

Strategic Significance of Northeast India in India's Look East Policy

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Abstract

Northeast India occupies a pivotal position in shaping and operationalizing **India's Look East Policy**, owing to its unique geographical location, historical linkages, and emerging economic potential. Sharing international borders with several Southeast Asian countries, the region serves as India's natural land bridge to Southeast Asia, enhancing connectivity, trade, and people-to-people interactions. The strategic relevance of Northeast India lies in its role in strengthening regional integration through infrastructure development, cross-border trade corridors, and cultural diplomacy. Initiatives such as improved road, rail, and inland water connectivity, along with border trade points, have transformed the region from a peripheral frontier into a strategic gateway. Furthermore, Northeast India contributes to India's security architecture by stabilizing border areas and countering geopolitical challenges in the eastern neighborhood. Thus, the integration of Northeast India into the Look East Policy framework not only promotes regional development and economic growth but also reinforces India's strategic, economic, and diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia, thereby advancing its broader foreign policy objectives.

Key Words: Northeast India, Look East Policy, Regional Connectivity, India–Southeast Asia Relations, Strategic, Gateway, Border Trade, Infrastructure Development, Regional Integration, Geopolitics, Economic Diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Northeast India comprises seven states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura—popularly known as the *Seven Sisters*. Located in the far eastern periphery of the Indian Union, the region covers about 2.62 lakh square kilometres, accounting for nearly 7.9 percent of India's total geographical area, while housing only about 3.7 percent of the country's population. Assam alone accommodates more than 70 percent of the region's population. Historically, the entire region formed part of Assam, but following independence, six new states were carved out at different stages to address administrative and ethnic aspirations. The region exhibits distinct geographical and socio-cultural characteristics that differentiate it from the rest of India. Only about 27 percent of its area consists of plains, while the remaining 73 percent is hilly and mountainous. Connectivity with mainland India is

limited to a narrow corridor through West Bengal, approximately 22 kilometres wide, commonly referred to as the Siliguri Corridor. Notably, the region shares merely 2 percent of its borders with the Indian mainland, while the remaining 98 percent constitutes international boundaries with neighbouring countries such as China, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Northeast India is also marked by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, with nearly 400 languages and dialects spoken across the region. Despite its rich natural resource base, the region has lagged in terms of economic development due to geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and historical neglect.² Border trade plays a crucial role in the economic life of Northeast India. It refers to the exchange of locally produced goods across international borders by communities residing along both sides, under bilaterally agreed arrangements. Given the region's proximity to neighbouring countries and its relative isolation from the Indian mainland, Northeast India enjoys a natural advantage in overland trade. Border trade has thus emerged as an important mechanism for enhancing livelihoods, promoting regional integration, and reducing economic marginalisation.

Strategically located, Northeast India serves as a gateway connecting India to major sub-regions of Asia, particularly Southeast and East Asia. The region encompasses fertile river valleys and plains formed by the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers and their tributaries, along with some of the world's highest rainfall areas, notably in Meghalaya. This unique geographical setting, combined with favourable climatic conditions, offers immense potential for agriculture, hydropower, and trade-led development.⁴ Recognising this strategic significance, India has initiated several connectivity projects under regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC and BBIN. Agreements like the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement aim to facilitate seamless movement of goods and passengers, reduce transportation costs, and enhance regional trade. Inland waterway development, rail connectivity projects, and cross-border linkages with Bangladesh and Bhutan further strengthen the region's integration with neighbouring economies. Additionally, energy diplomacy and infrastructure expansion under the Act East Policy seek to improve access, connectivity, and economic interdependence.

In essence, Northeast India functions as a vital bridge between India and its immediate neighbours in South and Southeast Asia. Addressing the challenges of isolation and landlockedness through integrated infrastructure development and cross-border cooperation is essential. A balanced approach that views security and development as complementary objectives is crucial for unlocking the region's full strategic and economic potential.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the geopolitical significance of North East India.
2. To assess the role of Northeast India in strengthening India ASEAN relations.
3. To examine connectivity and infrastructure development.

Methodology & Data

To write this article, I have used content analysis and observation methods, in this study, data have been collected from secondary sources like different published books, Journals, Internet sources, newspapers, etc.

