



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92  
IJPSG 2025; 7(10): 21-23  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 18-07-2025  
Accepted: 22-08-2025

**Manas Ranjan Pati**  
Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
PG Department of Political  
Science, Utkal University,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

**Dr. Bindushree Mishra**  
Reader in Department of  
Political Science, Prananath  
Autonomous College,  
Khordha, Odisha, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Manas Ranjan Pati**  
Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
PG Department of Political  
Science, Utkal University,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

## India's Act East Policy and the North East region: A critical evolution

**Manas Ranjan Pati and Bindushree Mishra**

**DOI:** <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i10a.699>

### Abstract

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has renewed India's diplomatic efforts with its neighboring countries by focusing on them more closely. He changed the name of the "Look East" policy to "Act East" to show a stronger and more active approach. The main goals of this policy are to improve political ties, boost economic links, and create regional security through cooperation with Southeast Asia. The North Eastern region of India plays a key role as a link or gateway to this area. With growing ties between India and Southeast Asia, the importance of the North Eastern region is clear and central to the "Act East" strategy. This policy makes use of India's close location, shared culture, and history with Southeast Asian countries. It is a comprehensive plan to build strong relationships with each country in the region and to develop good relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This paper will look at how Border States help in strengthening economic and cultural ties with nearby countries. It will also examine how the involvement of the North Eastern states can help New Delhi in improving its diplomacy in the region.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Look East, Act East, diplomacy, collaboration, strategic, strengthen

### Introduction

Among the major foreign policy steps taken by the Indian government after the Cold War, the Look East Policy is very important. This policy started in the early 1990s because of sudden problems in the Indian economy and the end of the Cold War. It came from working together to improve relationships with countries in Southeast Asia. The goal was to build stronger links in strategy, economy, and politics with both individual countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Look East Policy began in the early 1990s as a way to bring India back into touch with Southeast Asia. Many Indian experts and officials say this policy has gone through different stages, each with quick and noticeable changes as it moved from one stage to another. The main aim was to increase India's involvement with Southeast Asia, but over time, its focus has grown to include a larger part of East Asia and now the Indo-Pacific region. This change has also brought in more areas like strategy, politics, and defence. Recently, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Look East Policy has moved into a new stage, now called Act East. This change shows a more active and forward-thinking approach to building connections in all areas.

Still, an important question comes up: has the rebranding of 'Look East' really brought about any real changes. This is something that both government officials and researchers are very interested in. Some people think that the different parts of the 'Look East' policy are more about what politicians say at home than about real changes in how India deals with other countries. The new government wants to show that its foreign policy is different from what came before.

The first part of the policy started when the Congress party, led by Prime Minister Narsimha Rao, was in power. The second part was during the time of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in the early 2000s, and it continued under the Congress government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2004. The final and rebranded version, called 'Act East,' began under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in 2014.

It's also worth noting that even during Vajpayee's time, India had a 'Neighbourhood First' approach, which aimed to make its regional relationships more connected and comprehensive.

### Aims and Objective

- To look into the history and goals of the Look East and Act East policy.
- To check the policies and programs linked to the Government of India's Act East Policy and to see the important changes in society, economy, government, culture, and strategy that have happened because of this policy.
- To understand how important the North-Eastern region is in relation to the Act East Policy.

### Methodology

In researching the topic "India's Act East initiative and the North East region: An Analytical Assessment," a descriptive approach will be used. The information for this study has been collected from secondary sources. These sources include data from books, academic journals, online websites, published research papers, articles, newspapers, and other related publications.

### Look East Policy to Act East Policy

The 'Look East Policy' was started by Narasimha Rao, who was the Prime Minister of India from 1991 to 1996. It was continued by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee from 1998 to 2004, and later during Manmohan Singh's time from 2004 to 2014. It is still in place today under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014. The main aim of this policy was to rebuild India's trade links with nearby countries and the growing nations in Southeast Asia. Its goal was to build stronger ties in areas like trade, investment, science, technology, and tourism, as well as to create political, cultural, and strategic relationships with Southeast Asian countries. This helped India gain more influence in the region and reduce China's impact. In recent years, India's relationship with Southeast Asia has grown a lot. The Look East Policy had three main areas of focus towards Southeast Asian countries:

- To increase interaction in areas like trade and investment, science and technology, and tourism.
- To build political connections and understanding with Southeast Asian countries through ASEAN.
- To strengthen defence ties with these countries.

