

## NORTH EASTERN REGION OF INDIA: GATEWAY TO ASEAN COUNTRIES

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### ABSTRACT

Officially designated as the Northeast Region (NER), Northeast India is an area made up of eight states that area extremely strategic due to its location, ethnic, and Tran's border realities. Most importantly, the NER international geographical proximity, shares 98% of its borders with international countries such as Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, which makes it more important in terms of connectivity with ASEAN countries. The Indian government launched the Act East Policy, a proactive shift to Look East Policy of P.V. Narasimha Rao, in November 2014. The Act East Policy is anticipated to serve as the macro- development of India's North-eastern area in its operational aspect. Therefore, Act East Policy is being implemented by the government of India with a focus on trade and economic links with ASEAN nations, where visions for trade and the economy typically include mobility, the flow of goods, and regional implementation of NER and bridges are being built throughout the North East Region for this reason. Additionally, there are some sub- regional forum initiatives, such as the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), the Bangladesh China India and Myanmar Forum (BCIM), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which are all intended to serve as gateways to East and South East Asia. This research paper will attempt how the Act East Policy affects the North Eastern Region and how North Eastern region become gateway to ASEAN countries. It will also look at the difficulties and how the North East Region perceives the Act East Policy.

**Keywords:** Northeast Region (NER), Connectivity, ASEAN, Infrastructure, Act East policy, BCIM, BIMSTEC

## INTRODUCTION

Often referred to as the "Seven Sisters and Sikkim," it is a land rich in varied cultures (with 220 languages spoken) and breathtaking natural beauty. Each of the eight states that comprise the region has its own distinct charm and character. The Land of Sunrise (Arunachal Pradesh), the World's Largest River Island (Majuli, Assam), The cleanest village in Asia (Mawlynnong, Shilling), the oldest oil well and the first modern oil refinery in India (Assam's Digboi), the world's largest tea-growing region (Assam), and India's most literate states (Tripura and Mizoram) are some of the most beautiful regions in the country. The Northeast is an incredible social and cultural ecology. There is a variety of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity crammed into such a little region. This variety is an inspiration to mankind. The Northeast has some of the world's oldest indigenous communities. It is one of India's spiritual homelands. Whether it's the Devi traditions in Kamakhya or Buddhism in Tawang and elsewhere, they provide a strong tie that connects India and Southeast Asia<sup>i</sup>.

The North Eastern Region of India is also significant geographically, as it has international boundaries with Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The Northeast's geographical advantage makes it an important hub for regional diplomacy and foreign relations<sup>ii</sup>. In these broader areas, initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Projects are vital for several countries, particularly in the North Eastern Region. The Northeast Region also serves as a commerce and connectivity corridor for BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan- India-Nepal) and BIMSTEC projects. The Northeast Tourism Development Council, established in March 2017, is forming partnerships between government and private sector entities to make the Northeast one of the top tourism destinations in not just India, but also in ASEAN countries. Furthermore, the position of this region improves India's connectivity with ASEAN countries, which benefits both the economy and geopolitical interests<sup>iii</sup>. However, the eight northeastern states have historically been in the headlines for negative reasons such as blocked roads and violence, and prejudices establish opinions about people while ignoring their importance. After decades, India's North Eastern area has enjoyed a year of peace and improvement, making it a talking point for culture, connectivity, and overall development. For decades, the region has experienced persistent insurgency-related bloodshed. The BJP-led union government has adopted the 'Peace through Development' program in recent years, including moves to abolish the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Northeast India. PM Modi, who also attended the North Eastern Council's golden jubilee meeting in Shillong, stated that the Northeast is our gateway to South-East Asia and has become a regional growth hub as a result of Act East policy. The current government, as well as a large number of people, argues that the Act East Policy has the potential to become an economic growth tool for India's Northeast Region by expanding trade and investment to East and Southeast Asian countries. Northeast India is crucial to the Act East Policy, which focuses on connection development projects with South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