Opportunities in Northeast India

Northeast India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—holds immense untapped potential and growing strategic importance within India's development and foreign policy framework. Often described as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, the region shares more than 5,000 kilometres of international borders with China, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. This unique geopolitical location places Northeast India at the core of India's Act East Policy, offering significant opportunities for cross-border connectivity, trade, and regional integration.⁷ One of the major opportunities lies in the region's rich natural resource base. Northeast India possesses substantial reserves of oil, natural gas, coal, limestone, and hydropower potential, particularly in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, dense forest cover provides valuable timber and non-timber forest products, including bamboo and medicinal plants. Bamboo has wide industrial applications and can support sustainable livelihoods if supported through modern processing and market access.⁸ The region also offers vast potential in renewable energy, especially hydropower. Arunachal Pradesh alone accounts for a major share of India's untapped hydropower capacity, while other states are suitable for small and micro hydel projects. Responsible development of clean energy can ensure energy security, promote industrial growth, and create employment in remote areas.

Agriculture and horticulture present another significant opportunity due to the region's diverse agro-climatic conditions. The Northeast is well suited for tea, rice, spices, fruits, and organic farming. Sikkim's success as India's first fully organic state highlights the export potential of organic and high-value crops. Strengthening agro-processing, storage, and marketing infrastructure can greatly enhance farmers' incomes. Tourism is a high-potential sector, driven by the region's scenic landscapes, biodiversity, and rich cultural heritage. Eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural festivals can generate employment while promoting sustainable development. Improved infrastructure and community-based tourism models can further unlock this potential. Connectivity and trade-related opportunities are expanding through projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. These initiatives are expected to reduce isolation, boost border trade, and integrate the region with Southeast Asian markets.

Finally, Northeast India's educated and youthful population offers strong prospects in human capital development, sports, services, education, and digital enterprises. With improved governance, infrastructure, and policy support, the region can transform into a dynamic hub of sustainable growth, regional cooperation, and strategic significance for India.

Challenges in Northeast India

Northeast India, comprising the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is one of the most culturally diverse and geographically unique regions of the country. Despite its rich natural resources, ecological significance, and strategic location, the region continues to face multiple structural and socio-political challenges that constrain its overall development. These challenges arise from a combination of historical neglect, difficult terrain, political unrest, ethnic complexity, and administrative weaknesses.¹¹ One of the most persistent challenges is political instability and insurgency. Since independence, several insurgent movements

have emerged across the region, driven by demands for autonomy, identity protection, and self-determination. Prolonged conflicts in states such as Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam have resulted in loss of life, displacement, and disruption of economic activity. The continued enforcement of security laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and allegations of human rights violations have further alienated local communities, discouraging investment and long-term development planning.

Geographical isolation and poor connectivity remain major obstacles. The region is linked to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, and its hilly terrain, dense forests, and frequent natural disasters make infrastructure development costly and slow. Inadequate road, rail, and air connectivity restrict trade, tourism, and access to essential services, reinforcing the sense of remoteness and marginalization among the population. Inter-state boundary disputes and porous international borders also pose serious challenges. Unresolved border conflicts among northeastern states frequently lead to tensions and violence, while porous borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar facilitate illegal migration, trafficking, and smuggling. These issues undermine internal security and social stability in the region.

Socio-economic underdevelopment further compounds these problems. Industrial growth is limited, agriculture remains largely subsistence-based, and employment opportunities are scarce, especially for educated youth. As a result, migration to other parts of India is common, leading to brain drain and weakening the local economy. Environmental degradation and climate-induced disasters such as floods and landslides add to the region's vulnerability, causing repeated damage to life, livelihoods, and infrastructure. Ethnic diversity, while a cultural strength, often creates governance challenges. Competing ethnic claims over land, resources, and political power have led to periodic conflicts and administrative inefficiencies. Additionally, shortcomings in education, healthcare, and public service delivery, coupled with weak policy implementation and centralized planning, have limited the impact of development initiatives. A sense of cultural and psychological alienation from the Indian mainstream further deepens these challenges. Addressing these issues requires an inclusive, region-specific, and development-oriented approach that balances security, growth, and social cohesion.

