

Act East Policy and ASEAN Connectivity: Political Turmoil and Security Challenges in India's North East

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Abstract

India's Act East Policy represents a strategic and economic blueprint to position the country as a regional power in Southeast Asia through enhanced connectivity and cooperation with ASEAN member states. North East India, sharing long international borders and holding immense geostrategic value, plays a pivotal role in this framework. However, the region is entrenched in political instability, ethnic conflict, insurgent activity, and underdevelopment, which collectively challenge the policy's implementation. This article examines the security, political, and structural constraints within the North East that hinder the realisation of India's connectivity vision with ASEAN. It further explores the implications of militarisation, governance deficits, and cross-border pressures, offering critical insights and policy recommendations for reconciling internal conflict with external engagement.

Keywords: Act East Policy, ASEAN connectivity, North East India, insurgency, ethnic conflict, regional security, AFSPA, border diplomacy, India-Myanmar relations, internal security, geopolitical strategy

1. Introduction

India's evolving geopolitical ambition in Southeast Asia has found structured expression in its Act East Policy, introduced in 2014 as a proactive extension of the earlier Look East Policy. With growing economic linkages, cultural ties, and a shared interest in maritime security and regional stability, ASEAN and India have emerged as natural partners. Yet, the core of this strategic framework lies not in distant diplomatic summits but in the North East region—a fragile, conflict-prone, yet crucially positioned space that connects India to Southeast Asia by land. While the region is often hailed as a "gateway" to ASEAN, it is simultaneously mired in longstanding ethnic tensions, governance failures, and persistent insecurity. These internal contradictions threaten to derail or dilute the benefits of the policy. This article critically investigates the extent to which these internal socio-political and security dynamics impede the goals of the Act East Policy and ASEAN connectivity, arguing that a secure, inclusive, and politically stable North East is foundational to India's regional diplomacy and strategic aspirations.

Research Question: How do political instability, ethnic insurgencies, and internal security challenges in North East India affect the implementation of India's Act East Policy and its broader objectives of ASEAN connectivity and regional integration?

Hypothesis: The unresolved ethnic conflicts, insurgent movements, and governance deficits in North East India critically constrain the operationalisation of India's Act East Policy and ASEAN connectivity efforts

by disrupting infrastructural development, undermining regional stability, and weakening India's strategic foothold in Southeast Asia.

2. North East India in the Context of ASEAN Connectivity and the Act East Policy

The North East region, comprising eight states, is India's eastern frontier, bordering China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Its geographic location places it at the heart of India's ASEAN connectivity agenda, with infrastructure projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and BIMSTEC frameworks positioning the region as a crucial land and trade corridor. However, despite policy declarations and initial enthusiasm, on-the-ground progress has been slow. Delays are often attributed to difficult terrain, administrative inefficiency, local opposition, and the overarching political instability in the region. Poor road infrastructure, lack of rail and air linkages, and weak digital penetration further hamper regional integration. While ASEAN nations have shown interest in expanding connectivity with India, sustained progress remains limited by these internal constraints.

Infrastructural development is also impeded by unresolved land acquisition issues and a general distrust of centrally sponsored projects. Local communities frequently protest such initiatives, viewing them as intrusive or exploitative. Moreover, without community participation and consultation, connectivity projects are perceived as extractive ventures rather than participatory development processes. The top-down model of development often undermines local institutions and indigenous practices, creating new tensions that risk destabilising already fragile social fabrics. The North East, therefore, is not just a passageway—it is a contested and negotiated space, where national aspirations must be carefully aligned with regional sensibilities.

3. Ethnic Conflicts and Political Turmoil: A Historical Burden

The complex history of ethnic conflicts in the North East is both a cause and a symptom of its political fragility. The region is home to more than 200 ethnic groups, each with its distinct cultural identity, language, and territorial claims. Since the colonial period, administrative policies that grouped disparate communities under singular administrative units sowed the seeds of identity-based grievances. Post-independence policies of integration were often perceived as coercive, triggering demands for autonomy or outright secession. This legacy of mistrust has perpetuated a cycle of conflict and state violence.

