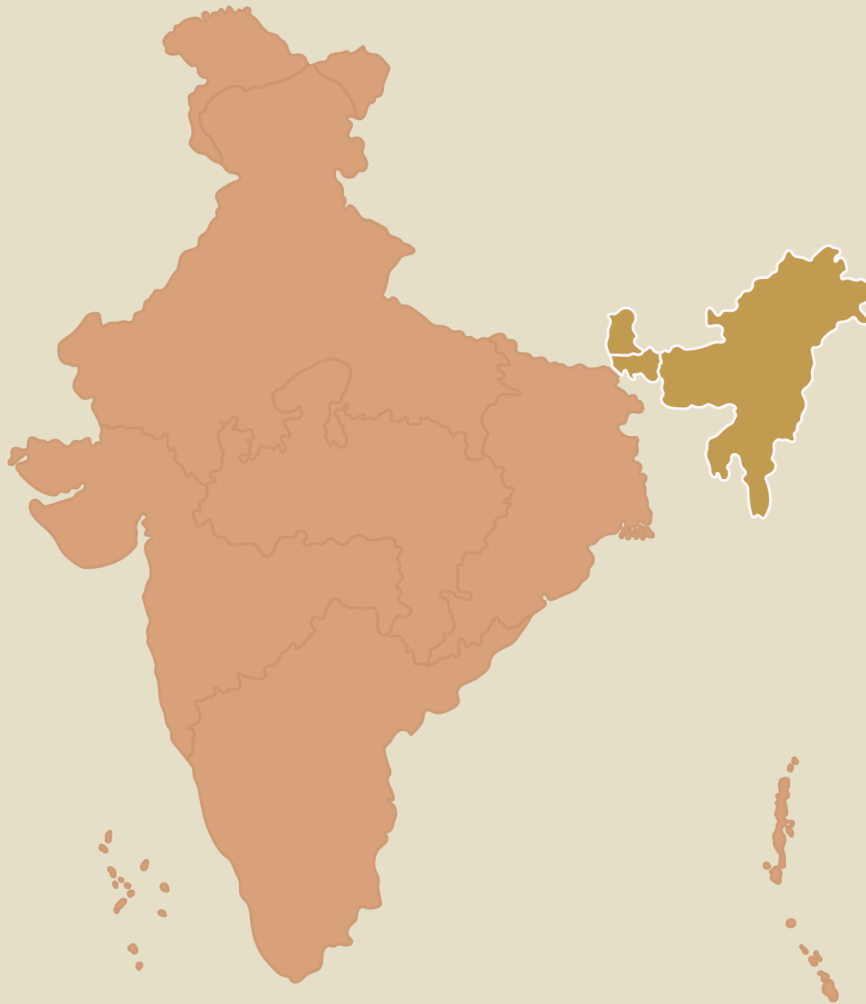




**Chintan
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ELEVATING IDEAS
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WEBINAR REPORT

ACT EAST POLICY

A North Eastern Perspective

07 November 2025



ABOUT CRF

Chintan Research Foundation is an independent think tank dedicated to shaping policy through rigorous research and thought leadership. With a strong focus on fostering collaboration between policymakers and industry, CRF integrates practical insights into its research and advocacy efforts. It conducts comprehensive research to support informed decision-making and engages with stakeholders through discussions, events, and publications. CRF's research is focused on three core domains – Climate Change & Energy Transition, Economy & Trade, and Geopolitics & Strategic Studies. For more details, refer to the website: www.crfindia.org

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FOREWORD



The Act East Policy (AEP) represents a fundamental reorientation of India's strategic and economic engagement with Southeast Asia and its immediate regional neighbourhood. Launched as a cornerstone of India's foreign policy, this initiative has evolved into a multidimensional framework encompassing connectivity, trade, culture, and capacity building. The policy is intrinsically linked to India's broader vision of Vikshit Bharat 2047—a vision of a developed and prosperous India that leverages its geographic position, demographic dividend, and institutional strengths to drive regional and global integration.

