



## AN IDEA OF INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY AND ITS RELATION WITH NORTH EAST INDIA

Tayenjam Priyokumar Singh

M.A. in Political Science

University of Delhi

New Delhi, India

### Abstract

With the reframing of the Look East Policy (LEP) to Act East Policy (AEP) under the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, development has sought to rescue the trap of security paradox of the North Eastern Region. This policy aims to revive political ties, economic linkage, regional security and strategic cooperation with East and Southeast Asian countries with India where North Eastern Region serves as a gateway. The paradigm shift towards pragmatic approach while formulating policies and programmes of India since 1990s brings this region on the path of people-centric development. Such strategy would integrate this landlocked region into mainland India's political-economy. This paper analyses the concerned fear psychosis among the civil society groups of this region and presents the role of those policymakers who deal with North East States.

**Keywords:** Act East Policy, Engagement, Gateway, Landlocked, Security.

### Introduction

Since its independence, India had been followed inward-import substitution policy for the country's economy growth agenda. With the change of global political-economy system, India had to change its policies and programmes. In late 1980s, domestically country had faced multiple crisis. We had huge negative trade balance, political instability and economic troubles. In the centre, we did not have the stable Union Government. In the global scenario, Washington Consensus and the apocalypse of cold war gave the impetus for accelerating the pace of neo-liberal policies.

As a practitioner of non-alignment policy, India did not join any military blocs, be it Soviet Union led bloc or US led bloc. But we have had more inclination towards Soviet Union line. Thus, India had huge investment in terms of trade and commerce, armed and strategic supplies from Soviet. Not only these, they supported India whenever India requests to help. But after the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, India almost lost its right hand. Russia too shifted its looking and strategy. India did not have any choice. In this period, Gulf oil crisis added another negative impact in Indian economy. India was almost near the door to declare economic emergency under Article 360 of the Constitution of India.

China liberalised its economy in 1979. By doing so, China increased to expand its trade and commerce in developing and underdeveloped countries. Southeast Asian countries also accelerated their economy and development. This region has a lot of scope for investment. This vacuum was known by Chinese. So, China started their economic investment as much as possible. China also building its security strategic architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. US could not do much against the expansionist policy of China on this region.

Domestically, India's political situation and economic condition were in pathetic conditions. From 1989, multi-party system was fully established in the Indian electoral system. Not a single political party is able to form the Union Government absolutely till 2019 Lok Sabha Election where Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) got absolute majority. But it still forms the Centre Government through coalition. Normally, coalition government could not take a bold step. The economic condition was deteriorated day by day. In 1991, under the Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Union Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh initiated the so called neo-liberal policy- "Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation" (LGP). It opened the domesticated economic system of India and abolished License Raj system. We also adopted the pragmatic foreign policy approach. We initiated the Look East Policy now known as Act East Policy under the Congress government in 1991. With all these factors, India's South Asian centric looking philosophy had to shift towards Southeast Asian region. India also acknowledges the challenges of geo-strategies especially in the sphere of political, economy and maritime on this region posed by the presence of Chinese.

### Look East Policy to Act East Policy journey

When we look back the history of the Southeast Asian countries' relation with India was very old. India have had civilizational connection with these countries (Muni and Mishra, 2018). Still the people of these countries follow the Indian epics namely Mahabharata and Ramayana. But these epics' colour is somewhat different with Indian version. They worship Hindu god and goddess. Angkor Wat Temple, the largest Buddhist temple in the world is located in Vietnam. Many Indian diasporas are living in



these countries. This relationship is connected mainly with South Indian Kingdoms. Therefore, to start a foreign policy of India with respect to these countries and to build profound bilateral and multilateral relations are not new to us in the modern world system.

The Act East Policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, political, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Indo-Pacific region at multiple levels. It involves the intensive and comprehensive continuous engagement with East and Southeast Asian countries in the field of connectivity, trade, culture, defence and people-to-people contact at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. As a name it appeared only in Annual Survey 1995-1996, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India (Haokip, 2015). The debate on launching the policy's exact year is also a matter in the academic circle. Some scholars used to refer that it was launched in 1992. Other section of thinkers used to think that it was initiated in 1991. There were no talk or discussion about the agenda and framework of the policy in the local and national media and even in academic circle in the initial period.