### How was the relationship with ASEAN? How was it developed?

If we look at the history of India's connection with ASEAN countries, it is not new. In terms of South and Southeast Asia, it has been from ancient times. From the Middle East to South Asia, the ancient belief in the diffusion of Indian civilization was evident. The Chola dynasty was one of the Indian dynasties that pushed their trade into the Southeast during the ancient period. India's uninterrupted civilization for five millennia has resulted in a rich heritage culture that is tied to the country's geopolitical, cultural, economic, and soft power linkages in the region. Hinduism and Buddhism started in India and spread throughout Asia, primarily through trade routes. Buddhism was practiced in Vietnam, China, Japan, Burma, Cambodia, Korea, and Thailand, but Hinduism was more common in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Southeast Asia and India share cultural similarities.

Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated, "India has historically had a significant influence on Southeast Asia, both economically and culturally. Southeast Asia is home to several variations of the Ramayana narrative." The region's civilization genuinely began in India. During the British colonial era, India and the countries of East and Southeast Asia had little cultural and civilization links. Nehru's anti-colonial philosophy bonded "pivot of Asia" to its present and potential material might, as well as its geostrategic location after independence<sup>iv</sup>. Nehru also describes Southeast and East Asia as part of "Greater India." During the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s, India was unable to persuade the bulk of Asian states to join the non-alignment movement. In certain areas, relations with India improved beginning in the late 1980s. The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, signaling the end of the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, India experienced severe economic crisis, prompting the country to implement the New Economic Policy in 1991. Under P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Indian government implemented the "Look East Policy" in 1992.

This policy entailed deliberate engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN, with a particular emphasis on commercial and investment ties. According to Minister of External Affairs Yashwant Sinha, India's Look East policy was divided into two phases. The first phase was ASEAN-centric and focused mostly on trade and investment links. This policy's new phase is marked by a broader definition of "East," which includes East Asia, with ASEAN at its core, and stretches from Australia. The new phase also signals a shift away from trade and toward broader economic and security issues, such as cooperation steps to secure maritime lanes and plan counterterrorism operations.

### What significance does ASEAN hold for India?

If we give an answer to this question, we say India needs a close diplomatic relationship with ASEAN nations both for economic and security reasons; connectivity with the ASEAN nations can allow India to improve its presence in the region because these connectivity projects keep Northeast India at the center; ensuring the economic growth of the North Eastern states; improved trade ties with the ASEAN nations would mean a counter to China's presence in the region and

economic growth and development for India. ASEAN holds a central position in the Indo-Pacific's rules-based security architecture, which is critical for India because most of its trade is dependent on maritime security; collaboration with ASEAN nations is required to counter insurgency in the North Eastern Region, combat terrorism, tax evasion, and so on. Because of the relevance of the present BJP government led by Modi, his Act East Policy promotes extensive engagement and the establishment of an extensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN countries. Also, during the BJP government, their objectives, Atma Nirbar Bharat and Make in India, have been successfully implemented in India through the signing of military agreements with ASEAN nations. In September 2023, PM Modi submitted a 12-point proposal to strengthen collaboration between India and 10 ASEAN member countries in sectors including as connectivity, trade, and digital transformation, while also advocating for the establishment of a rules-based post-Covid world order.