However, the translation of strategic vision into tangible ground-level outcomes remains a significant challenge. While the policy has catalysed important infrastructure projects, diplomatic engagements, and economic initiatives across the Northeast, its benefits have been unevenly distributed. Eight Northeastern states—each with distinct geographical, demographic, and socio-cultural characteristics—face region-specific impediments that require contextualized policy implementation rather than uniform application.

In this context, Chintan Research Foundation convened a comprehensive webinar on “Act East Policy: A North Eastern Perspective” to examine the policy's trajectory, identify implementation bottlenecks, and formulate actionable recommendations for stakeholders. The event brought together senior scholars and academicians from the region to reflect particularly how they locate their respective states in India's AEP, how they have benefited from it, what the major challenges are and how they can be addressed.

The novelty of the dialogue was in bringing voices from the region to discuss and deliberate in a free and frank manner so that policy solutions can be infused with a community driven approach. This report, therefore, does a yeoman service to the imperative of offering off-ramp views to the ongoing academic and policy discourse on the inevitable role of the Northeast in India's AEP.

Warm regards,
Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi
President, Chintan Research Foundation

Webinar

Act East Policy: A North Eastern Perspective

WEBINAR

ACT EAST POLICY

A NORTH EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

7 November 2025

11 am to 1 pm

Microsoft Teams

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PANELLISTS

- Dr. Indrani Talukdar, Fellow, CRF (Moderator)
- Dr. Monish Tourangbam, Senior Research Consultant, CRF (Moderator)
- Dr. Rajeev Rai, Assistant Professor, ICFAI University, Sikkim
- Dr. JC Zomuanthanga, Associate Professor, Mizoram University, Mizoram
- Dr. Monalisa Tase, Assistant Professor, Nagaland University, Nagaland
- Dr. Bhaswati Sarmah, Assistant Professor, Grijananda Chowdhury University, Assam
- Dr. Anuradhan Oinam, Assistant Professor, Imphal College, Manipur
- Dr. Tashi Phuntso, Principal, Government College, Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh
- Dr. Biplob Debnath, Assistant Professor, Tripura University, Tripura
- Dr. Batskhem Myrboh, Associate Professor, NEHU, Meghalaya

Introduction

The centrality and unmistakable relevance of India's eight Northeastern states in India's Act East Policy (AEP) and outreach to the Southeast Asian extended neighbourhood is well known and has become a growing subject of inquiry in the academic and policymaking community. In the realm of politics, economics, security and strategy, the future of India's Northeast is inextricably intertwined with the contours of the Act East Policy and how they align with each of the Northeastern states. While several discussions and reports already exist on the Northeast and the Act East Policy, CRF believes that it is imperative to bring voices from the ground, to share the perspectives from the respective states. Through this webinar, the speakers representing each of the eight states, presented very precise and policy-oriented views on how their particular states' vision aligns with the AEP, spelled out the challenges and also explored ways in which they can be addressed, particularly focussing on the development and economic aspects.

India's Act East Policy remains a cornerstone of India's strategic framework, shaping its economic, cultural, and geopolitical engagement with the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Northeastern states hold a place of singular importance within this vision as the nation's gateway—both geographically and culturally—to Southeast Asia. As India marches toward its ambitious national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the role of these states in regional connectivity, trade facilitation, and cross-border cooperation has taken on increasing significance.

India is at a crucial juncture when the transformative potential of the Act East Policy must be critically examined beyond rhetoric. While India's foreign policy recalibration and regional outreach have gained momentum, the implementation on the ground in the Northeastern states reflects both progress and complex challenges. The strategic importance of these states in enhancing connectivity infrastructure,

fostering people-to-people engagement, and supporting multi-dimensional cooperation with ASEAN countries cannot be overstated. Yet, realities such as infrastructural disparities, socio-political sensitivities, and geopolitical dynamics shape the unfolding journey.