India's Attention on Northeast India

During British rule, the development of railways and roads in Northeast India was primarily aimed at extracting raw materials such as tea, coal, and oil from Assam, while traditional trade routes linking the region with Southeast Asia were disrupted. After Independence in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Northeast Region (NER) became further isolated and lost access to its natural markets. However, in the post-Cold War globalised world, India has begun to reassess these colonial legacies. Given its geographical position as a natural bridge between India and Southeast Asia, Northeast India has acquired renewed importance in India's foreign and economic policy, particularly under the Look East Policy (LEP) and its later evolution into the Act East Policy.

The Look East Policy envisages Northeast India not as a peripheral region but as a central hub linking South Asia and Southeast Asia through networks of highways, railways, pipelines, and communication corridors. As noted by Rajiv Sikri, the policy seeks to transform the region into a vibrant economic space connecting two dynamic regions of Asia. However, for the Northeast to benefit from Free Trade Agreements and deeper engagement with Southeast Asian economies, critical requirements include transit

arrangements, multiple trade routes, customs infrastructure, liberal visa regimes, and substantial investments in physical connectivity. The Shukla Committee on Transforming the Northeast estimated that infrastructure investment requirements would exceed ₹25,000 crore, highlighting that regional development is essential for the success of the policy. India's engagement gained momentum in the early 2000s, symbolized by initiatives such as the India-ASEAN Car Rally in 2004 and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's description of the Northeast as the "gateway" to ASEAN and BIMSTEC. The Northeast dimension of the Look East Policy formally emerged in 2007, followed by its integration into the Northeastern Region Vision 2020 document released in 2008. The policy emphasizes connectivity and infrastructure, trade and investment frameworks, improved utilization of existing assets, and softer dimensions such as tourism and people-to-people exchanges.

Several bilateral and multilateral projects have since been initiated, including the Indo-Myanmar Trade Agreement (1994), the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Project, rail and road linkages, energy pipelines, and digital connectivity. Despite these initiatives, geographical constraints, security concerns, political challenges, and local apprehensions continue to hinder progress. Many in the region perceive development promises as rhetoric unless accompanied by inclusive growth, security, and cultural sensitivity. For India's engagement with Southeast Asia to be sustainable, the Northeast must not feel marginalized but instead be an active and confident partner in the country's eastward integration strategy.

Cultural, Ethnic Conflicts and Politico-Economic Integration

India's Look East Policy (LEP) holds significant potential to reverse the adverse effects of colonial geopolitics and transform Northeast India by reopening borders for trade, connectivity, and economic cooperation. Within this foreign policy vision, Northeast India is frequently described as the gateway to Southeast Asia. As articulated by **Rajiv Sikri**, the policy envisages the Northeast not as India's periphery but as the centre of a vibrant and integrated economic space linking South and Southeast Asia through networks of highways, railways, pipelines, and communication corridors.

However, this optimistic vision stands in contrast to the ground realities of the region. Northeast India is marked by profound ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, which, while a strength, has also generated deep-seated anxieties and conflicts. Many communities perceive development strategies under the Look East Policy with suspicion, often viewing them as rhetorical exercises that ignore local concerns. Immigration from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar has intensified competition over land, resources, and employment, aggravating ethnic tensions and internal insecurity. These conflicts pose serious challenges to economic integration by discouraging investment, disrupting social cohesion, and threatening regional stability.

Political integration of the Northeast has historically been a contested and uneven process. In the post-independence period, the Indian state pursued integration largely through top-down mechanisms, often neglecting democratic consent and cultural sensitivities. The forced merger of Manipur in 1949, the unresolved autonomy demands of the Nagas, resistance among the Khasis, and controversies surrounding Tripura's accession created lasting grievances. For many communities, integration was experienced as coercion rather than partnership, giving rise to insurgency, secessionist movements, and prolonged

political unrest. The idea of the “Northeast” itself is a colonial construct that gained political meaning only after Independence. Historically, the region did not constitute a homogeneous or unified entity but was a frontier zone of British Bengal. State reorganization—from Assam to the creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and later the inclusion of Sikkim—was intended to manage ethnic aspirations, yet it also reinforced fragmented identities. Scholars argue that clubbing all eight states under the single label of “Northeast” often obscures their distinct histories, cultures, and region-specific problems, leading to generalized and ineffective policy responses.