## **ACT EAST POLICY**

Currently, the BJP government in India has embraced a proactive foreign policy aimed at forging a better world order. In the twenty-first century, India aspires to be a major economic developed country among neighboring countries, major resource power countries, and regional economic power countries, etc. After 2014, the Indian government under Narendra Modi implemented a number of proactive policies, including the Act East Policy (AEP), which is a proactive and expanded version of the earlier Look East Policy (LEP) initiated by Narasimha Rao in 1991. Act East strategy is a key pillar of India's foreign strategy. But let's dig further into one of the main forces behind the transformative partnership: the Act East Policy, which was previously known as the Look East Policy. In 2014, the Look East Policy underwent a substantial transition, turning into the Act East Policy<sup>v</sup>. This new approach has broadened its focus to include the greater Asia Pacific region as an extended neighborhood. Initially envisaged largely as an economic endeavor, the Act East Policy has expanded to include political, strategic, and cultural components. To accomplish these comprehensive goals, it has built institutional mechanisms for conversation and collaboration between India and ASEAN nations<sup>vi</sup>. The Act East Policy is a strategy to strengthen economic and strategic cooperation with countries in South East Asia and Northeast Asia in Oceania, with the goal of connecting India with old historical linkages across their region and engaging India in rule making and rule creation in this region to ensure a prosperous and secure future for Indians.

The Act East Policy has advanced and emphasizes economic and security cooperation and integration with East Asian countries like as China, Japan, and South Korea, in addition to ASEAN states. The Prime Minister of India underlined the four C's of Act East Policy: culture, commerce, connectivity, and capacity building. Security is an important dimension of India's Act East Policy, as evidenced by India's role in countering China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region (for example, QUAD, an informal military grouping consisting of Australia, the United States, India, and Japan to counter China's dominance) and its ongoing efforts to combat terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and so on<sup>vii</sup>.

The Act East Policy's core principles and objectives are threefold: to promote economic cooperation, strengthen cultural ties, and develop strategic relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region through a proactive and pragmatic approach, thereby improving the economic development of the North Eastern Region (NER), which serves as a gateway to the South East Asia Region. The ASEAN leaders warmly welcomed India's Act East Policy. They highlighted the potential for these projects to supplement ASEAN Community building efforts and encouraged strong collaboration with ASEAN to fulfill the goal of ASEAN 2025 and the 4G future together. As we know, Northeast India serves as the entrance to Southeast Asia under the Act East Policy. Myanmar and India have expressed a desire to re-establish long-shuttered transportation links and connections. Dr. S Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, made some very fascinating comments about the Northeast of India and how it has to further integrate with its broader Southeast Asian neighbors, and how Japan is playing a key role in promoting these links. He stated, "Consider what happens if land connectivity through Myanmar and sea connectivity through Bangladesh become possible on a commercial basis. A world all the way to Vietnam and the Philippines, from Haiphong (Vietnam) to Hazira (Inhza, Surat in Mumbai, India) and from Manila (Philippines) to Mundra (India), would open, forming an East-West lateral with far-reaching implications for the continent. It would not only strengthen our partnership with ASEAN and Japan, but it would also have an impact on the Indo-Pacific economic framework that is currently being developed. We have the ability to overcome geography and rewrite history if the politics and economics are handled correctly. The Modi government's focus on the Northeast makes it clear that we should collaborate with our most trusted global partners. In 2017, we established the India-Japan Act East Forum as a platform to bring together all stakeholders and coordinate the development and implementation of projects being conducted with Japanese assist<sup>viii</sup>. These include projects in areas such as road and highway connectivity, renewable energy, forest management, urban amenities, and health-care system strengthening (May 28, 2022, Guwahati, ASIAN Conference engaging the third space).

India has been working on a number of projects under the Act East Policy, some of which has been postponed or has not been completed, but overall include. Bangladesh is also at the forefront of the Act East Policy in many aspects, despite being a member of South Asia; therefore, India is opening up numerous new corridors and links that will allow for free movement of commodities and people. That is the essence of the Act East Policy. In fact, the free movement system was implemented with Myanmar in 2018 as part of the Act East Policy, just as diplomatic relations between India and Myanmar were improving.

The development of Northeast India is one of the key components of the Act East Policy. Act East Policy is crucial for connecting the Northeast with the rest of India, the Northeast with ASEAN, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and other countries. This fosters certain prosperity in the region because connectivity isn't just about roads and infrastructure; it's

also about power grids, energy lines, and experiences between individuals. The External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, stated during the NADI (Network of ASEAN Defence and Security Institution) Conference on May 28, 2022, "We hosted delegates from across the region, including every ambassador from ASEAN." Therefore, Northeast India's growth is crucial to the rest of the country and to India's ties with all of its neighbors, especially those with whom it shares a "Neighborhood First Policy" with its immediate neighbors.