The webinar brought scholars and voices from the eight Northeastern states to deliberate on these issues under Chatham House rules. It offered an opportunity to share insights about successes, identify bottlenecks, and explore innovative pathways to strengthen policy implementation in alignment with national priorities and regional aspirations. The discussion's overarching aim was to inform policymaking that is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the unique demographic, cultural, and geographic characteristics of the Northeastern region.

The Act East Policy embodies a comprehensive and forward-looking approach to harnessing economic opportunities, amplifying cultural linkages, and reinforcing strategic partnerships with the Northeastern states positioned as vital actors in this process. The active engagement and shared expertise of all participants immensely enriched the dialogue and contributed meaningfully to advancing India's vision for regional integration and development.

The webinar was divided into two sessions covering perspectives from four different states of the Northeast in each session. The first session included perspectives from Sikkim, Meghalaya, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh and the second session covered the views from Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura.

SESSION I

The Act East Policy, while transformative in its ambition, requires sustained investment, institutional coordination and political stability to yield tangible outcomes on the ground. Each of the eight states, depending on differential geographic features, historical legacy, socio-political dynamics, security and strategic imperatives have had both similarities and dissimilarities in how they look at the Act East policy. The webinar was particularly successful in deep diving into the perspectives that are germane to understanding the intersectionality between the local, national, regional and global.

Sikkim is strategically positioned between Nepal, Bhutan and China, giving the state a natural role in India's eastern outreach. However, its mountainous terrain, fragile ecology and limited digital and physical connectivity impose structural constraints that must be realistically addressed. The state's development trajectory cannot rely on conventional infrastructure models. Instead, eco-sensitive planning, calibrated border development and people-centred initiatives are essential. The promise of the policy lies in expanding tourism, strengthening cultural exchanges and supporting small-scale local trade but these avenues must be pursued through frameworks that balance environmental sustainability with economic aspirations. Like any project of regional integration, the success of Sikkim's engagement under AEP will depend not on intent alone, but on a careful assessment of feasibility and long-term institutional viability

Similarly, Meghalaya's experience demonstrates both opportunity and systemic unevenness. While collaborations with Japan range from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)-supported Shillong–Dawki–Tamabil road to a nursing placement programme sending dozens of nurses to Japan with a multi-year target of 3,000–5,000, as well as shiitake mushroom cultivation with YATS Corporation that showcases early gains, the broader impact of the Act East Policy remains limited. The absence of an international airport and railway connectivity in Shillong continues to impede tourist inflows.

Diplomatic outreach too has been modest, exemplified by the South Korean Ambassador's visit only once or twice over two to three decades. While people-to-people linkages with Bangladesh are growing and inclusive, community-driven tourism holds long-term promise, a realistic evaluation reveals that connectivity gaps, environmental fragility and low local trust in government initiatives remain substantial barriers. Any forward movement will require meticulous assessment of Meghalaya's carrying capacity, careful sequencing of trade and tourism initiatives, and the embedding of community consent as a core operational principle.

Manipur's position within the Act East Policy is marked by both geographic centrality and political fragility. Situated along a 390 km border with Myanmar, Manipur stands at the heart of India's aspirations for connectivity, commerce, culture and capacity-building. Yet the state's potential remains significantly constrained by instability across the border, infrastructural gaps and persistent security challenges.

The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and ASEAN-linked corridors present major opportunities, but a realistic assessment must recognise that conflict in Myanmar has halted

momentum. Ground realities also confirm that while regional enthusiasm exists, implementation has been disrupted. The Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh despite being India's primary land-based trade node with Myanmar operates amid porous borders, drug trafficking, insurgency, criminal networks, and socio-political disturbances, all of which undermine reliable economic activity.

