

Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) and India's Act East Policy: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) Network, envisioned as a pan-Asian rail corridor, holds significant potential for bolstering India's Act East Policy (AEP) by enhancing connectivity with Southeast Asia and beyond. As India seeks to deepen economic and strategic engagement with ASEAN and East Asian nations, the TAR presents a critical infrastructure framework that could facilitate seamless trade, mobility, and regional integration. However, despite its promise, the realisation of India's participation in the TAR faces multifaceted challenges, including gauge incompatibility, underdeveloped rail infrastructure in Northeast India, geopolitical tensions, and financing constraints. It evaluates the TAR's strategic, economic, and logistical dimensions while addressing hurdles like cross-border coordination and security concerns in conflict-prone zones. This paper will examine the prospects and challenges of aligning the TAR with India's AEP, focusing on key segments such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral railway project and the broader implications for sub-regional cooperation. This paper aims to assess whether the TAR can evolve into a viable instrument of India's connectivity-driven diplomacy or remain constrained by structural and geopolitical barriers.

Keyword: Regional Connectivity, Jiribam-Imphal Railway, Geopolitical Competition, Northeast India's Development, Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR).

Introduction

The idea of transnational connectivity has increasingly shaped the discourse on regional integration in Asia, where economic dynamism and strategic competition converge. Among these initiatives, the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR), envisioned by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in the 1960s and revived in the 1990s, represents one of the most ambitious infrastructure frameworks for promoting regional integration. Designed as a pan-Asian rail corridor spanning 28 countries and connecting Asia with Europe, the TAR aims to facilitate seamless trade, mobility, and people-to-people exchanges through a vast network of standardised railway systems. For India, the TAR is not merely an infrastructure project; it holds strategic significance within the framework of its Act East Policy (AEP), which prioritises deeper economic and cultural engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

The Act East Policy, announced in 2014 as an upgraded version of the earlier Look East Policy, reflects India's recognition of Southeast Asia as a critical frontier for its economic growth, security interests, and diplomatic engagement. Unlike its predecessor, which emphasised dialogue and economic cooperation, the Act East Policy places greater emphasis on physical connectivity, security partnerships, and

institutional frameworks. In this context, the TAR emerges as a potential vehicle for realising India's vision of being both a continental and maritime power, positioned at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia.

India's Northeast region occupies a central place in this evolving connectivity framework. Geographically contiguous with Southeast Asia and historically marginalised in India's development trajectory, the Northeast is increasingly being reimagined as the country's gateway to ASEAN. Projects such as the Jiribam–Imphal railway line and the India–Myanmar–Thailand trilateral highway initiatives underscore this transformation. However, despite these ambitious undertakings, India's participation in the TAR remains fraught with obstacles ranging from infrastructural gaps and gauge incompatibility to cross-border security risks and geopolitical competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

This paper seeks to analyse the prospects and challenges of integrating India's Act East Policy with the TAR framework, focusing particularly on the Northeast as a pivotal space for India's continental outreach. It argues that while the TAR offers a transformative opportunity for India's connectivity-driven diplomacy, its realisation depends on addressing complex logistical, financial, and geopolitical hurdles. By situating the TAR within the broader discourse on India's AEP, the paper aims to contribute to debates on infrastructure, development, and regional cooperation in Asia.

TAR in the Context of Northeast India's Development

The success of India's participation in the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) is inseparable from the developmental trajectory of the Northeast region, which serves as both the geographical link and strategic hinge connecting India to Southeast Asia. Encompassing eight states and sharing over 98 per cent of its boundaries with neighbouring countries—China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal—the Northeast has historically been marginalised in national planning, owing to its rugged terrain, limited infrastructure, and security challenges. However, with the emergence of the Act East Policy (AEP), the region is increasingly reimagined as India's gateway to ASEAN. In this context, TAR-related projects hold transformative potential for the Northeast's socio-economic development while also presenting new sets of challenges.