In course of time, India's foreign policymakers started to take care of this policy. India joined Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as sectoral-dialogue partner in 1993 and became a full partner in 1996. It gave a new dimension in the journey of the policy. India-ASEAN Car rally took place in 2004. Among the ASEAN members, Myanmar is the only our immediate neighbouring country. Because of the incircle failure system of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India could not move much beyond South Asia. It is an obstacle on this policy's movement. In order to create a significant regional system, India as a founder member initiated the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sector Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997. Myanmar and Thailand joined this regional organization. This organization strengthens the working of the Act East Policy in Southeast Asian countries.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, there were no significant movement of this policy till late 1990s and early 2000s. It was resurfaced when Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha gave his lecture in 2003 at Harvard University, USA. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the second innings of this policy undertook in 2003. By taking up the second phase, the scope and area of this policy has expanded. It covers not only the ASEAN countries but also East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, China. It encompasses other strategic areas like security, geo-political unlike the earlike one which was mainly focus on economic perspective. With the support of US, India has able to extend its hand. At the same time, US also wants to contain the Chinese influence in this region. On the one hand, US has been tactically using India as tool by taking advantage of this policy to some extent. The second phase of this policy was kept in cold storage in most of the time. The Government of India or State Governments of the North East States did not take up any significant initiatives in this phase. In 2011, when her visit in India, US State Secretary Hillary Clinton clearly indicates about to "acting" of this policy. It indicates the affirmation of the Chinese domination in one point of time. Among the American policymakers and scholars, the debate of civilizational clash between China and America is a hot headache academic discourse. The economic growth of China maintained in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Chinese maritime policy in the South China Sea is also a great concerned to US. China's beggar thy policy on this region and its far-flung countries increases the US' consciousness of China in the global politics. This means China's challenge of American domination or unitary world model becomes shining day by day.

During her visit in India, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed that Washington encourages New Delhi not just to "look" East but to engage East and "act" East (Sajjanhar, 2016). This US push to India to act on the Indo-Pacific region was reaffirmed in August 2014 when India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj announced that the decades-long "Look East Policy" would become "Act East Policy". It was forwarded by the speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 4<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit and 12<sup>th</sup> India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. He formally asserted that India had turned the "Look East Policy" into "Act East Policy" (Press Information Bureau, 2014). It marks the beginning of the latest (3<sup>rd</sup> phase) of this policy. Though New Delhi has not clearly outlined the key features, content, and scope of the policy initiative, Act East Policy is not only the continuation of the Look East Policy but also represents a transformation in India's foreign policy towards eastern world. As part of its Act East Policy, India is helping Southeast Asian countries to build up strategic infrastructures and capacities. Whether Beijing likes it or not, India has emerged as one of the main players in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. However, has something substantial changed brought by the renaming of the Look East Policy to Act East Policy? is a big question which concerns all the policymakers and scholars of the North East States. Critics also argued that these phases are deeply rooted in the domestic political rhetorics rather than tectonic foreign policy shifts as BJP Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to differentiate their foreign policy formulation from its predecessor, Congress.



## Look East Policy (AEP) vs Act East Policy (LEP)

From the very beginning, the Government of India do not declare explicitly the objectives of this policy. From time to time, those scholars and thinkers who are dealing on this field implicitly or explicitly explain the main agendas of this policy. The major differences between the AEP and LEP of India are discussed in below.

### Look East Policy (LEP):

1. It was launched in 1991.
2. Its main focus was boosting economic cooperation.
3. Its relationship (bilateral and multilateral) was mainly ASEAN and its member countries.
4. North East India was almost absence in its plan of forging deeper ties with Southeast Asia.
5. It did not cover maritime security almost.