Moreover, Manipur's internal constraints like poor roads, high airfares, weak digital connectivity and inadequate medical and transport infrastructure limit mobility and isolate remote communities. Agricultural potential remains underutilised due to the absence of technology, cold chains and processing. As with any strategic connectivity initiative, peace, stability and institutional capacity in border management are foundational. A results-oriented approach would require modernising surveillance, tightening law enforcement, preventing the re-emergence of "Golden Triangle" dynamics, and strengthening internal linkages within the Northeast and with the rest of India before expanding outward. Medical tourism, military tourism, skill development and improved public transport form essential, feasible building blocks for long-term integration.

Arunachal Pradesh exemplifies a state where strategic geography intersects with infrastructural challenges. Bordering China, Myanmar and Bhutan, and home to vast ethnic diversity, the state has benefited from a strengthened Centre-State interface under the Act East Policy. The operationalisation of the Itanagar airport, expansions in railway connectivity and major arterial projects such as the Trans-Arunachal Highway, the Frontier Highway near the China border and the East West Industrial Corridor linking the foothills to Assam represent important progress.

Yet, as in other large-scale connectivity efforts, macro-level achievements mask micro-level deficits. The state's low road density, just 17 km per 100 sq km, continues to restrict access to remote settlements, and without feeder and link roads, major highways cannot unlock economic value. The agricultural sector illustrates this gap: out of 25 lakh hectares of cultivable land, only 5 lakh hectares are used due to disjointed settlements and limited transport access. A realistic approach requires developing a scientific agricultural database, mapping land-crop suitability, and promoting high-value produce such as kiwi, oranges, spices and vegetables.

Long-term success will depend not only on infrastructure but also on enabling local entrepreneurship, aligning development with ecological sustainability, and deepening economic integration with Assam before expanding into cross-border trade. The vision is ambitious but must be balanced with practical, geographically informed planning.

Across states, the discussion underscored that the Act East Policy, much like any large-scale connectivity initiative, must reconcile strategic ambition with on-ground realities. Environmental degradation in Meghalaya's Dawki River and East Jaintia Hills due to limestone mining, socio-political resistance to railway expansion owing to fears of demographic pressure, and the continuing impact of India-China tensions on regional connectivity routes all highlight the need for realistic assessments.

Strengthening local participation, building trust with communities, ensuring ecological safeguards, and improving internal Northeast connectivity emerged as common priorities. The policy's success will depend not merely on infrastructure, but on the capacity to address structural gaps, align local and national interests, and sustain long-term cooperation across political, economic and social domains.

SESSION II

The Act East Policy (AEP) is a platform that facilitates far more than just trade, encompassing a broad spectrum of strategic sectors beyond logistics. It reflects both the transformative potential of regional integration and the challenges of implementing development strategies in fragile geographies.

The growth of Nagaland's start-up ecosystem—supported by Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) with nine recognised start-ups receiving ₹1 crore each, and the 200% rise in registrations through YouthNet's Start-up India Seed Fund Scheme illustrate the early gains from targeted capacity-building and mentorship. Simultaneously, alignment with Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision through initiatives such as the JICA-supported Nagaland Forest Management Project demonstrates how international partnerships are expanding sustainable development outcomes.

Yet, the persistent insurgency narrative, the "disturbed area" designation, and repeated failures of major road projects including NH-29 and the Foothills Road due to recurrent landslides underscore the need for context-specific planning rooted in local knowledge and rigorous geotechnical research. A significant structural gap between academia and policymakers continues to restrict the translation of research into implementation, requiring institutional mechanisms that bridge these divides.

Strategic priorities ahead include community-driven development for a largely rural population, leveraging soft power through music, arts, and crafts for early-stage external engagement, strengthening monitoring systems for centrally-funded projects through strict vigilance mechanisms, and prioritizing intra-regional connectivity within the Northeast before advancing international linkages. While private sector participation remains limited compared to Assam, Nagaland holds substantial potential in renewable energy, IT services, artisan industries, ecotourism, and health tourism—provided partnerships are grounded in community support.

Assam, by contrast, occupies a central and more advanced position within AEP due to its strategic geography bordering Bhutan and Bangladesh and its proximity to Myanmar and China. Connectivity initiatives—ranging from the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project and India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway to ICPs such as Daranga, expanded railway networks, northeast economic corridors, and revived routes like the Stillwell Road—highlight the scale of infrastructural integration under way.

