

The Gateway Reimagined: Northeast India's Centrality in India's Act East Policy

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Abstract

Foreign policy shift took place in India from the reactive look east policy (1991) to the proactive Act East Policy (AEP, 2014), which has completely changed the strategic identity of the Northeast region in India. In the national narrative, the Northeast is the periphery of the nation that has been plagued by insurgency, underdevelopment and geographical remoteness, but today, it is the centre of gravity of the most important foreign policy document in India. This paper looks at four analytical lenses that make Northeast India central to the AEP: firstly, Northeast India's role as the infrastructure hub for India's connectivity drive to Southeast Asia and the West, secondly, underrated civilisational and cultural linkages of Northeast India with the ASEAN societies, thirdly, its irreplaceable geo-political and geostrategic significance, and fourthly, its formidable internal and external constraints that still limit its strategic potential. The paper, which adopts a qualitative analytical approach, contends that Northeast is not just a corridor but a 'geopolitical living asset' whose development has been inextricably linked with the success or failure of India's endeavour to engage the eastern region. It ends with a set of policy options to address the Northeast's paradoxical status as an indispensable and institutionally neglected region.

Keywords

Act East Policy, Northeast India, ASEAN, Kaladan Multimodal Project, India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, cultural diplomacy, geostrategy, connectivity, Indo-Pacific, Look East Policy.