

# LOCATING “NORTHEAST” IN INDIA’S “ACT EAST POLICY”

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## ABSTRACT

*The recalibration of the erstwhile Look East policy to Act East Policy has forgotten the most important domestic driver of the policy- the development of Northeast. Where is “Northeast” in a decade of India’s “Act East Policy”? The article explores a decade of AEP to answer this question. It seems that the “Act East Policy,” which was aimed at making the earlier policy more action-oriented, has missed the “Northeast agenda,” which was the main reason for culture, commerce and connectivity towards the Southeast Asian economies. Past literature has celebrated the role of connectivity in the region’s development; this article will critically analyse the implementation of India’s AEP. This article reveals significant gaps in ‘policymaking’ and ‘policy orientation,’ which must be addressed by new policy implementation.*

**Keywords:** India, Northeast Region, Act East Policy, development, connectivity

The Look East policy (LEP), as most policymakers, economists, political scientists, journalists, and academicians believe, was initiated in the early 1990s as a part of the economic liberalization that took place during Narasimha Rao period. A precursor to the policy, the “Look East Destiny,” was unveiled in the 1980s. The root cause of initiating this policy goes back to the Cold War when India’s relations with Southeast Asian countries waxed and waned. In the 1980s, intra-Asian conflicts and rivalries were prominent, and India’s economic and military strength was not strong enough to get involved in these conflicts. Though India had successfully forged closer strategic ties with South Korea and Japan, India’s efforts at formalizing and forming a relationship with ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) were met with limited success. This could have been due to India abstaining from an ASEAN-sponsored call in the UN General Assembly to withdraw all foreign troops from Kampuchea. Moreover, LEP was first initiated with a principal focus on Japan and the Asian Tigers to benefit from the sustained export led economic growth. However, Japan did not reciprocate India’s overtures. The policy was reoriented towards ASEAN instead of individual countries and ASEAN centrality became prominent in the policy. LEP succeeded in getting closer to ASEAN.

When the Soviet Union fell apart, and the Cold War ended, India lost its three essential partners in the Soviet Union – a major diplomatic benefactor, arms supplier, and largest trading partner. India, which was a captive market of the Soviets, had to explore new partners for its products and services and to meet its growing energy needs. India had to explore other regional and global options to preserve and promote its economic and strategic interests. India was searching for new possibilities in Asia and the Central Asian Republic. To the east, India had focused mainly on security cooperation with ASEAN and had neglected economic cooperation since its independence. After the Cold War, India changed its strategy from emphasizing bilateral relations to dealing with ASEAN by implementing the erstwhile Look East Policy in 1991. The “Look East Policy” term was first used in the 1995-96 report after India became a dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1995. India became an ARF member in 1996.

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Domestically, the LEP was promoted as Look east though Northeast, to get northeast on the development track after decades of neglect and internal strife. The 'Vision Document 2024' underscored the urgent need to accelerate the pace of development in the Northeast region. Northeast was supposed to act as a gateway to Southeast Asia especially since Myanmar had joined ASEAN. Several infrastructure projects were initiated, to connect India to Southeast through Northeast. However, the progress on these projects was very slow, which led to dissatisfaction among the locals about the LEP.

In 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi rechristened Look East as Act East Policy (AEP), highlighting pragmatism to connect Southeast Asia and East Asian economies with its culture, commerce and connectivity projects. However, the AEP was seen as a "recalibration rather than a reincarnation" of India's engagement with Southeast Asia. Although the primary driver, in theory for the "AEP", is development of the northeast region, in practice it became more of a security paradigm.

People in Northeast states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram are primarily tribes of ethnic kith and kin relations with Myanmar's tribes. Except for Sikkim, seven Northeast states are living underdeveloped, which cites the emergence of insurgents revolting in the regions. So, the policy formulation was that developing the Northeast would, by default, assist the region's connection with Southeast Asian countries. Indian security suspected that armed groups in Northeast India have also sustained arms support from the Myanmar-led Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which has acted as the interlocking chain for the illegal weapons flow from Yunnan in China via Myanmar to Northeast India. Thus, citing China's eye on the Northeast and every local practice with insurgent movements has brought security dynamics over economic concerns.

Since the junta's government in Myanmar in 2021, the battleground has been fought between soldiers and resistance groups, leading to a series of people crossing the border for short-term and long-term migration. Earlier, in January 2024, 300 Myanmar junta soldiers crossed the border and were defeated by the Arakan Army and resistance allies (The Irrawaddy, Jan. 18, 2024). According to Indian media, around 278 soldiers entered Bandukba in Lawngtai district of Mizoram. Likewise, many soldiers abandoned their Chin Let Wa camp in Paletwa, a military outpost in the Falam district of Chin state in Myanmar and entered Mizoram. On the other hand, around 600 troops from Light Infantry Battalion 539, including its commander, soldiers and families, surrendered to the Arakan Army after being besieged in Kyauktaw township of Rakhine State (Ibid). India also repatriated junta soldiers who entered the country to escape Arakan Army attacks (RFA Burmese, Jan. 3, 2024).