Direct international air links from Guwahati to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur and a new terminal enabling expanded routes further strengthen foreign engagement. High-value investments—Tata's semiconductor plant in Morigaon, FDI in hydrocarbons from Thailand and Malaysia, bioethanol and polypropylene projects, and major agro-food infrastructure like the North East Mega Food Park—demonstrate growing industrial diversification. Assam's cultural diplomacy, rooted in mobile theatre and shared cultural circuits with Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, complements these economic efforts. Institutional backing through the Act East Policy Affairs Department and the "Advantage Assam" initiative reinforce the state's position as the Northeast's economic gateway.

However, recurring floods, difficult terrain, investor security perceptions, weak capacity within administrative institutions, and insufficient coordination with neighbouring Northeastern states

hinder policy execution. Regional instability in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar continues to disrupt connectivity and trade flows. Strengthening export capabilities, accelerating corridor completion, expanding research-driven policymaking, and attracting investment from advanced ASEAN economies such as Singapore and Malaysia remain essential for realizing Assam's full potential as the engine of India's Act East Policy.

Mizoram's strategic relevance emerges from its 722 km of international borders—510 km with Myanmar and 210 km with Bangladesh—making it a natural gateway to Southeast Asia. The Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement of 1994, operationalised in 1995, with 22 items later expanded to 62, has structured the evolution of Zokhawthar's Land Customs Station across three phases: traditional/free exchange trade, barter trade, and finally normal/regulated trade.

Beyond infrastructure, the strength of cross-border ethnic, linguistic, religious, and institutional linkages—particularly between Mizo and Chin communities, through organizations like the Young Mizo Association and the Presbyterian Church—continues to facilitate mobility for education, joint cultural and sports engagements, and shared media consumption. Mizoram's integration into flagship projects such as the Kaladan multimodal initiative and upcoming railway extensions positions the state as a key land corridor for India's engagement with Myanmar and the broader ASEAN region.

Tripura's role in AEP is driven primarily by its 84% border adjacency with Bangladesh, enabling multiple cross-border routes crucial for regional diplomacy and economic connectivity. The Agartala-Akhaura rail link, inaugurated in November 2023, is expected to provide a shorter route to Kolkata via Bangladesh, considerably reducing travel time. The Maitri Setu bridge (Sabroom-Ramgarh), inaugurated in March 2021, offers direct access to Chattogram Port—the closest maritime outlet for Tripura and the wider Northeast. Inland water connectivity through the Sonamura-Daudkandi route under the India-Bangladesh Protocol has shown early viability though commercial volumes remain limited. External actors have strengthened Tripura's development landscape, with Japan (through the Act East Forum and JICA) supporting road, power, and environmental projects, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) providing around USD 85 million for infrastructure and industrial development.

Despite these advances, implementation delays persist due to regulatory and post-pandemic constraints. Equity concerns remain acute as development is concentrated in the plains while the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) region covers 68% of Tripura's land area, raising questions about whether tribal communities equitably benefit from growing cross-border opportunities. Private sector participation also remains limited despite the state's potential in bamboo, agarwood, tourism, and industrial logistics. Sustained diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh, operationalizing completed infrastructure, and ensuring inclusive development across ethnic and regional divides are essential for maximizing Tripura's strategic role within AEP.

