

## **India's Act East policy and North East India: A Critical Review**

**Zulafqar Ahmed\***

---

### **Abstract**

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave new push to regional diplomacy of India by giving specific focus on neighbours and renamed the “Look East” policy to “Act East” policy. Terming it as “Act East” from “Look East”, the main objectives of this foreign policy was to revive political ties, strengthen economic linkages, and forge regional security and ensure strategic cooperation with the Southeast Asia, for which North Eastern region serves as the gateway. In the context of emerging relations of India with South East Asia, role of North Eastern region is inevitable and it would be a pivot of overall “Act East” policy. This foreign policy has given geographic proximity, socio-cultural, and historic ties with the South Eastern countries. This policy is described as a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach to establish strategic links with many individual countries and build good relations with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In this backdrop, this paper would analyse the role of border-states in strengthening regional economic and socio-cultural ties with the neighbouring states. Besides, this paper would also examine how the involvement of North Eastern states provides opportunities to New Delhi in making a robust regional diplomacy.

**Keywords:** *Diplomacy, Cooperation, Gateway, Inevitable, proximity, Robust,*

---

\* Research Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University.

## Introduction

Among the prominent foreign policy initiative which government of India has taken post Cold war, Look East Policy is one among them. This policy was undertaken in the early 1990s against the prompt shaking of Indian economy and the sudden end of Cold war. This policy was the resulted of concerted efforts to extent the strategic ties with the Southeast Asian countries. The policy was meant to strengthen strategic, economic, political links with the individual counties as well as with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (Kalita, 2018).

The 'Look East' policy was launched in the early 1990s, was the part of the effort to re-engage India with Southeast Asia. This policy has been characterised by most of the Indian Scholars and Policymakers as it evolved through various 'phases' with an accelerated pace and process of interactions in moving from one phase to another phase. this policy was meant to extend India's engagement with the Southeast Asian region, the policy has expended beyond its initial geographical focus on Southeast Asia to cover the broader East Asia and now Indo-Pacific region; this has expanded to its earlier 'Economic interaction' to strategic, political, defence interactions. This 'Look East' policy recently has culminated into new 'phase' under the Prime minister ship of Narendra Modi who rebranded the policy as 'Act East' to marked a significant shift towards a more pro-active and action-oriented approach towards the region to foster links in all sphere.

However, has something substantial changed by the rebranding of 'Look East'? Is a serious question which concerns all the policymakers and scholars? One may argue that the various phases of the 'Look East' policy are rooted in the domestic political rhetoric's rather than foreign policy shifts as new government has sought to differentiate their foreign policymaking from its predecessors. The first phase of the policy began with the Congress government of Prime Minister Narsimha Rao; whereas second phase was associated with the Bartiya Janta Party (BJP) Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government in early 2000s and remained continue under the Congress government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2004. Finally, last phase of rebranded 'Act East' policy emerged under the government of Narendra Modi in 2014. (BAJPAEE, 2017)

It is pertinent to mentioned here that even during the Vajpayee's government India articulated 'Neighbourhood First' policy, where government intended to take a more 'integrated and holistic' approach to its regional engagements. Since the

inception of this policy all the government during this period attempted to strengthen ties with the Asia-Pacific region because this is the fastest growing region of the world to its unparalleled development in security, economic, demographic and political terms. Enhancing ties with the Asian neighbours through ASEAN has bridge the gap and has increased the connectivity to wider Asia-Pacific region. This initiative also reflects an optimistic development impact on our North-Eastern region. (Kalita, 2018)

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To study the historical evolution and objectives of the Look East and Act East policy.
2. To examine the policies and programmes of the government of India's Act East Policy and to enquire what significant socio-economic, political, cultural, and strategic changes have been brought forth by the implementation of this policy?
3. To understand the importance of North-Eastern region for Act East Policy.

### **Methodology**

For the purpose of the study of "*India's Act East Policy and North East: Opportunities and Challenges*" a descriptive method will be followed. For the study of this topic material have been collected by secondary sources. Secondary material and data have been collected from different books, journals, internet sources, published research papers and articles, newspaper, etc.