While the region shares common challenges such as insurgency, immigration, and underdevelopment, there exist sharp intra-regional disparities between hills and valleys, urban and rural areas, and among different ethnic groups. Northeast India is among the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, shaped by multiple migration waves from Southeast Asia, China, colonial-era settlers, and post-partition migrants. These complex demographic dynamics continue to fuel social tensions. In sum, successful politico-economic integration of Northeast India with Southeast Asia requires more than physical connectivity. It demands inclusive governance, respect for ethnic identities, democratic participation, and trust-building measures that reassure local populations. Without addressing cultural anxieties and historical grievances, the Look East Policy risks deepening alienation rather than fostering genuine regional integration.

China Factor in Northeast India

The China factor in Northeast India is a multidimensional issue that encompasses geopolitical, economic, security, and sociocultural dimensions. The northeastern region of India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, shares an extensive and sensitive border with China, specifically Tibet, which has been a critical aspect of India's security concerns. The historical, political, and strategic aspects of the China factor in Northeast India have influenced the trajectory of India-China relations and the internal dynamics of the region.²⁰ China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, which it refers to as South Tibet, have been a major point of contention between the two countries. This claim has resulted in periodic tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), particularly in areas like Tawang. The 1962 Sino-Indian War had a profound impact on the region, leading to long-standing suspicions and defense build-ups along the border. The frequent Chinese incursions and transgressions across the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh have continued to fuel security apprehensions within India, leading to increased militarization and infrastructural development in the region.²¹ Apart from the military and territorial disputes, the China factor also extends to the economic sphere. China's involvement in India's neighboring countries, such as Myanmar and Bangladesh, has had significant implications for Northeast India. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has increased its economic presence in South Asia, strengthening its influence through infrastructure development projects, investments, and trade partnerships. This economic engagement has implications for Northeast India, as it competes with Chinese investments in neighboring regions and aims to enhance its connectivity through initiatives like the Act East Policy.

China's support for various insurgent groups in Northeast India has been another contentious issue. Reports suggest that Chinese entities have historically provided arms and training to insurgent factions, which have

been involved in destabilizing activities in the region. While Beijing officially denies such allegations, the presence of Northeastern militant leaders in Myanmar and their links to Chinese arms suppliers indicate a complex interplay of geopolitics and subnational conflicts. This factor further complicates India's internal security challenges, necessitating a multi-pronged approach involving military, diplomatic, and developmental strategies.²³ The socio-cultural impact of the China factor is also noteworthy. The historical and ethnic ties between Tibet and certain communities in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Monpas, create a cultural bridge that China seeks to leverage. The Dalai Lama's visits to Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang, have drawn strong reactions from Beijing, as China views the Tibetan spiritual leader as a separatist. India's policy towards the Tibetan refugee community, which has a significant presence in Northeast India, adds another dimension to the China-India dynamics in the region.

Infrastructure development in Northeast India has been directly influenced by the China factor. India has ramped up its efforts to enhance connectivity and military preparedness through projects like the Trans-Arunachal Highway, new airstrips, and advanced landing grounds. These initiatives aim to counterbalance China's rapid infrastructural advancements on its side of the border, including highways, rail networks, and military installations. The competition in infrastructure development has led to an increased focus on Northeast India's strategic importance within India's national security framework. Trade and economic relations between Northeast India and China remain limited, primarily due to security concerns. The reopening of the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim for border trade was a step towards greater economic engagement, but trade remains restricted due to political sensitivities. Northeast India's potential as a gateway for regional trade with Southeast Asia is often viewed through the lens of China's economic ambitions in the region. The development of border trade points and cross-border exchanges with Myanmar and Bangladesh are part of India's broader strategy to enhance its economic footprint and reduce dependency on Chinese goods.

China's water policies regarding the Brahmaputra River, known as the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, have significant implications for Northeast India. China's construction of dams and hydroelectric projects on the upper reaches of the river has raised concerns about potential disruptions to water flow, which could impact agriculture, biodiversity, and water security in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The lack of a comprehensive water-sharing agreement between the two countries exacerbates these concerns, making water resources a potential flashpoint in India-China relations. India's response to the China factor in Northeast India has been multi-faceted. Strengthening military presence, investing in infrastructure, fostering regional connectivity, and engaging in diplomatic negotiations are key elements of India's strategy. The emphasis on developing economic corridors, enhancing border trade, and improving relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh through connectivity projects aligns with India's broader objective of countering China's strategic influence in the region.