In the final analysis, all the speakers from the eight states of the region shared their concerns regarding socio-political and ecological concerns that are arising from connectivity and infrastructure expansion under AEP. Despite the benefits that the states have received from the AEP, the potential of the region has not been tapped given the internal constraints that the states are facing and external circumstances. Overall, the speakers also emphasized that managing India's political and economic

ties with its immediate and extended neighbourhood was extremely crucial to leveraging the true potential of the Northeastern region as a central node to India's economic growth and development. It was also highlighted that reopening of historic trade routes once linking the Northeast to wider Asian markets is important. The speakers suggested that community participation, strengthening of local stakeholder engagements, enhancement of cross-border connectivity and trust-building measures are prerequisites for sustainable progress and a successful AEP.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Economic Development & Trade

- To enhance Act East Policy's resilience, long - term viability and promote holistic, all-round development of the Northeast, it is imperative to promote deeper economic integration with anchor states like Assam to build resilient supply chains, nurture domestic markets and create a stable foundation for future ASEAN trade expansion. Recent milestones exemplify how collaborative frameworks can enhance logistics, resource sharing, and market access across the Northeast. India must strategically attract investments from advanced ASEAN economies like Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand into Northeast India's high-potential sectors like renewable energy, IT services, ecotourism, health tourism and artisanal products while diversifying investment ecosystem beyond government initiatives through private sector engagement in connectivity, logistics, and healthcare. Concurrently, establishing sector-specific facilitation centers, investor-assistance cells, and robust public-private partnership frameworks will enhance the ease of doing business.
- Developing comprehensive state-specific agricultural databases will provide precise mapping of crop suitability, particularly kiwi, oranges, spices, and vegetables which are tailored to local soil, climate, and topography and foster agro-processing industries which align with ecological constraints. Leveraging geospatial tools for crop estimation in hilly terrains, these databases will enable data-driven decisions for sustainable farming and value addition in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.
- Local entrepreneurs must be provided targeted financial support, incubation facilities, and value-chain integration for entrepreneurs in the region to scale micro-enterprises in sectors like agri-tech, handicrafts, and ecotourism. Initiatives launched in recent years have helped in exemplifying effective models for credit access and mentorship in these states.
- Emphasis should be laid on broadband connection, mobile network rollout, and digital payment systems to catalyze education, e-governance, entrepreneurship, and essential service delivery in Northeast India's remote regions. Key initiatives under government schemes are bridging the digital divide, enabling online learning, telemedicine, and e-commerce growth.
- There is a need to prioritize bolstering Northeast India's internal road, rail, air, and digital connectivity ahead of Southeast Asian expansion by harnessing government schemes and complement them with investments in last-mile feeder roads, affordable transport, and inter-state links to unify markets and drive economic integration.

- In Northeast India's mountainous states - Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland, eco-sensitive planning is essential to balance infrastructure development with environmental protection. Major projects like highways, railways and mining should comply with strict safeguards to prevent ecological damage such as river pollution, deforestation and landslides. Promoting sustainable, high-value, low-impact tourism can support economic growth while conserving biodiversity. Additionally, the strengthening of environmental monitoring and regulatory compliance in resource-intensive industries is crucial to ensure long-term ecological resilience. These steps align with national efforts to sustain fragile ecosystems and promote sustainable development.
- India should promote small-scale, environmentally sustainable border trade, high-value agricultural exports, artisanal handicrafts and community-managed ecotourism to leverage Northeast India's unique comparative advantages in biodiversity and cultural heritage. These initiatives align with ongoing efforts to highlight sustainable textiles, handicrafts, and eco-tourism as growth sectors, fostering local livelihoods while minimizing ecological impact.