The construction of these ambitious projects through Myanmar, be they waterways or roads, is crucial for India due to its historical, cultural, and economic ties that date back centuries, as well as for the general development of the Northeast Indian states. It is the only nation capable of serving as an intermediary between ASEAN and India. As India's entry point into Southeast Asia, Myanmar may provide the necessary catalyst for the implementation of India's Act East Policy. As for connection, India, Myanmar, and Thailand are constructing the Asian Trilateral Highway, a project that would connect Sittwe, Myanmar, to Kolkata, India's northeast, and the Kaladan River in Myanmar, to Sittwe.

## **NORTH EASTERN REGION GATEWAY TO ASEAN COUNTRIES**

The North East region is essential to the implementation of the India's Act East Policy. India's Northeast, sometimes known as the "Gateway to Southeast Asia," is strategically crucial for maintaining connections with the ASEAN countries<sup>ix</sup>. Located in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent, this area is strategically and economically important to our neighbors in Southeast Asia. Being geographically close to the ASEAN nations gives the Northeast Region an inherent advantage in terms of connectivity; it acts as a link between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. It is the perfect entry point for trade and business because of its close proximity, which drastically lowers transit times and expenses. The development of the Northeastern region has been given particular significance by the government, which is why the Ministry of DoNER is working hard at it. Secretary of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), Chanchal Kumar stated that the Ministry's mandate is to see to the holistic development of the region, which has a geographical mandate. "We observe that all Indian ministries carry out their programs in the North-eastern Region in an exclusive manner and devote at least 10% of their gross budgetary support to this area," Kumar added.

In addition, the Northeast has a wealth of cultural diversity, wildlife, and economic potential. This region's distinctive fusion of cultures and customs creates a space for cross-cultural interactions and cooperation. Furthermore, its natural riches and biodiversity present chances for cooperative development and sustainable growth in sectors like tourism and agriculture. Additionally, the Northeast has recently seen a significant increase in infrastructure projects, such as the construction of new highways, bridges, and tunnels, which have greatly improved connectivity. These advancements not only improve the region's economic prospects but also make it easier to trade and travel between Southeast Asian nations<sup>x</sup> (Bajpayee, 2017). As the esteemed Vice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar, once remarked, "The Northeast is looking up." The tourism, health, and education industries are booming, and the Northeast's rich culture and natural beauty are winning over both Indians and foreign visitors.

We have examined the Northeast Region's enormous potential with regard to its biodiversity, cultural variety, and economic opportunities. This region has the ability to grow and collaborate significantly, but what really sets Northeast in a larger context is not simply the potential, but also the continuous change. Deeper connection with India's ASEAN is highly promising, and the current quest for infrastructure projects is redefining connectivity in this area. There are now a number of large capital road connectivity projects in progress in India's northeastern region. Notable initiatives include the 4 Lining of the Dimapur-Kohima Road, which spans 62.9 KM and is anticipated to increase connection inside Nagaland. These projects aim to improve transportation and connectivity in the region. In addition, improving transportation connections is the goal of the 167-kilometer bypass from Nagaon, Assam, to Holog, Arunachal Pradesh. Aizawl-Tuipang NH-54, which involves expanding a significant 351 KM stretch to accommodate two lanes, is the latest example of Mizoram's efforts to improve road connectivity. Likewise, the Imphal-Moreh section of NH-39 is undergoing a four-lane development spanning 20 KM along the two-lane expansion of 75.4 KM within Manipur, fostering improved road lengths until December 2022. These developments are taking place in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Mizoram. 421 KM of new roads in Northeastern India have been completed by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways<sup>xi</sup>.