### **From Look East Policy to Act East Policy**

The 'Look East Policy' was started by then prime minister of India Narasimha Rao (1991-96) and has continued during the tenure of former prime minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) subsequently in the tenure of Manmohan Singh (2000-2014) and finally under the Prime minister ship of Narendra Modi (2014- ). The main objectives of this policy were to reengage India's trade focus with the neighbours and to the emerging South East Asian countries. Its aim was to cultivate socio- economic, political, cultural and strategic relations with the South East Asian Countries in order to strengthen India's position in this region and to avert China's dominance from the region. In the recent years India's relationship with

South East Asia has flourished significantly. Look east Policy of India has three dimension approaches towards the South East Asian countries which are:

- Firstly, to enhanced interaction with the South East Countries pertaining to trade and investment, Science and technology, tourism etc.
- Secondly, it aims were to ensure political links and understanding with the South East Asian Countries through ASEAN.
- Thirdly, to strengthen the defence links with these countries. (Kalita, 2018)

‘Look-East’ policy culminated into ‘Act East’ policy in July 2011, when former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited India and advocated for India stronger role in the Asia-Pacific region. She coined the term ‘Act East’ instead of just ‘Look East’ this policy got momentum under the Modi government as External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj confired in 2014 that New Delhi is now willing to ‘Act East’ under the ‘Act East Policy’. India not only expected to reinforce its economic ties with the region but also desire to emerge as a potential security balancer as well. (Brahma, September 2018)

North Eastern Region (NER) acts as a ‘gateway’ to South East Asian region and it provides a unique platform in terms to New Delhi to extend the links and ties with the neighbouring countries in the South and South East Asia. This region has all the potentialities to develop into India’s powerhouse as it has abundant rich sources of energy, natural gas, coal, oil, limestone, and other mineral resources. Besides, this region has a potential water resource in the river Brahmaputra and its tributary, this region is also rich in plantation crops, medicinal plants, horticultural products, vegetables, spices. This region also provides opportunities for tourism having rare flora and fauna scenic beauty unique performing arts and handicrafts.

The North East India shares borders with the Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh culminating in a long border of 4500km long international border. Myanmar alone is regarded as prime gateway of North East to South East Asia shares at 1643kms boundary with the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. Pranab Mukherjee, former president of India considered that North East India would get benefits from the India’s growing relationship with the South East and South East Asia through the ‘cross border market’ which would uplift the people of this region from poverty, economic backwardness, and would bring prosperity, inculcate entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. The North Eastern region of India, due to its ‘geographic significance’ could exploit

their geographical contexts in order to bring significant benefits for the whole India in general and region in particular. (Kalita, 2018)

North East India which shared cultural history with some of the ASEAN countries of Vietnam, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Thailand enjoys exclusive advantages in fostering people to contact and foster multi-dimensional ties and people diplomacy. To explore the land locked Northeast region, need is to develop the inherent of the region by accessing the South East Asian countries along with the international route via India-Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway and its extension to Lao PDR and Cambodia or the “Mekong-India Economic Corridor” (MIEC) are inevitable conditions to strengthen the ties. For strengthening deeper and strongest ties with the South East Asian Nations people of North East India will play crucial role. Moreover, from the geographical point of view North Eastern region stands as the central point of the Indian Subcontinent with that of South East Asian region. Due to its geographical proximity with the South East Asian countries and cultural diversity, North Eastern region will play an important role in the Success of ‘Act East Policy’. (Choudhury, 2017)

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

It’s imperative to discuss the opportunities inherent in this approach and also highlight the challenges which will come in its path. There are three well known pillars Culture, Commerce, and Connectivity which could provide multiple opportunities to empower the people of North East India, create developmental opportunities, create hospitable investment climate for South East Asian counties etc. These three pillars have played crucial role in strengthening ties with the South East Asian countries and in future need is to further improve the connectivity through technology, transport, and through cultural with the region.

In the recent years India’s relations with the South East Asian counties have strengthened significantly, it has become imperative for the North Eastern region of India to play the pivotal role in overall ‘Act East’ policy by considering its historical socio-cultural ties and geographic proximity with the South East Asian countries. The main opportunities which ‘Act East Policy’ could provide for the development of North Eastern region of India are as under:

1. Connectivity and physical infrastructure that help in facilitating trade.

2. North Eastern region is rich in biodiversity that would be helpful for the attraction of tourists of South Eastern countries.
3. This region is well off in term of natural resources, like coal, oil, spices, natural gas and limestone which provides opportunity to North Eastern region to export their natural resources to South East Asian countries.
4. 'Act-East' policy would provide opportunity to the North Eastern region in order to attract the investors of South East Asian counties who would invest in different sectors of the development.
5. 'Act-East' policy also provides opportunity to the North Eastern region to strengthen its relationship bilaterally or multilaterally with the South East Asian countries. This objective could be achieved through people to people contact and through culture, sports, academic and medicinal research. (Brahma, September 2018)
6. India has an opportunities to develop ties with the South Asian countries because India had cultural and civilisation links with the South Eastern region. Increasing connectivity between the two multi-cultural societies would revive the free mobility of people held centuries back.