Ethnic insurgencies have taken various forms—some demand sovereignty, while others seek greater autonomy within the Indian union. Inter-ethnic clashes, such as the Naga-Kuki conflict or Bodo-Muslim tensions, have further fragmented the region. These conflicts are sustained by historical narratives of injustice and reinforced by weak governance structures. In this volatile environment, even well-intentioned policies like Act East are met with scepticism. Political instability caused by ethnic rivalries frequently results in administrative breakdowns, law and order issues, and delays in executing policy interventions. This makes it nearly impossible to pursue large-scale connectivity initiatives without parallel investments in conflict resolution and political reconciliation.

4. Insurgency and the Militarisation of Governance

The phenomenon of insurgency in North East India is deeply entrenched, with over 60 insurgent groups operating across various states. Groups such as the NSCN (IM), ULFA, and numerous outfits in Manipur and Tripura continue to engage in acts of violence, extortion, and sabotage. These outfits often operate

across borders, particularly into Myanmar, where the porous terrain and weak state control offer safe havens. As a result, the Indian state has responded with a militarised approach to governance, primarily through the deployment of armed forces under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). While AFSPA has enabled the state to combat insurgency with legal impunity, it has also generated widespread allegations of human rights abuses, extra-judicial killings, and suppression of civil liberties. The alienation that results from militarisation undercuts the state's legitimacy and fosters further rebellion. It also creates an environment of fear and uncertainty that deters economic investment and development. Connectivity corridors that traverse conflict zones often become sites of contestation or sabotage, further undermining the Act East Policy's objectives. The militarisation of development thus becomes a paradox—one that enables short-term control but forestalls long-term peace.

5. Cross-Border Pressures and External Geopolitical Influences

The North East's geostrategic location makes it a site of both opportunity and vulnerability. India's border with Myanmar plays a critical role in its connectivity agenda, yet the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup has had destabilising effects. Refugee flows into Mizoram and Manipur, coupled with increased militant activity and humanitarian concerns, have added layers of complexity to bilateral engagements. Moreover, China's rising influence in Myanmar and the broader Indo-Pacific region poses a strategic challenge. Beijing's infrastructural investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its political clout in Myanmar could undercut India's efforts to develop alternative trade and diplomatic corridors.

Furthermore, regional powers such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia are increasingly positioning themselves as key players in ASEAN connectivity. India must therefore compete not only against regional instability but also against strategic competition. The failure to stabilise and integrate the North East into the national development narrative risks sidelining India from the evolving Southeast Asian order. In this context, the internal becomes the external—domestic unrest in the North East is no longer merely a national concern but a determinant of regional power dynamics.

6. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The success of the Act East Policy hinges not only on diplomacy but on the transformation of the North East from a security burden into a strategic asset. First, conflict resolution must be central to policy design. This includes the implementation of existing peace accords, transparent negotiations with insurgent groups, and investment in dialogue-based governance. Second, infrastructure development should be community-led and culturally sensitive. Engaging local institutions, respecting indigenous land rights, and promoting participatory planning are essential to ensure that connectivity projects do not reproduce historical patterns of marginalisation.

Third, AFSPA must be reviewed and repealed where possible. While security is important, it must be balanced with civil liberties and democratic accountability. Fourth, India must deepen subnational diplomacy by promoting state-level cooperation with ASEAN provinces, particularly in areas such as education, environmental sustainability, and healthcare. Finally, a national integration policy must be formulated that sees the North East not merely as a conduit for foreign policy but as an active stakeholder in national and regional growth.

7. Conclusion

India's vision for regional leadership through its Act East Policy cannot materialize without addressing the contradictions embedded within its own borders. The North East region, while strategically positioned to lead the country's engagement with ASEAN, continues to struggle with the burdens of history, identity, and insecurity. Until these challenges are systematically addressed through inclusive governance, decentralised development, and demilitarisation, the promises of ASEAN connectivity will remain unrealised. The need of the hour is a policy framework that recognises that external engagement and internal peace are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. A secure, stable, and empowered North East is not just a regional imperative—it is the cornerstone of India's geopolitical future.

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