The Northeast now has much better road connectivity as a result of these completed projects, improving accessibility and transportation. According to the Ministry of DoNER, "People in the Eastern Region have access to health care, education, and agriculture; as a result of the decreased transition costs, the region is now more competitive when it comes to trade and interaction with neighboring countries." In fact, many of our neighbors are showing a newfound interest in engaging with our farmers, PSUs, and other stakeholders in a more focused manner at this time.

There are currently 17 active airports in the North Eastern Region, which improves air connectivity and accessibility. Donyi Polo Airport, formerly known as Holog Airport, was recently inaugurated in Arunachal Pradesh, extending the region's air travel possibilities. Several new Greenfield airports are in various phases of development, with the goal of improving the environment. These airports include Tezu in Arunachal Pradesh, Dibrugarh, Guwahati, and Silchar in Assam; Imphal in Manipur; Barapani in Meghalaya; and Agartala in Tripura. These advancements would make air travel more comfortable for inhabitants and visitors to Northeast India. Giving a boost to the expansion of the rail network in the region, new railway projects with a cumulative length of 8,647 kilometers have been sanctioned in Northeast India since 2014-15. There are now 20 projects in various phases of planning permission or execution for a new railway line and the doubling of existing lines in the region, covering a distance of more than 2,000 kilometers. A total of 321 kilometers of new railway have already been commissioned in the region, resulting in better rail connectivity<sup>xii</sup>. In the sphere of waterway connectivity in Northeast India, the government has sanctioned the following projects for the

development of inland water transport infrastructure on national waterways in the North Eastern region over a five-year period from 2020-21 to 2024-25. The River Brahmaputra from Dhubri (Bangladesh Border) to Sadiya was classified as National Waterway 2 in 1988. The waterway is being developed with the fairway to meet the requisite depth and width, as well as day and night navigation aids and terminals. River Barak was designated as a national waterway 16 in 2016. It connects Silchar, Karimganj, and Badarpur in Assam's Cachar Valley to Haldia and Kolkata ports via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol route. According to Harsh V. Pant, Head of ORF (Strategic Studies Programmed), "India's Act East Policy is centered around the Northeast and the way the Northeast has become a gateway to the wider Southeast Asia, and by doing so to the wider Indo-Pacific, India cannot be an Indo-Pacific player unless India is an important and organic player in Southeast Asia and East Asia. That can only happen through India's northeast." From antiquity to the present, connection has been a critical link that connects nations.