Besides, there are still lots of opportunities for the North Eastern Region in particular and India in general. Underlying India's rephrased 'Act East' policy has been successful in strengthening ties with the South East Asian counties. The developmental-intended agenda has placed special focus on strengthening connectivity through culture, commerce, sports, with the ASEAN. The focus on connectivity has also been reflected from the efforts to facilitate connections and ties with the existing regional forums such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that has been proved as a bridge between the ASEAN and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with the establishment of a Transport Connectivity Working Group in 2016. There has also been a proposal to institutionalize annual meetings between ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a regional forum whose members are bordering the Indian Ocean region. Former Indian ambassador and Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs states that "Modi has also sought to strengthen India's Soft power influence in the region through the promotion of Yoga and revival of the ancient Nalanda University". In brief it can be said that 'Act East' policy has provided lots of opportunities to the people of North East India and still there are plentiful of opportunities for

this region to develop its physical infrastructure, economy, education and can create lots of employment opportunities for the residents of the North Eastern region. (BAJPAAE, 2017)

Although, there are lots of opportunities for the North Eastern region for development with the help of this dynamic ‘Act East’ policy but simultaneously there are several challenges that come in the path of its development. These challenges are discussed as under:

1. There is lack of infrastructure in the North East Region. Most of the state roadways across this region are in pathetic condition. The North Eastern States’ extremely limited connectivity with the rest of India made this policy unviable.
2. ASEAN is economically and politically uneven level playing field. Vietnam and Laos both have the communist governments, Singapore has a single party political structure and a symbolic opposition, Myanmar having the semi-democratic political set up; Malaysia having two party democratic structure; Indonesia has emerging democratic structure, Thailand having Military rule with the promise of new constitution; Brunei having Monarchy and Philippines having a unique democratic characteristics. (Bhattacharjee, 2016)
3. There is a problem of Insurgency in the North Eastern Region which becomes a hurdle in the path of development. Keeping in view, investors don’t want to invest in any sector due to the state of constant fear and insecurity. In such a circumstances, where people remain always in the state of constant fear chances of success for any policy remain very little.
4. There is also problem like lack of coordination between the government agencies. Security is the main concern of the North Eastern Region of India. There is presence of several troops in this region and there are special laws like Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) which has been enforced in the North East. North East is the special region where the ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) control the all defence related matters. In the North Eastern region along with the insurgency large network of illicit trade in goods, arms and narcotics is thriving. There is also lack of coordination among the states over the several issues which make policymakers difficult to execute this policy along with its proposed objectives.
5. States’ incapacities are another challenge for the success of this policy. It’s mainly North Eastern Council (NEC) and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region

(DoNER) entrusted with opening of the North Eastern states to South East Asia. However, functioning of both these agencies is not satisfactory. This lack of coordination between the agencies further deteriorates the locally generated revenues of North Eastern region. (Dubey, 2014)

Besides, above mentioned Challenges there are few others challenges which make the success of 'Act East' policy very tricky. These challenges are as under:

- a. The Issue of South China sea
- b. Regional Security- China's assertive role
- c. Chinese Diaspora controlling economy in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore
- d. China- Russia growing relationship
- e. India's lack of Initiatives on trade and investment in South East Asian countries
- f. The issue of connectivity that acts as a major obstacle in the path of development

### **Recommendations**

To counter the several challenges, and to make this policy more dynamic, goal-oriented, action-oriented, here are the following options which would ensure success of this policy.

- North East should not be a 'gateway' of 'Act East' policy rather it should be a convergence point where trade facilitation between the mainland India and ASEAN would be possible.
- There is a need to work seriously on the proposed objectives and to find out why the objectives of the policy could not achieved.
- There is also dire need to ensure active involvement of the bordering states in the process of trade and commerce. This will give new dynamism to this policy and would also help in strengthening the relations.
- North East has always been disturbed due to insurgency. Prime focus of the Central governments in this region has been to strengthen the security. Border States are generally the states which first bear the brunt of any illegal or anti-social activities across the borders. In the highly insecure states, both the local residents and the foreign investors don't want to invest in the sectors of development due to the sense of insecurity and disorder.



