action by establishing the necessary infrastructure and guaranteeing security (Strachan et al., 2009).

V. Possible Future Roadmap

To ensure the Act East Policy's effectiveness, a well-defined roadmap is crucial, prioritizing infrastructure development and equal benefits across the region. And investments should avoid concentrating solely in major cities and consider the diverse ethnic communities in the northeastern states. This approach aims to prevent conflicts of interest and mitigate existing divisions between the hills and plains, which are rooted in ethnic and tribal linkages. The policy must embrace inclusivity, respecting unique cultures, and adopting a tailored and inclusive approach for success. To include indigenous peoples participation in the Act East policy, it's crucial to engage them by respecting their rights and cultural sensitivities. Provide economic opportunities, education, and conflict resolution mechanisms, while promoting their representation in decision-making processes. International collaboration and transparent, accountable implementation are also keys to ensuring their voices are heard and their interests are protected throughout the policy's execution. Prioritizing the resolution of trade barriers, reducing tariffs, and simplifying regulatory frameworks are crucial to create a favorable business environment and facilitate increased trade and investment. Additionally, enabling active participation of northeastern states in regional institutions like ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation can strengthen regional cooperation and integration. The shared cultural heritage between the ethnic communities of the northeast and Southeast nations presents significant opportunities for engagement and should be capitalized upon to foster closer ties.

As stated above, it is imperative to provide skill development programs, particularly in business and related fields, to the residents of the northeastern region. This will enable them to capitalize on emerging trade and business opportunities effectively. Additionally, the government should establish a robust support systems and provisions to aid entrepreneurs, including start-ups and other business ventures. Given the region's susceptibility to natural disasters like landslides, floods, earthquakes, and mudslides, it is crucial to establish disaster management centers for efficient response and mitigation. Moreover, maintaining peace and stability is vital for the Act East Policy's success, highlighting the importance of fostering an independent civil society free from state interference. To achieve this, immediate steps should be taken to repeal repressive laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the region and explore more humane alternatives. Understanding the complexities of ethnic communities and their relationships should be given equal emphasis in the Act East Policy. Communal tensions and conflicts have the potential to disrupt the policy's implementation and negatively impact economic objectives. Shutdowns of internet services, bandh, and curfews, as seen in Manipur (2023), can hinder trade, commerce, and investment flows and affect the whole northeast region and halting the prospect of the Act East projects. The economy of the state and the livelihoods

of people are severely impacted when essential services such as banking, e-commerce, bill payments, e-ticketing, businesses, work-from-home, and education come to a standstill.

Infrastructure development projects, particularly related to connectivity, may be delayed due to communal disturbances and in the light of the G20 business summits concerns about security and stability in the state/region can affect perceptions among potential investors and partners, hampering strategic partnerships and economic cooperation. Cultural exchanges and tourism initiatives may also be affected, limiting opportunities for mutual understanding and relationship-building. The ethnic divide in the northeast requires long-term trust-building efforts, and failure to address these issues can raise concerns about governance and stability, impacting the Act East Policy's success. The government's response, including efforts to restore peace, address grievances, and promote inclusive development, will play a crucial role in mitigating negative effects and maintaining the momentum of the Act East Policy.

VI. Concluding remarks

Undoubtedly, the Act East Policy has played a pivotal role in India's foreign policy objectives in East Asia, South Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. However, focusing solely on trade and connectivity while neglecting essential infrastructure investment could have severe consequences, especially considering the region's delicate political systems and underlying ethnic tensions. In order to address contemporary realities, it is imperative for the political class responsible for governance and policy decisions in the region, civil society organizations, and diverse ethnic groups to transcend narrow political ambitions and foster an inclusive coexistence to reap the long-term political dividends and enable the region to thrive alongside the global community. Achieving peaceful coexistence and enabling the development of a competitive and globally integrated northeast region necessitates the establishment of vibrant and stable governance within the states.

Availability of Data and Materials: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Funding: No funding is received for this study.

Authors' Contributions: Single author.

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