The Act East Policy aims to integrate Northeast India with the larger ASEAN region and serves as a countermeasure to China's growing presence. India seeks to bolster economic growth and strategic depth in the region by improving road, rail, and air connectivity. Collaborations with Japan for infrastructure projects in the Northeast further demonstrate India's effort to diversify partnerships and reduce dependence on Chinese investments. Public perception and narratives surrounding the China factor in Northeast India also play a role in shaping policy responses. The awareness of Chinese activities, both at

the border and in economic engagements, influences how local communities, political leaders, and policymakers view India-China relations. Media coverage of border incursions, diplomatic engagements, and infrastructure developments contributes to a broader national discourse on securing India's interests in the Northeast.

The role of the Indian armed forces, particularly the Indian Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), in safeguarding the region is critical. The presence of strategic military bases, joint exercises, and collaborations with local communities for intelligence gathering ensure that security challenges posed by China are addressed proactively. The modernization of defense capabilities and the deployment of advanced surveillance systems further strengthen India's preparedness along the northeastern frontier. While tensions persist, diplomatic channels between India and China remain active in managing border disputes and bilateral relations. The Special Representatives' dialogue mechanism, border personnel meetings, and agreements on maintaining peace along the LAC highlight efforts to prevent escalations. However, incidents such as the Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash indicate the fragility of these engagements and the enduring nature of strategic competition between the two nations.

The tribes inhabiting the Northeastern region of India share close historical, ethnic, and cultural ties with the tribes in China, Tibet, and Myanmar. Barring Khasis and Jaintias of Meghalaya, almost all hill tribes belong to the Tibet-Chinese fold and the Tibet-Brumes family. It was this feeling of affinity toward the border people of erstwhile East Pakistan and Burma that led some of these tribal groups to turn toward their stock rather than toward the country they inhabited. The strategic location of Northeastern India and the access to China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal, together with the material and moral support of foreign intelligence agencies to these groups have facilitated insurgency in the Northeastern region. Safe sanctuaries to hide, material and moral support from the locals across the borders, and the machinations of forces hostile to India fuel the insurgency.²⁹ With the given geographical and cultural advantages into consideration, China has been keenly observing and encouraging infightings among the tribes and against the Indian government. These external linkages have serious implications for the Government of India in dealing effectively with the menace of insurgency. Brands of insurgency or terrorism, whether actively promoted by foreign powers or furtively assisted by the parties having a stake in the destabilization of the country, tend to cooperate and complement each other. In India's Northeastern region, insurgent outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and both factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), fighting for independent homelands, have received assistance from the neighboring countries. The forms of assistance range from the supply of arms and ammunition and other logistical support to the provision of a haven, camping, and training facilities.

From the early 1960s and throughout the 1970s, China was reported to be involved in rendering material and moral support to insurgent groups in Northeastern India. The hostile nature of Sino-Indian relations in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian war was regarded as the main reason for China's anti-Indian stance and the resultant support to the outlawed insurgent groups. In May 1966, the Nagas approached the People's Republic of China for 'any possible assistance'. Subsequently, Isaac and Muivah, leaders of Nagaland National Council with a band of 300 men reached Yunan province in January 1967, where the Naga rebels were imparted with the knowledge of arms and guerilla tactics, and they were indoctrinated

in Maoism. With Chinese support, the Naga insurgency became stronger and more intense with better tactics and modern weapons.

“Naga rebels were the first to establish transborder contacts, in the early ‘60s. The 1962 Indo-China war only catalyzed the process. Facilitated by Pakistani intelligence in Dacca, Kughato Sukhai, the self-styled Naga prime minister, wrote to Chinese leaders on May 29, 1963, alleging persecution and oppression by India. He exhorted China to “honour and follow their principle of safeguarding and upholding the cause of any suppressed nation of Mongolian stock”. In November 1966, China welcomed a 300-strong contingent of Naga rebels led by Thinusilie and Muivah. Trained, and laden with huge quantities of arms and equipment, the contingent returned in January 1968 and established a huge camp in the Jotsoma jungles. When Indian forces attacked it in June that year, they recovered Chinese weapons and incriminating documents”. Speaking in parliament on December 13, 2000, MoS, Home Affairs, I.D. Swami said that a surrendered ULFA militant had disclosed that some of his colleagues crossed Over into China Via Bhutan and established contact with the Chinese Army in 1993. A news report of December 2000, quoting unnamed intelligence sources, said that a consignment worth an estimated US\$ 750,000 reached Cox’s Bazaar, a coastal town in Bangladesh at around the same time, another report claimed that an arms consignment had arrived in Myanmar at a city named Tamu, close to the border with India.