From a developmental perspective, the TAR presents the opportunity for the Northeast to integrate economically into regional and global value chains. Improved rail connectivity would facilitate faster movement of agricultural produce, handicrafts, and natural resources from the region to markets in Southeast Asia. States such as Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, which remain economically underdeveloped, could benefit from increased cross-border trade and tourism. The potential spillover effects include employment generation, enhanced business opportunities for small and medium enterprises, and an influx of investment in sectors such as agro-processing, handicrafts, and eco-tourism. Infrastructure projects, such as the Jiribam–Imphal railway line, which is currently under expansion, exemplify the dual domestic and international significance of connectivity in the Northeast. By linking Imphal to India's national railway grid and extending towards Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border, the project is designed to connect to the TAR corridors that link Myanmar and Thailand. Similarly, the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), tasked with expanding railway infrastructure in the region, is playing a pivotal role in ensuring that the Northeast is no longer an infrastructural cul-de-sac but part of a wider continental network. Once integrated into the TAR, such projects could drastically reduce logistical bottlenecks and enhance the strategic importance of border towns like Moreh as transshipment hubs.

The developmental vision, however, must be balanced against security and socio-political concerns. Ethnic insurgencies, fragile governance, and uneven patterns of economic development have long characterised the Northeast. Large-scale infrastructure projects, if not implemented inclusively, risk exacerbating local grievances, particularly regarding land acquisition, environmental degradation, and cultural marginalisation. Moreover, cross-border insurgent movements between Northeast India and Myanmar could pose significant challenges to ensuring the security of TAR routes. This highlights the need to integrate peace-building and participatory governance into infrastructure planning.

Another critical consideration is the environmental vulnerability of the Northeast. The region is ecologically fragile, characterised by hills, valleys, and high seismic activity. Railway construction through such terrain poses significant risks, including deforestation, landslides, and habitat loss. Sustainable development frameworks, therefore, need to be embedded in TAR-linked projects to prevent long-term ecological damage. This is especially pertinent given the growing awareness of environmental politics in both local and global arenas.

Finally, the TAR holds a symbolic dimension for the Northeast's identity. By repositioning the region as a hub of transnational connectivity, it offers the prospect of overcoming historical isolation. Nevertheless, the realisation of this vision depends on ensuring that local communities are active stakeholders rather than passive recipients in the development process. Only by aligning national strategic goals with regional aspirations can the TAR genuinely contribute to inclusive development in the Northeast.

Key Projects and Corridors

The operationalisation of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) in the Indian context hinges on several strategic projects and corridors that physically link India's transport network to Southeast Asia. These projects are not only infrastructural undertakings but also represent the material embodiment of India's Act East Policy (AEP). Together, they aim to transform India's Northeast from an isolated frontier into a connectivity hub. Among these, three projects stand out in shaping India's engagement with the TAR framework: the Jiribam–Imphal–Moreh railway line, the India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) trilateral corridor, and multilateral initiatives such as BIMSTEC and the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity (AMPC).

Jiribam- Imphal -Morech Railway Line

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project, currently under construction, represents one of the most ambitious infrastructure initiatives in the Northeast. It seeks to link the capital of Manipur, Imphal, with Jiribam, thereby connecting the state to the national railway network. Its extension towards Moreh, located on the Indo–Myanmar border, is envisioned as a critical segment of India's link to the TAR. From Moreh, the line is expected to integrate with Myanmar's railway system, eventually providing seamless connectivity to Thailand and beyond. Once operational, this corridor will drastically reduce logistical bottlenecks, enhance the flow of goods and people, and position Imphal and Moreh as key transshipment hubs within the TAR framework.

India- Myanmar- Thailand Trilateral Highway and Railway Project

While the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway has garnered more attention in policy circles, its railway counterpart remains a crucial, though less developed, component of the connectivity strategy. The trilateral corridor is envisioned to link Kolkata, Imphal, Moreh, Tamu, Kalewa, Yangon, and Bangkok, creating a direct overland route for trade and mobility. The railway extension, if successfully developed, will provide a complementary mode of transport, capable of carrying bulk cargo at lower costs and linking

seamlessly with maritime routes at ports like Kolkata, Yangon, and Dawei. Together, the road and rail linkages are crucial to integrating India more deeply into ASEAN supply chains.