### Act East Policy (AEP)

1. It is an upgraded version of LEP and initiated in 2014.
2. It encompasses economic cooperation, political, security, cultural and capacity building infrastructures.
3. It extends India's relations upto with East and Southeast Asian countries and even Australia.
4. In this policy, Government of India acknowledges North Eastern Region as a 'gateway' of this policy.
5. It covers maritime security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region.

## North East India: Gateway for Act East Policy

The North East India which is often known as mini-India connects with the rest of India through a 21-kilometre-long landmass, often described as the "chicken's neck" (Ahmed, 2019). More than 98 percentage of the combined boundary formed by the eight North eastern states is shared with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Historically this region is more or less connected and shared social system with its neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. The separation of Burma (now Myanmar) from British India in 1947 started demarcation of economy and cultural relations of tribal people who are living in the periphery of borders. Along with this demarcation, partition of British India in 1947 further strengthened the international boundary of South Asia. This process of modern state formation created the so-called North East India, a landlocked region between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

North East as a concept was introduced by British India. For their economic extraction from the region, Britisher started natural resources discovered and exploitation. Since the discover of Tea in 1823 marked the beginning of economic drain. Later on, oil exploration did take place. They intentionally introduced isolation protectionist policies like Inner Line under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 in order to maintain their security while exploiting forest resources from this region (Phanjoubam, 2016).

Historically, this region is less connected with the mainstream India. Under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, these states were merged through different tactics into the Indian Union. During the Nehruvian ideal period, isolationist policy (Nehru-Elwin policy) towards this region was extensively followed. Even under Article 371 series of the Constitution of India, almost all the states of this region got its own social-cultural protection (Bakshi, 2020). The granting of Nagaland statehood in 1963 mainly based on ethnic line added the fuel of the existing demand for separate statehood in the region. The reorganisation of states in the region in 1972 further created a sense of suspicious towards the region by the mainstream policymakers. India too lost Sino-India war, 1962 in the hand of China. And from 1960s, many ethnic based insurgent groups started their demand of separate nation from India. All these factors contributed the looking of this region from security prism.

When Indian policymakers adopted the pragmatic approach since 1990s, this security angle of looking started to shift towards developmental perspective. This region has a lot of untapped resources be it natural, human and geographical advantage unlike other parts of the country. The Government of India realised the importance of this region lately. India-Myanmar Border Trade opened in 1995 in order to increase trade and commerce of the region with Southeast Asian countries. In course of time, North Eastern Region vision 2020 report was published in 2008 under the North Eastern Council which was established in 1871 with the basic objective "to break the fetters of the geo-political isolation". This vision document forced this region to the development path.

With the upgradation of LEP into AEP in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also expressed four pillars of this policy. They are 4Cs-Culture, Commerce, Connectivity and Capacity building. To unpack this landlocked region by developing its inherent strength through access and cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries along international route via India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project are inevitably necessary conditions. A new regional cooperation with emphasising on North East people would ensure secure and peaceful engagement and

development of this area. From the geo-strategic point of view, this region stands as a convergence point with that of eastern neighbouring countries.

Being a mosaic society and geographically diverse region, this policy is required to sub-categorise to suite and fruitful execution of it in the region. It can be broadly categorised into three groups. The first one is that Act North Policy comprising the states of Sikkim and Western half of Arunachal Pradesh with Bhutan, Nepal, and China; second category, Act South Policy involving Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram along with Bangladesh and the last group is Act East Policy comprising of Eastern side of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram along with Myanmar (Das and Thomas, 2016). However, such a policy of strengthening ties with eastern neighbours should not be limited to counter insurgency efforts which were happened in Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

By utilizing the potential of each and every state of this zone, the policy can move forward into quantum jump. As an individual and group, these states must carry forward their development agenda along with the cooperation of Centre government. At the same time, they should act together to bring a viable and prosperous region of the country.

### Opportunities and Constraints

It is important to discuss the opportunities and obstacles inherent with this policy especially in the context of North East India. The Government of India has recognised North Eastern Region as the “gateway” of Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi explicitly declared that four pillars which are very important to maintain a healthy relationship with these countries. These four pillars are well known as 4Cs- Culture, Connectivity, Commerce and Capacity Building which would provide a viable environment for development of this region.