- There is also need to understand comprehensively growing equation of the South East Asian region. Free Trade Agreement like Trans-pacific Partnership, Regional Comprehensive Partnership, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation are going to play very pivotal role in the near future and how India will get benefits from these Free Trade Agreement is need to assess.
- The government should seriously develop knowledge and capacity building in the North East.
- There is also need to work for the improvement of regional relations among the states of North East and integrating them with the policy framework.
- There is also need to strengthen cultural and social links with the South East Asian countries. Soft Power does play a very significant role in the formation of perceptions. Hornbill festival of Nagaland and Sangai festival of Manipur have been attracting tourists of the bordering countries. Strong cultural and social links, people-to-people contact with the neighbouring countries, help in promoting the interest of the concerned countries.
- There is a need to ensure relaxation in the visa facilities for the Students of the South East Asian countries. Indian government should provide best educational facilities and infrastructure to the students who come from these counties for quality education.
- Economic development is the key or perhaps the most viable sphere where every country wants to excel. Involvement of the Bordering States for the economic development of the country is inevitable. There are various projects which are under-construction or proposed to be made, if the projects pass through these bordering states then assurance of these states is requisite to take into the consideration. Besides, if any developmental project is going to set off in these bordering states; assistance and active involvement of these hosting states is indispensable for the success of any project.

### **Concluding Remarks**

India's 'Look East' policy rephrased as 'Act East' policy has evolved successfully from the last three decades. The policy was earlier devised to establish economic bounds with the South East Asian countries, has gained political, social, strategic, cultural and security dimensions in the South East Asian region. The country worked with the objectives to make

speedier development of the country with the active involvement of the North Eastern States. The progress of the North Eastern region would lead populace of the region towards prosperity. Geographical proximity and ancient links of the North Eastern region with the South Eastern region is the real propeller of the 'Act East' policy. Several Critics' also claim that there are various hurdles; which act as a stumbling block for 'Act East' policy. These problems are i.e. lack of coordination at ministerial level, bureaucratic inertia, lack of investors- friendly laws, insurgency in the region etc. Despite of, lots of hurdles, still we can say that 'Act East' policy through North East India is a commendable exercise for the development and prosperity of North Eastern people. There is a dire need to follow the 'bottom up' approach and not the 'top down' approach, where North East would decide the contours of the 'Act East' policy and Centre would play the role of facilitator. (Dubey, 2014). Moreover, North East region needs to recognise that it must have leverage on the opportunities which are present today. This region must also come out from the narrative of 'isolation' that has kept the region cut off from the benefits which are present around it. It's in its interest to provide all kind of support to the undertaken initiatives. It is quite interesting to analyse that how Modi government can minimise the gap between the 'policy formulation' and 'policy implantation' and take into the consideration entire local dynamic which will be very crucial for the success of 'Act-East' policy from the perspective of North East region. (Yhome, 2015)

## References

1. BAJPAEE, C. (2017). "Dephasing India's Look East/Act East . *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs, Volume 39,(Number 2,)*, pp, 349.
2. Bhattacharjee, D. (2016). "India's Act East Policy: Problems and Prospects in North East India". *Indian Council of World Affairs*. New Delhi.
3. Brahma, A. (September 2018). "India's Act East Policy: the North-East States". *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science,, Vol. 7, Issue 9*, p- 10025.
4. Ibid.
5. Choudhury, S. (2017, January). "Northeast India and the Act East Policy: Opportunities and Challenges." p,2 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320921997>.
6. Dubey, R. (2014, July). North East India in India's Look East Policy: Constraints and. *Social Research Foundation Vol (4)*, p 124-125. <http://srfaurangabad.org/journals/4thissue/11.pdf>

7. Ibid.
8. Kalita, S. (2018). "India's act east policy and north-east: Prospects and challenges". Vol, 3 issue, 1 ISSN, 2455-4030, *International Journal of Advanced Research and Development*, pp 268.
9. Ibid
10. Yhome, K. (2015, January). From "Look East" to "Act East":What it. *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol, 2, *Issus* (1,2), p- 27. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311774304>