Prospects of TAR for India's Act East Policy

The integration of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) into India's connectivity framework offers significant prospects for strengthening the Act East Policy (AEP). By linking India's transport networks to Southeast Asia and beyond, the TAR provides both strategic leverage and developmental opportunities. Its potential can be understood across four interrelated dimensions: economic integration, geopolitical positioning, regional cooperation, and the transformation of the Northeast into a connectivity hub.

Economic integration and trade expansion

The TAR is expected to enhance India's access to ASEAN markets, which collectively represent one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Overland rail connectivity can reduce transportation costs and time compared to maritime routes, particularly for bulk cargo, agricultural products, and manufactured goods. For industries located in landlocked states of North and Northeast India, the TAR could provide more efficient access to seaports in Myanmar and Thailand, thereby stimulating new patterns of production and export. Additionally, the TAR can enable India to become more integrated into global value chains, especially in electronics, textiles, and agro-processing sectors, where Southeast Asian economies have already established strong footholds.

Strategic and geopolitical leverage

Participation in the TAR also carries significant geostrategic implications. In an era marked by the rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connectivity projects have become instruments of influence and competition. By advancing TAR-linked projects, India can counterbalance China's growing footprint in Myanmar and the broader Indo-Pacific region. The TAR also enables India to strengthen its role in multilateral forums such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and UNESCAP, where connectivity is central to regional agendas. In effect, TAR participation allows India to project itself as a rule-shaper rather than a passive recipient of external connectivity models.

Regionalism, cooperation and Multilateralism

The TAR can serve as a platform for sub-regional cooperation, fostering closer economic and political ties among India, Myanmar, and Thailand, as well as with the broader ASEAN community. By harmonising railway standards, customs procedures, and border management, the TAR encourages institutional cooperation that extends beyond infrastructure. Furthermore, regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC and the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity provide opportunities for India to embed its TAR initiatives within broader cooperative structures, thereby amplifying their impact. Such coordination could also encourage the participation of development banks and multilateral financial institutions, reducing the burden on India's domestic resources.

Northeast India as a gateway to ASEAN

The most transformative prospect of TAR integration lies in its potential to reshape the developmental trajectory of Northeast India. By positioning the region as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, TAR-related projects can generate new economic opportunities, address long-standing issues of isolation, and foster greater people-to-people interaction. Border towns, such as Moreh (Manipur), could evolve into bustling trade centres, while improved rail infrastructure may attract investment in industries like tourism, agro-processing, and renewable energy. Beyond economics, greater integration with Southeast Asia could help

foster a sense of inclusion and national integration for communities in the Northeast, which have historically been marginalised within India's developmental framework.

Strategic Resilience and Supply Chain Diversification

Ultimately, the TAR presents India with an opportunity to diversify its connectivity options and mitigate its vulnerabilities to maritime chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca. By expanding land-based transport corridors, India can enhance its resilience against global supply chain disruptions, a lesson reinforced by recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts. In this way, TAR connectivity supports India's aspiration to become a regional hub for trade and logistics.

Challenges in realising TAR and AEP convergence

While the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) offers transformative opportunities for India's Act East Policy (AEP), its realisation is fraught with multifaceted challenges. These barriers span the technical, political, financial, and socio-environmental domains, making the TAR a complex undertaking rather than a straightforward infrastructure project. Unless these constraints are systematically addressed, India's participation in the TAR risks remaining aspirational.

Technical and infrastructure obstacles

One of the most persistent challenges is gauge incompatibility. India's railway system predominantly operates on broad gauge, whereas Myanmar and Thailand rely on meter gauge tracks. This discrepancy complicates cross-border interoperability, necessitating costly conversion projects, dual-gauge systems, or transshipment hubs, all of which undermine the efficiency that TAR seeks to achieve. Additionally, the rugged terrain of Northeast India, characterised by hills, seismic activity, and fragile ecosystems, complicates construction and raises costs. Projects such as the Jiribam–Imphal railway, involving multiple tunnels and bridges in geologically unstable areas, exemplify the technical challenges involved.