Significant opportunities which this policy would provide for the sustainable development of the North Eastern Region of India are as under:

- 1) **Connectivity:** This landlocked region is opening day by day with the rest of the country. Many international Organisations like World Bank, New Investment Band give soft loan for physical infrastructures. Foreign countries like Japan through Japan Infrastructure Cooperation Agency (JICA) invest huge money for road constructions in Mizoram, Assam etc. The construction of Asian Highways would provide large business investment. The organised and unorganised sector can export their goods to the neighbouring countries. It will increase the economic activities of the region. Hospitals especially Shija Hospital in Manipur provide treatment a lot of patients from Myanmar. It adds to the economy of Manipur (Das, and Thomas, 2016).
- 2) **Untapped resources:** This region is a world's biodiversity hotspot region. So, it has multiple natural scenic beauties which will attracts tourists. North East people are known for their hospitality. This area has an edge of the region. There are a lot of natural resources like oil and gas, coal, hydropower etc. If these resources utilise in a sustainable manner, lot of jobs will generate thereby will reduce the unemployment rate among the educated youths. This will in great length reduce the anti-national activities in the region.
- 3) **Human Resources:** As the literacy rate is high and maximum of the youth are English educated, with the coming of adequate infrastructure, youth of this region automatically will generate jobs. We can promote the Atmanirbhar Bharat idea among them. The outflow of people from this region could be minimised in large number. This would reduce the sponsor economy model which has been following in the last many decades. Thus, these states can regenerate a self-sustain economy which is not entirely depend upon the Centre government's fund like the present situation.
- 4) **Cultural connections:** Since ancient time, Indian value system and culture has spread in Southeast Asia. This cultural connection brings closure mainly with Southern India. During the British time, Indian diasporas were settled in Myanmar and Bangladesh and Nepalese also settled in India. We have Manipuri communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It strengthens ties with these countries significantly.
- 5) **Opportunity to strengthen:** This policy gives a golden chance to strengthen India's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region's countries. India has multiple bilateral relations with these countries for instance, India-Japan Act East Forum initiative in 2017 and India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement in 2005. India is a founding member of East Asia Summit which was established in 2005. With all these, India is able to extend its geo-strategic position upto the South China Sea.

There are several constraints while executing the Act East Policy that come in the path of its development. These challenges are discussed as under:

- 1) **Infrastructures:** Lack of infrastructure has been a major concerned of this region. Not only state highways but also National Highways across the region are in deplorable conditions. During the rainy season, these roads' potholes become as if small



ponds. The contractors do not care the quality rather they blame the weather conditions of the region and insurgent groups. The road ratio is below the national average. There are no favourable infrastructures which are required for big trade and commerce. The power supply is in pathetic condition. In the IT age, 24\*7 electric supply is must. The region is almost hilly areas, so big building infrastructure projects and roads are very limited.

- 2) Insurgency: Since 1950s, this region has been facing insurgency conflicts. Counter-insurgency operations by State armed forces took many innocent lives. Underground or insurgent groups also killed common people. The blame game on this conflict situation is going on between the state and non-state actors. These ongoing unholy incidents create fear psychosis to the people. These unlawful organisations do ransom and take commission from businessmen, contractors and even government employees. Due to this constant fear and insecurity, investors be it Indian or foreigners do not want to invest in any sectors. The common people of this region only bear the burden of all this inhuman act. This becomes a major hurdle in the path of development.
- 3) Co-ordination: There is a lack of cooperation and coordination between Union Government and State Governments and among State Governments. Most of the development projects could not execute properly as the internal and external security threats prevail over this region. For example, the trade in border areas in Moreh town, Manipur and Zokawthar in Mizoram still do not utilise up to the optimum level. The issue of border pillars with Myanmar again indicates the lack of coordination between India and its state Manipur. It is mainly Centre government takes the initiative for opening any policies and programmes related with East and South East Asian countries. The State Governments do also require to take pro-active initiatives like Punjab and West Bengal.
- 4) Chinese aggression: China is aggressively controlling the economy and is playing an assertive role in these countries. China overpowers in the crisis of the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN countries are an economically and politically uneven level playing field which hinders their relationship with other countries. Some countries like Myanmar, Vietnam are dominated and influenced by China.
- 5) Understable relations: India has able to maintains its relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh but not with China. Unfortunately, this region is dominated by the Chinese goods. It adds more negative trade balance to India. The North East States are not able to produce any finished goods which are compatible with Chinese one. The concerned of Chinese military extension in the border areas of Arunachal Pradesh. And the current military regime in Myanmar provides a negative catalyst in the journey of this policy. The porous international borders infuse huge illegal migrants. These reasons create humungous ethnic conflicts and political-economy impacts on the indigenous communities of the North East States.