Wasbir Hussain, Executive Director, CDPS, Guwahati and former National Security Advisory Board, India member, has narrated a specific incident and a Chain of links between insurgency groups and Chinese weapon manufacturers. The following statement reveals the extent and the range of network and weapons dealing:

“If one looks at the charge sheet filed by the National Investigating Agency (NIA) On 26 March 2011 against Anthony Shimray, chief arms procurer of the Isak-Muivah Faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), it becomes clear. That the insurgent group was actively buying weapons from Chinese companies. The FIR lists the plan in detail and specifically says that Shimray, accompanied by a Representative of another rebel group, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), visited the Norinco headquarters in Beijing. Norinco or the China North Industries Corporation is one of China’s largest State-owned weapons manufacturers. Bangkok-based NSCN-IM rebels paid USD 500,000 to Norinco and bought 1,800. Weapons that landed at Bangladesh’s Cox Bazar in 1996 and were transported. Onwards to Northeast India, to NSCN-IM and NDFB camps. Half of these weapons, of course, were seized by Bangladeshi security forces while being off-loaded”.

“Around 2007, NSCN-IM faced desertion from its ranks with people going Away with weapons. That was the time the outfit again decided to buy 1,000 Weapons, mainly AK series rifles, light machine guns, sub-machine guns, pistols, rocket-propelled grenades etc. NSCN-IM approached another Chinese arms manufacturing company, TCL, and paid USD 1,00,000. The money was paid through a Thai arms dealer Wuthikorn Narunartwanich alias Willy. The deal did not materialize due to the disturbed situation, in Bangladesh where the consignment was meant to be delivered. The NIA has electronic receipt of the payment.”

It is evident that Wang Qing, a Chinese spy and a TV reported was arrested and deported after she reportedly visited the headquarters of the national socialist counsel of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) or

NSCN (IM). On this occasion Indian authorities said Qing admitted to being a spy for the people's security Bureau, a Chinese intelligence agency, has also admitted that she conducted a secretive four-hour-long, closed-door meeting with Thuingaleng Muivah.

Some significant details are about Chinese latest attempts at beefing up Paresh Baruah's 28 battalion of ULFA with many Meitei groups for some attacks in Assam. Authorities' security sources disclosed that the Khaplang faction of NSCN and elusive ULFA chief Paresh Baurah area playing the key role from their hideouts at Taga in Burma and that at least eight insurgent groups of Manipur have already joined hands. Many inputs about the Chinese connection came from Anthont Shimray of NSCN-IM and Rajkumar Meghen of the UNLF arrested by national Investigation agency (NIA), both off who had participated in meetings with Chinese intelligence agencies operatives following requests from both these groups for support including sophisticated weapons." Theres a long history of Chinese's engagement with North-eastern insurgents, and after a lull in the post-Mao era, such engagement seems to have picked up over the past decade. Media reports present a variety of forms of engagement. Rebel leaders have spent time on Chinese soil, met with leading Chinese intelligence officials, procured arms from Chinas shadowy arms markets, gathered intelligence for China in India, are even trained cadres on Chinese soil."

India–Southeast Asia Connectivity

India's connectivity with Southeast Asia has emerged as a central pillar of its foreign policy, economic strategy, and regional integration efforts. As one of the world's fastest-growing regions, Southeast Asia offers immense opportunities for trade, investment, and strategic cooperation. India's Northeastern states, sharing a land border with Myanmar, occupy a pivotal position in facilitating this connectivity and form the backbone of India's Act East Policy.

Historically, India and Southeast Asia were closely linked through trade, culture, and religion. Ancient land and maritime routes enabled the exchange of spices, textiles, and ideas, while Hinduism and Buddhism from India profoundly influenced the societies and cultures of Southeast Asian countries. These interactions created a shared civilizational space that was disrupted during the colonial period. In the post-Cold War and globalized era, India has sought to revive these historical ties through proactive regional engagement.