Security concerns in Border regions

The Northeast region has long been affected by insurgencies, ethnic conflicts, and cross-border militancy, which pose risks to the stability of connectivity projects. Insurgent groups operating across the Indo–Myanmar border often target infrastructure to signal resistance or extract resources. The instability in Myanmar following the military coup of 2021 further aggravates the security environment, raising questions about the viability of transnational railway projects that must traverse politically volatile zones. Ensuring the security of TAR routes thus requires not only military preparedness but also long-term political stabilisation and peace-building efforts.

Geopolitical Rivalries and Competition with China

The TAR must also be understood in the context of geopolitical competition, particularly in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many TAR corridors overlap with BRI projects, giving China a first-mover advantage in financing and constructing infrastructure in Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. India's more cautious approach, coupled with limited financial resources, risks marginalising its influence if not complemented by proactive engagement. Furthermore, China's ability to mobilise large-scale investments contrasts with India's reliance on incremental project financing, highlighting a structural disadvantage in competing for regional influence.

Financing Constraints and Institutional Weaknesses

Infrastructure projects of TAR's magnitude require massive financial resources. India faces significant fiscal pressures domestically, with competing demands on infrastructure spending, social welfare, and defence. Unlike China, which leverages state-owned enterprises and development banks to fund

connectivity projects abroad, India relies on multilateral institutions and public–private partnerships (PPPs), both of which face delays and bureaucratic hurdles. Weak institutional coordination between the central government, state governments in the Northeast, and neighbouring countries further exacerbates implementation challenges.

Cross-border coordination and governance

Railway connectivity requires harmonisation of customs procedures, border management, and technical standards. India’s engagement with Myanmar and Thailand has often been slowed by bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of political will, and differing regulatory frameworks. For example, the absence of streamlined customs clearance at border towns like Moreh–Tamu has already created bottlenecks for trade even before rail connectivity has been established. Without adequate governance mechanisms, TAR’s benefits may be undermined by delays at borders.

Environmental and social Challenges

The ecological fragility of the Northeast presents another set of challenges. Railway construction in this region frequently entails deforestation, land acquisition, and the displacement of local communities. Projects such as the Jiribam–Imphal railway have already raised concerns about land rights, cultural erosion, and ecological degradation. If not managed inclusively, such initiatives risk generating local opposition that could delay or derail progress. Additionally, compliance with environmental

Structural constraints in the Northeast

Finally, the underdeveloped economic base of the Northeast poses challenges to making TAR commercially viable. Unlike industrialised regions, the Northeast currently lacks the manufacturing capacity to generate sufficient trade volumes to sustain large-scale rail corridors. Without parallel investments in industrial clusters, trade logistics, and border infrastructure, TAR projects could remain underutilised.

In short, the realisation of TAR and AEP convergence is impeded by a confluence of technical, political, and structural barriers. These challenges underscore the importance of careful planning, sustained diplomacy, and inclusive development strategies to ensure that the TAR does not become another unrealised vision.

Comparative and regional Lessons

The challenges facing the convergence of the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) and India’s Act East Policy (AEP) are not unique. Other regions have attempted similar cross-border connectivity initiatives, offering valuable comparative lessons for India and its Northeast. By studying these experiences, India can draw insights into overcoming technical, political, and social barriers.

The European Union’s TEN-T network

The Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) provides a model of how cross-border rail connectivity can be successfully institutionalised. The EU’s approach relied heavily on standardisation of technical norms, financial support from the European Investment Bank, and strong political will among member states. For India, this highlights the importance of harmonised standards, multilateral financing mechanisms, and the establishment of a regional institutional framework with ASEAN members to prevent fragmented implementation.

China -Laos Railway Experiences

The China–Laos railway, inaugurated in 2021, exemplifies how infrastructure projects can transform landlocked regions into trade corridors. Despite initial scepticism, the project benefited from consistent

financing, rapid construction, and state-backed support under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, it also highlights risks of debt dependency and limited local benefits. India must therefore avoid excessive reliance on external financing while ensuring local participation and ownership in TAR-related projects.