Today, Indian foreign policy aims to rekindle the embers of historical involvement with Southeast Asian countries by establishing a strong framework of regional interconnectedness. The India- Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project are two major initiatives that act as pillars for the North Eastern area. These projects that go beyond infrastructure development have the potential to influence regional dynamics. The India Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway, which spans an astonishing 1,360 kilometers, is more than just a road; it is a symbol of connection. It cuts a path across the heart of Southeast Asia, promoting commercial, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic ties. It's a modern-day embodiment of the age-old silk road, bringing new vitality to Myanmar's traditional commercial arteries. This roadway is critical to India's regional diplomatic engagement. India is building two portions in Myanmar: the 120.74 km Kalewa-Yagyi road section and the 149.70 km Tamu-Kyigone Kalewa Road section, which includes 69 bridges and an approach road. Again, Chanchal Kumar stated that "there are many highways connecting to the border area of 12.74% states and we hope that by the time these schemes are completed, these projects we'll have a very good ecosystem in place to enter into more trade with the neighbouring countries <sup>xiii</sup>(Srikant, H. (2016). Apart from boosting connectivity by improving road, rail, and air ties to enhance trade and people-to-people exchanges, collaborations between Ashta Lakshmi (Northeast India) and ASEAN have concentrated on a number of significant areas of cooperation. Trade and commerce connections have improved as a result of initiatives such as the Act East Policy, which encourages increased exports from Northeast India to Asian nations. Tourism campaigns aim to attract more visitors from Asian countries while encouraging cultural exchanges. Cultural events and festivals have also been arranged to exhibit the Northeast's rich and diverse legacy to Asian neighbors. Education and research collaborations have attempted to strengthen linkages between institutions in the Northeast and ASEAN nations. Encouraging foreign investment and developing economic partnerships, notably in agriculture, technology, and manufacturing, remains a goal. The collaboration extends to agriculture and horticulture, which includes common practices and horticultural product exports. Finally, coordinated efforts in regional security and counterterrorism have been critical in improving ties between Northeast Indian states and ASEAN. On September 7, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the 20th ASEAN-India summit and the 18th East Asia summit in Jakarta, Indonesia. During the summit, Mr. Modi conducted detailed discussions with ASEAN partners to strengthen the ASEAN-India comprehensive strategic partnership and chart a course for its future development. Prime Minister Modi presented a detailed 12-point proposal to strengthen India-ASEAN collaboration. This idea involves various elements of collaboration, including the construction of a multi-model connectivity and economic corridor that shares India's digital public infrastructure and establishing the ASEAN-India fund for digital future. ASEAN and East Asia's economic and research institutes will receive renewed support. Advocating for issues affecting the global South in international forums, collaborating on mission life, encouraging ASEAN nations to join the Global Centre for Traditional Medicine, combating terrorism, terror financing, and cyber disinformation, promoting disaster management efforts, and improving maritime safety, security, and domain awareness. These efforts demonstrate India's commitment to raising awareness and solving crucial issues with its ASEAN neighbors. The North Eastern Region has played an important part in India's foreign policy and its dynamic relationship with ASEAN<sup>xiv</sup>. The increased connectivity between Northeast India and ASEAN Nations goes beyond transportation infrastructure; it serves as a vital link for trade, cultural exchange, and diplomatic ties; this network reinforces India's active participation with its dynamic ASEAN counterparts. This narrative of cooperation development and diplomacy places the Northeast area as a critical cornerstone in India's involvement with ASEAN. As the Northeast evolves as a gateway to ASEAN<sup>xv</sup>, so does its relevance in ASEAN-India ties.

## THE CHALLENGES

The Act East Policy makes the North Eastern Region a major component of India's foreign policy, and the region will be the primary benefactor and performer under this policy. As a result, the success of Act East policy is dependent on the development of transportation in the North Eastern regions. Ambassador Navrekha Sharma made the following comment on February 23, 2015, during the opening session of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) seminar on "Integration Northeast in India's Act East Policy". She concluded that the LEP produced "mixed results". It has helped industrialists and highly qualified professionals, but it has not exceeded expectations in terms of employment generation. She went on to say that focusing solely on ASEAN will not enable the Northeast Region realize its full potential, and that the AEP's scope must encompass Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, with which the region has link. At the same conference, Prof. Amar Yumnam of Manipur University stated that the LEP/AEP had not done much. He discussed the geographic 'continuum' between Northeast India and adjacent countries. He emphasized that, in order to construct the AEP, we must first analyze the developmental needs of the NE Region, with a particular emphasis on Manipur. However, there are various explanations or causes of obstacles that postpone the outcome. Internal conflicts in India's North Eastern Region have surely complicated and diversified the execution of the Act East Policy (AEP).

While it is difficult to estimate the exact amount of delay, these disagreements have created a number of obstacles that have hindered progress in a variety of ways. Its physical violence and instability make it impossible to create and maintain critical infrastructure projects like as roads, trains, and waterways, which connect India's North Eastern Region to Southeast Asia. Some examples include project delays, such as the Trans-Asian Highway, caused by insurgencies in Myanmar. Through the Act East policy, resources given to projects may be diverted to handle conflict-related issues, impeding project progress. Internal strife had a negative impact on economic output. The security environment hinders foreign investment and tourism in the region, both of which are critical components of the Act East Policy. Investors are afraid to place their money in places prone to violence and instability. Local businesses are likewise struggling to develop because to conflict-related disruptions, limited regional economic growth, and integration with Southeast Asia.