Modern India–Southeast Asia connectivity gained momentum with the Look East Policy of the early 1990s, later upgraded into the Act East Policy. Physical connectivity forms the core of this engagement. Major infrastructure projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aim to link India's Northeast with mainland Southeast Asia, enabling smoother movement of goods, people, and services while reducing logistical costs and travel time.

Northeast India plays a crucial role in this strategy due to its geographical proximity and deep ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affinities with Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar. Enhanced road, rail, inland waterway, and air connectivity can transform the region from a landlocked periphery into a land-linked economic corridor. Improved connectivity also offers economic benefits by opening new markets for

agricultural products, natural resources, handicrafts, and tourism, while attracting investment through border trade centers, industrial corridors, and special economic zones.

India's connectivity efforts are supported by several bilateral and multilateral frameworks, including ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Regional Forum, as well as sub-regional groupings like **BIMSTEC** and **BBIN**. Agreements such as the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement are expected to facilitate seamless movement of goods and passengers, reduce transport costs, and promote regional trade. Inland waterways, particularly the Brahmaputra river route linking India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, further enhance multimodal connectivity.

Despite these initiatives, challenges persist in the form of inadequate infrastructure, difficult terrain, security concerns, bureaucratic delays, and insurgency in parts of the Northeast. Addressing these issues requires sustained investment, institutional reforms, public-private partnerships, and stronger governance mechanisms. Alongside physical connectivity, digital connectivity, energy cooperation, tourism, education, and people-to-people exchanges are essential for deepening integration.

Overall, India-Southeast Asia connectivity is not merely an infrastructure-driven agenda but a comprehensive strategy encompassing economic growth, cultural exchange, energy security, and geopolitical balance. Strengthening the Northeast as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia is vital for achieving inclusive regional development and long-term strategic engagement.

2. Conclusion

The Look East Policy (LEP) has had significant political and socio-economic implications for Northeast India, particularly in relation to ethnic integration, insurgency, migration, and drug trafficking. The historical roots of these challenges lie in colonial interventions, especially the separation of British India and Burma in 1937 and the Partition of 1947, which disrupted traditional mobility and trade routes. These events fragmented ethnic communities across newly created international borders, depriving them of long-standing economic linkages and cultural interactions. The resulting sense of alienation and loss contributed to discontent among various ethnic groups in Northeast India. Many communities in the region perceive that their distinct cultural identities are inadequately accommodated within the broader framework of Indian nationalism. This perceived marginalization, combined with poor implementation of development schemes and denial of economic opportunities, has fueled insurgency movements seeking political recognition, autonomy, and economic rights. Historically, the state's response to these movements has largely been security-oriented, treating them as law-and-order problems rather than addressing their deeper political and economic roots. In this context, the Look East Policy emerged as an attempt to address regional backwardness by promoting infrastructure development, trade expansion, and economic integration, thereby compensating for long-standing grievances.

A central objective of the Look East Policy is the revival of ancient trade routes and cross-border economic linkages. Such revival has the potential to reduce insurgency by creating livelihoods, fostering interdependence, and promoting cooperation at regional and sub-regional levels. Migration, particularly from Bangladesh, remains another major challenge, altering demographic balances and intensifying

competition over scarce resources, which in turn fuels ethnic and political tensions. Rather than unilateral measures, sustained bilateral and regional cooperation is seen as a more viable solution to manage migration and related conflicts. Drug trafficking is another trans-border problem affecting the region, driven by porous borders, proximity to the Golden Triangle, unemployment, and ongoing conflicts. Although concerns exist that increased connectivity under the Look East Policy may facilitate such illicit activities, improved transport infrastructure and better border management can help contain them. Ethnicity, insurgency, migration, and drug trafficking are deeply interconnected and transnational in nature, making regional cooperation essential for durable solutions.

Overall, the Look East Policy was conceived to end the economic isolation of Northeast India by integrating it with the fast-growing economies of East and Southeast Asia. While progress on the ground has been slower than expected, the policy provides a strategic framework for transforming the region from a landlocked periphery into a land-linked economic corridor. Its evolution into the Act East Policy reflects India's continued commitment to regional integration. However, for the policy to achieve its full potential, it requires stronger implementation, inclusive development, and sustained political engagement that aligns regional aspirations with national and regional goals.

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