### Role of mainland India

The news of North East India has been happening in the national discourse mainly for unlawful activities and arm conflicts. The national media covers mainly the news which are very tricky to the national integrity and security. It means these negative images of the region surface not only in India but also across the globe. In the age of internet, unfortunate incidents do happen viral in social media. They also focus the news of sport medals which are brought by the sportspersons from this region. But the problem is disproportionate coverages of news. The time has come to show the developmental projects which are working in the region.

The mainstream thinkers and scholars who are doing research on this region look from the national security perspective commonly. Foreign policymakers usually looking India's eastern neighbouring countries like Myanmar from security angle. This thinking creates securitization in the region which is very problematic. The other important scholarly aspects on this field like social development, politics of recognition, etc. are almost neglected. They also took the so call sub-region, North Eastern region as a homogeneity society all the time. This diminishes the distinctive and unique role of the different communities of these states. The concept of one size fits all applied in the region till date. The homogenisation of these multi-ethnic societies further problematises the region.

The suspicious upon this region's people by the mainland Indians must be removed by same looking like the other parts of the country. They should transform their perception index towards the region. It could be happened through composite education system and mass awareness of this region's culture, history and geography etc. throughout the country. The people pro-active looking instead of security-centric border management will bring a fundamental change in the region. The politics of recognition of the region is one of the solutions. For instance, the changing of Mt. Harriet in Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Manipur Mountain.

Critics have pointed out that the stagnation infrastructure development is a political-economy tool for enabling resource extraction from this periphery area. The reductionist perspective from the civil society organisations of the region is that this region might be reduce to just gateway for transitional trade and traffic zone. This concerned fear could be subdued by providing the impetus for developing infrastructure accompanies visions along with social development (Kikon, 2018).



## Conclusion

In the complex interdependence world system, all the North East States must put their heart and soul all together. This policy could not bring a drastic change unless and until they uniformly execute their responsible tasks. As of now only Assam Government has a separate department for the Act East Policy. Rest of the states are almost in the dormant stage. We have seen mainly in the academic debate rather than action in ground reality.

The soft power, for instance, culture, hospitality and syncretic value system etc., existed in the region must be popularised to attract investors across the globe. This will globalise the existing potential of this region in the country and foreign countries. Having said that, we should also take care the possible negative fallout of hospitality. Our potential brothers and sisters might be reduced to the level of slum dwellers and security personnel for migrants. Rather than recognising just as a gateway, the centre government must also give the opportunity to be a convergence zone for trade and commerce. If the connotation of just gateway exists, this region could not get its rightful fruit. For instance, the trade volume between India and ASEAN stood around US\$ 78.90 billion in 2020-2021 but bulk of this trade routed mainly through Chennai, Vishakapatnam and Kolkata.

In recent times, there has been considerable engagement by the Government of India on the question of development of the states of North East. For example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Integrated Check Post in Moreh, Manipur (The Hindu, 2020). The isolation of the region has been reducing by improving all-round connectivity through road, railway, telecom, and power and waterways sectors. This policy should include goals such as providing basics necessities, combating corruption, cultivating the spirit of intellectual and cultural openness, encouraging public debate and participation, and improving governance quality of the region. It will uplift the people of this region from poverty and socio-economic backwardness (Mukherjee, 2007). This region could utilise its geo-strategical advantage to bring significant benefits for the whole of India in general and the region in particular.

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