ASEAN connectivity initiatives

ASEAN's Master Plan on Connectivity has emphasised the role of multimodal transport, border infrastructure, and regulatory reforms. Countries like Thailand and Malaysia have invested in modernising customs systems and border checkpoints, significantly reducing trade delays. For India, this underscores that railway construction alone is insufficient; complementary investments in border governance and logistics are essential. The Moreh–Tamu border, for instance, needs streamlined procedures and digital customs platforms to prevent bottlenecks.

Lessons from Africa's regional Railways

Regional rail projects in East Africa, such as the Kenya–Uganda Standard Gauge Railway, reveal the challenges of balancing foreign investment, local employment, and environmental protection. Cost overruns, land acquisition disputes, and limited freight volumes have hindered long-term viability. These cases suggest that India must carefully assess the commercial feasibility of TAR projects, ensuring that they are aligned with local economic development strategies, not just geopolitical ambitions.

Lessons for the Northeast Region

Comparative experiences highlight several lessons directly relevant to Northeast India:

Institutional Coordination: Successful projects require coordination among central, state, and local governments, as seen in Europe.

Financing Models: Hybrid financing (state funds, multilateral loans, and PPPs) can reduce fiscal burdens, avoiding the pitfalls of overdependence on a single source.

Social Inclusion: Projects must prioritise local employment, fair compensation for land acquisition, and cultural sensitivity to prevent local resistance.

Environmental Safeguards: Drawing on experiences from Africa and Southeast Asia, ecological risks must be mitigated through transparent environmental impact assessments.

Geopolitical Balancing: Like ASEAN states, India must balance relations with China while advancing its own projects, avoiding confrontation but ensuring strategic autonomy.

Implications for India's strategic

Comparative lessons underscore the importance of integrated planning that combines infrastructure development with governance reforms, industrial growth, and environmental protection. For India, TAR is not merely about building railways; it is about redefining regional integration in a way that enhances economic opportunities while safeguarding sovereignty and sustainability.

In this sense, the TAR–AEP convergence can learn from both the successes (EU, ASEAN) and pitfalls (Africa, BRI overdependence) of other regional projects. The challenge is to adapt these lessons to the Northeast's unique geographical, cultural, and political context.

Policy Recommendations and Way Forward

The prospects of aligning the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) with India's Act East Policy (AEP) depend not only on addressing infrastructural bottlenecks but also on devising strategic, institutional, and socio-economic measures that ensure sustainable and inclusive connectivity. The following policy recommendations outline possible pathways forward:

Infrastructure upgradation in Northeast India

Complete Ongoing Projects: Priority must be given to the Jiribam–Imphal–Moreh line, which will serve as India’s principal TAR link. Timely execution with adequate funding is essential.

Gauge Standardisation: India must actively collaborate with Myanmar and Thailand to resolve gauge incompatibility through either dual-gauge tracks or transshipment hubs

Intermodal Connectivity: Integration of rail with road (India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway) and riverine transport will strengthen multimodal corridors.

Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation

Institutional Framework: India should advocate for an ASEAN–India Connectivity Council to coordinate TAR projects, similar to the European Union’s TEN-T model.

Border Modernisation: At Moreh–Tamu, streamlined customs, digital clearance systems, and harmonised tariffs must be developed to minimise delays.

Security Mechanisms: Given the insurgency-prone areas in Manipur and Nagaland, joint border security task forces with Myanmar are necessary to safeguard railway infrastructure in these regions.

Financing and Economic Models

Diversified Financing: India should adopt hybrid financing models, including multilateral development banks (ADB, AIIB), bilateral partnerships, and public–private partnerships (PPP), to reduce fiscal strain.

Industrial Corridors: TAR projects should be linked to special economic zones (SEZs) and industrial clusters in Northeast India to ensure freight viability and local benefits.

Private Sector Incentives: Tax breaks and logistic subsidies can attract private logistics companies to use TAR routes.