Armed groups and violence can damage the efficacy of local governments and institutions, making it difficult to implement policies and initiatives related to the Act East Policy. Corruption and a lack of openness in conflict-affected areas may impede development on Act East Policy projects. Furthermore, ongoing can reinforce negative images of Northeast India both within India and abroad, making it less appealing to potential partners and collaborators under the Act East Policy. This may complicate efforts to strengthen connections with Southeast Asian countries.

The ongoing conflict in Manipur, particularly between Meitei's and Kukis, is also providing considerable hurdles to the execution of the AEP in a variety of ways. The fragile security of the Manipur conflict hinders investment in critical infrastructure projects such as the Imphal-Moreh highway and the Trans-Asian Highway, which connect Manipur to Myanmar and Southeast Asia. Construction activity is halted due to worries about worker safety; local businesses suffer as a result of interrupted supply chains and decreased customer trust, further affecting economic growth and making it impossible to execute legislation and regulations connected to AEP efforts.

The infrastructure Bottlenecks pose substantial hurdles to the full execution of the Act East Policy. The lack of road, rail, air, and inland canal infrastructure within the region and towards Southeast Asia impedes efficient transportation of products and people. Different states frequently have mismatched infrastructure standards, preventing seamless transit across state borders. The Northeast region's hilly topography and monsoon season pose logistical problems for infrastructure construction and maintenance Subba, (T. B. 2021). Northeast India has enormous hydropower potential, but low capacity and outmoded infrastructure limit electricity supply to economic activity. Due to limited intra-regional power transmission networks, the region is reliant on electricity from other parts of India, causing risks. For these reasons, insufficient connectivity with Southeast Asia inhibits the flow of products, services, and people, impeding regional economic integration. Furthermore, a lack of infrastructural development makes particular areas prone to illegal activity and conflict, compromising regional stability.

## CONCLUSION

As a key entry point to Southeast Asia, India's North Eastern Region (NER) is integral to the nation's Act East Policy. The goal of this policy is to improve India's strategic and economic ties with East Asian countries. The NER is a vital component of regional connectivity and development due to its advantageous position, which borders multiple ASEAN nations. Since the early 1990s, India's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed considerably, leading to the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022. This collaboration is motivated by a number of important factors:

**Economic Cooperation:** As the fourth-largest trading partner of India, ASEAN is dedicated to enhancing economic connections between the two countries through free trade agreements and infrastructural initiatives like as the Kaladan Multimodal Project.

**Security Concerns:** China's increasing assertiveness in the region is a concern shared by ASEAN and India. Launched in 2014, India's Act East Policy seeks to address this by forging stronger security ties with ASEAN countries. This involves working together on matters like terrorism and marine security as well as conducting cooperative military drills.

**Connectivity:** A key component of the Act East Policy is the development of Northeast India as a land bridge that connects India to Southeast Asia. This includes funding infrastructure initiatives such as the Asian Trilateral Highway, which would link Thailand and Myanmar with India.

**Cultural and People-to-People Ties:** In an effort to strengthen their citizens' bonds, ASEAN and India are supporting cultural exchange programs and other initiatives. This is essential for creating enduring understanding and trust.

**Development of Northeast India:** As a gateway to Southeast Asia, Northeast India's development is a key component of the Act East Policy. In addition to helping the area, this growth improves India's relations with ASEAN in general.

In summary, India and ASEAN have a mutually advantageous partnership that could only get stronger in the years to come. Their dedication to collaborating on a variety of topics, including security cooperation, cultural exchange, and economic development, is shown in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The Indo-Pacific region's future is probably going to be significantly impacted by this growing connection between India and ASEAN. All things considered; the NER is essential to India's Act East Policy. Even if there are obstacles, continued work to resolve internal issues and upgrade infrastructure is essential to achieving this region's full potential as a gateway to Southeast Asia.

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