The junta's presence also led tens of thousands of civilians, mainly from Chin, Kuki-Zo and allied ethnic communities, to cross the border into Mizoram, where relief camps have been set up. As India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and refugees largely fall under the Foreigners Act, which was not designed for mass humanitarian displacement. This means the people who have crossed the border to India are unable to work formally, access higher education or even travel safely, but may be detained for unauthorised documentation. Moreover, Chin state in Myanmar is also one of the poorest areas, with over 73 per cent of the state's estimated 478,801 people living below the poverty line (Russell, 2025, p. 81). Yu Gan Paing (2025) asserts that Myanmar people migrate due to an unprecedented crisis characterised by political instability, economic hardship, and growing violence and insecurity in the country (p. 176). The Chin and Mizo people recognise a common heritage and similar cultural practices, with a shared origin, and describe themselves as belonging to the Chin hills (Ibid., p. 83). According to Zohesia (2025), many Chin people moved to Mizoram from towns such as Tonzang, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Thantlang, Matupi, and Mindat, all in the Chin state (p. 118). But there are also cases where many are not able to move out of the crisis. Chin anti-regime

forces, which have around 1,000 households with largely Zomi population, are blocked in the town of Tonzang by Myanmar's junta and its allied Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) (Khaing, May 16, 2024). Thantlang on the Indian border has been severely under arson attacks and airstrikes by regime raids. Likewise, in May 2024, two churches were damaged by a junta airstrike on Lonetet village in Tonzang township (Ibid). Also, the Tonzang population is divided between supporters of the ZRA and the Chin Defense Force (CDF), which is allied with the Chin National Army (CNA). In Myanmar, the Chin people live not only in Chin state but also in Rakhine state, the Bago, Magway, and Sagaing regions. Ethnically, the Chin groups are mainly divided into six groups: Asho, Cho (or Sho), Khuami (or M'ro), Laimi, Mizo (Lushai), and Zomi. The Mizoram government in India has extended humanitarian assistance to Chin refugees and also allows refugee children to attend schools.

In addition, the focus on the Indo-Pacific concept has sidelined the "Northeast" development project, with the debate shifting to maritime security. India's engagement with Southeast Asia has been limited to a few infrastructure projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH) and the Kaladan Multimodal Project (KMMP), which is also at a halt due to the crisis in the border region. This infrastructure development target is also seen more as a response to Chinese development in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link project, the China-Laos Railway Link project, the Boten-Vientiane Railway project, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which together form a Pan-Asian Railway Network. Moreover, Thailand's approach to the "Look West Policy" to connect South Asian states via India's Northeast has become a hurdle due to the border crisis in Manipur and western parts of Myanmar.

In addition, the Indian government's negligence in building peace in Manipur ethnic violence has hampered the Moreh border trade, which is the gateway to IMT-TH. IMT-TH Project that started in 2002 and was initially set to be operationalised by 2015, with a deadline of 2019. Now, the new deadline is extended to 2027. These delays are primarily due to political instability in Myanmar's Sagaing region, where Kuki tribes live in the Tamu, on the other side of the Moreh border. Earlier, ASEAN tried to exclude Myanmar's military leaders from high-level summits due to non-compliance with the Five-Point Consensus (which calls for an end to violence, inclusive dialogue, and humanitarian assistance, remaining largely unheeded and revealing the limitations of regional responses). After three years of boycott, Myanmar's Foreign Ministry to Laos highlighted ASEAN to keep the dialogue alive and reflect a pragmatic shift in its approach. Additionally, it shows the junta's willingness to participate in ASEAN dialogues and signals its engagement in the bloc's efforts. Within ASEAN, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines continue to push for more decisive action, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos maintain closer relations with the military government. This has created more complexity in policy formulations. For example, Thailand's humanitarian corridor operates only with the junta's consent in controlled areas. This is where India can assist with humanitarian engagement and keep the Northeast as a gateway first to help Myanmar, which bridges the whole ASEAN.

Last, the closure of the Free Movement Regime (FMR), which was the only hope for people-to-people connection, has been in place since last year. FMR was revised thrice from 40 km to 16 km for movement. Instead of the closure of FMR, India could have been more proactively engaged with Southeast Asia with local participation. There is a need-based policy (vertical over horizontal) for security personnel to be sensitised to the regional dynamics, which will, by default, assist in political gain. The primary goal should be pragmatic enough to help and uplift Northeast India, which will re-attract Southeast Asia to cooperate more. India must compete with China in economic engagement rather than making it more political. Once the Northeast becomes a more engaging region with Southeast Asia, India's Act East Policy will

become a significant source in supplementing the Indo-Pacific debate rather than the latter to the former.

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