Social & Community-Centric Issues

- One of the most important aspects is embedding mandatory Northeast-specific sensitization modules into academic curriculum, administrative training, and foreign policy institutes to foster contextual understanding among policymakers and academicians. Complement this with fortified monitoring frameworks for centrally funded projects via joint central-state oversight committees, augmented by stringent vigilance commissions, real-time digital auditing platforms, and accountability protocols to guarantee timely project delivery, minimize fund leakages, and maintain fiscal integrity across Northeast India's development portfolio.
- To ensure sustainable and inclusive development in Northeast India, particularly in states like Nagaland where over 70% of the population resides in rural areas and governance is shaped by socio-cultural norms, it is imperative to adopt a community-driven development model. AEP-aligned projects that span through trade, tourism, infrastructure, logistics, and skill development must be designed with substantive participation from local stakeholders to foster trust and minimize resistance. Strengthening mechanisms for grievance redressal, expanding consultation processes and ensuring equitable benefit-sharing are essential to address socio-political opposition, including resistance to major initiatives such as railway expansion in Meghalaya. This participatory approach will enhance project acceptance and effectiveness while respecting local cultural contexts.
- India must leverage the Northeast region's distinctive cultural assets such as vibrant music, traditional arts, handicrafts, festivals, and ethnic connections such as Mizo-Chin linkages to advance cross-border diplomacy with ASEAN nations. This approach enables effective regional engagement without substantial investments in physical infrastructure, fostering people-to-people ties through cultural exchanges, festivals and shared heritage initiatives. These efforts will strengthen people-to-people connectivity, enhance mutual trust, and amplify India's cultural influence in the Indo-Pacific without requiring major infrastructure outlays.

- Expanding educational exchange programs, research collaborations, and skill-development initiatives is vital for fostering stronger socio-cultural integration between Northeast India and ASEAN countries. Such initiatives enhance human capital, encourage cross-cultural understanding, and build lasting partnerships. By facilitating student and faculty exchanges, joint research projects, and skill-building workshops, these programs create platforms for knowledge sharing and mutual growth. Moreover, incorporating courses on Southeast Asian history, languages, and culture in Northeast Indian institutions can deepen regional appreciation and prepare students for active participation in the wider ASEAN community. Strengthening collaborative academic networks, such as those offered through the ASEAN-India Framework further supports this integration, cultivating future leaders equipped to advance regional cooperation and development.

Strategic & Security Dimensions

- India must sustain robust diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh and Myanmar, focusing on cross-border infrastructure projects that deliver tangible benefits to communities on both sides, while reinforcing cultural, societal, and educational exchanges especially among ethnic groups such as the Mizo–Chin community who share deep linguistic, religious and cultural bonds. Given ongoing tensions with China that constrain reopening of historic trade routes, policy should emphasize the development and strengthening of alternative connectivity corridors through Bangladesh and Myanmar to ensure resilient access to ASEAN markets. This approach aligns with India's pragmatic engagement in the region, balancing strategic cooperation with Myanmar's government alongside outreach to ethnic groups while maintaining strong ties with Bangladesh despite geopolitical complexities, ultimately aiming to promote stability, regional integration, and inclusive growth.
- Any progress in the Act East Policy is subject to regional disturbances due to ethnic violence in states like Manipur since May 2023, and designated status of Nagaland as 'disturbed state' impeding their socio - economic credibility, which has stalled key important projects in the region. Bolstering border security via enhanced regulation, community policing, inter-agency intelligence fusion, and conflict mediation in high-risk districts while advancing trust-building dialogues and equitable development will benefit allocation across ethnic groups to defuse tensions and promote inclusive regional progress.
- Northeast remains susceptible to geopolitical turbulence. There is urgent need to upgrade and fully operationalize vital border points which includes Zokhawthar LCS in Mizoram, Moreh in Manipur and Tripura's entry points to Bangladesh to facilitate secure, efficient and regulated cross-border movement. It is crucial to develop integrated, modern border management systems that effectively counter trafficking networks, enhance law enforcement capabilities and prevent the emergence of illicit activities akin to the "Golden Triangle." Furthermore, prioritizing the completion of key cross-border connectivity corridors such as the Kaladan project while harmonizing road, rail and digital infrastructure with evolving regional demands is also essential for realizing the full potential of the Act East Policy.

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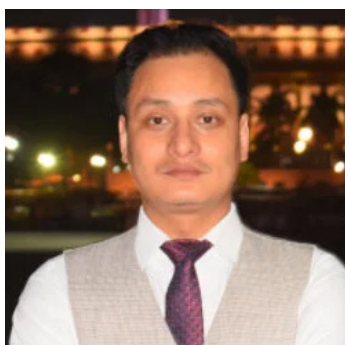


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