Regional Development and Local Participation

Employment and Skills Training: Local youth should be trained in railway construction, logistics, and maintenance, ensuring ownership and participation.

Fair Land Acquisition: Transparent compensation and resettlement policies must be implemented to prevent displacement-related grievances.

Community Integration: TAR projects should respect indigenous cultures and environmental practices, preventing alienation of tribal communities.

Geopolitical and Strategic Positioning

Strategic Autonomy: India must strike a balance between engagement with ASEAN and countering China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) without entering unsustainable competition.

Sub-Regional Diplomacy: Strengthen platforms like BIMSTEC and BCIM (Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar) for cooperative, rather than confrontational, connectivity.

Maritime–Rail Synergy: Integrating TAR with Sagarmala and Act East maritime corridors will enhance India’s overall regional presence.

Environmental and Sustainability Considerations

Ecological Safeguards: Given Northeast India’s fragile ecosystem, TAR projects must undergo rigorous environmental impact assessments (EIAs).

Green Technologies: The adoption of electrified tracks, solar-powered stations, and sustainable construction methods can help reduce ecological damage.

Disaster Resilience: Rail infrastructure must be designed to withstand floods, landslides, and seismic risks in the Northeastern United States.

Institutional and Policy reform

Integrated Planning: Establish a National Connectivity Authority to synchronise policies across railways, highways, and inland waterways.

Policy Continuity: Ensure long-term commitment beyond electoral cycles by institutionalising TAR–AEP initiatives within India’s national development strategy.

Data and Monitoring: Create a digital connectivity dashboard to track progress, expenditures, and cross-border coordination, ensuring transparency.

Conclusion

The Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) embodies both the promise and the paradox of 21st-century connectivity. For India, its intersection with the Act East Policy (AEP) highlights the ambition to transform the Northeast from a strategic periphery into a vibrant gateway for commerce, diplomacy, and cultural exchange with Southeast Asia and beyond. Nevertheless, as this paper has demonstrated, the path toward realising this ambition is neither linear nor uncontested.

On the one hand, the TAR offers immense opportunities: it can reduce logistical costs, integrate India into pan-Asian supply chains, foster sub-regional cooperation, and catalyse development in historically marginalised regions like Manipur and Nagaland. The strategic corridor could also reinforce India’s position in the evolving Indo-Pacific, balancing regional powers while strengthening economic ties with ASEAN.

On the other hand, the challenges are formidable. Gauge incompatibility, incomplete rail infrastructure, fragile ecosystems, insurgency-related security concerns, and financing constraints all hinder progress. Beyond technical issues, geopolitical rivalries—particularly with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—complicate India’s choices, raising questions of strategic autonomy and sustainability. Moreover, without local participation and community consent, projects risk reproducing patterns of marginalisation and resistance rather than delivering inclusive development.

The comparative lessons from Europe’s TEN-T network, ASEAN’s connectivity initiatives, and China–Laos and African rail experiences underline a crucial insight: railways alone do not guarantee integration. Connectivity succeeds when it is embedded in broader frameworks of governance, industrial development, environmental stewardship, and regional cooperation. For India, therefore, the TAR must be viewed not simply as an engineering project, but as a comprehensive strategy—one that integrates infrastructure with diplomacy, security with inclusivity, and global ambitions with local realities.

The way forward lies in strategic pragmatism: completing priority corridors, such as the Jiribam–Imphal–Moreh line, forging multilateral financing partnerships, and establishing mechanisms for ASEAN–India institutional coordination. Simultaneously, India must pursue environmental safeguards, community engagement, and industrial integration to ensure that TAR connectivity translates into tangible benefits for the people of the Northeast.

In conclusion, the TAR can indeed evolve into a viable instrument of India’s connectivity-driven diplomacy, but only if India moves beyond rhetoric to address its structural and geopolitical constraints. Success will depend on whether the Northeast is empowered not just as a transit zone but as a stakeholder in regional integration. If realised, the TAR–AEP convergence could redefine India’s regional posture—anchoring the Northeast within Asia’s dynamic economic networks while contributing to a more balanced and inclusive vision of development.