The 'Look-East' policy changed to the 'Act East' policy in July 2011 after Hillary Clinton, the former US Secretary of State, visited India. During her visit, she encouraged India to take a bigger role in the Asia-Pacific region and introduced the term 'Act East' to replace 'Look East.' This policy became more popular under the Modi government. In 2014, the External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, said that New Delhi was ready to 'Act East' as part of the 'Act East Policy.' India wants to build stronger economic ties with the region and also wants to be a major player in security matters.

The North Eastern Region (NER) is like a bridge to Southeast Asia, giving India a special chance to connect with nearby countries in both South and Southeast Asia. This area has a lot of potential to become a strong part of India. It has plenty of resources such as energy, natural gas,

coal, oil, limestone, and other minerals. The region also has the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, which are important sources of water. There are also many plantation crops, medicinal plants, fruits, vegetables, and spices available. Tourism is another opportunity here because of the rare animals and plants, beautiful landscapes, unique performing arts, and traditional crafts.

The North East region of India shares borders with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, making it a long international border of 4500 km. Myanmar is especially important as the main link between North East India and Southeast Asia. The border between India and Myanmar is 1643 km long and connects the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. Former President Pranab Mukherjee said that North East India can benefit from stronger ties with Southeast Asia through a 'cross border market.' This project is expected to help poor people, improve the economy, and bring prosperity. It will also encourage people to start their own businesses and develop new skills in the region.

The North East region of India has a rich cultural heritage that connects it with several ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. This region has special strengths in building personal relationships and strengthening ties between people and nations. To better connect with Southeast Asia, it is important to develop the region's potential by creating links to these countries through international routes, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. This highway also connects to Laos and Cambodia, forming the "Mekong-India Economic Corridor" (MIEC). These improvements are vital for strengthening regional relationships.

### Prospects and Obstacles of the Look East to Act East Policy

It is important to look at the opportunities this policy brings, as well as the challenges that may come with it. The three main areas Culture, Commerce, and Connectivity provide many chances to help the people of North East India, support development projects, and create a welcoming environment for investors from Southeast Asia. These areas have helped improve relations with Southeast Asian countries. Going forward, it is important to improve connectivity using technology, transport, and cultural exchanges with the region.

In recent years, India's relationship with Southeast Asian nations has improved a lot. This makes it important for the North Eastern region of India to take a central role in the overall 'Act East' policy, considering its historical and cultural ties and its geographical closeness to Southeast Asia. The main benefits the 'Act East Policy' can bring to the North Eastern region are as follows:

- Improved connectivity and physical infrastructure that help promote trade.
- The region has a rich biodiversity that can attract tourists from Southeast Asian countries.
- The region has a lot of natural resources, such as coal, oil, spices, natural gas, and limestone, which can be exported to Southeast Asian countries.
- The 'Act East' policy can bring in investors from Southeast Asia to invest in various development sectors.
- The policy gives the North Eastern region a chance to improve its relationships with Southeast Asian

countries through people-to-people connections and activities such as cultural, sports, academic, and medical exchanges.

Furthermore, there are still many chances for the North Eastern Region and for India as a whole. India's new 'Act East' policy has helped improve ties with Southeast Asian countries. The plan focuses on development and puts a lot of effort into building connections through culture, trade, and sports with ASEAN. This focus on connections is also seen in efforts to work better with groups like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC has helped link ASEAN with SAARC by setting up a Transport Connectivity Working Group in 2016. There have also been talks about holding annual meetings between ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which includes countries around the Indian Ocean. A former Indian ambassador and senior official from the Ministry of External Affairs said, "Modi has also worked to increase India's influence in the region by promoting Yoga and restoring the ancient Nalanda University. "Even though the North Eastern Region has many opportunities for growth through the active 'Act East' policy, there are also several problems that are stopping progress.

The following sections will explain these issues in more detail.

The North Eastern Region has poor infrastructure. Most of the roads in the area are in bad shape. The limited links between the North Eastern States and the rest of India make this policy hard to carry out. ASEAN is a mix of different political systems. Vietnam and Laos are run by communist governments. Singapore has a single-party system with some opposition. Myanmar is semi-democratic. Malaysia has a two-party system. Indonesia is working on making its democracy stronger. Thailand is under military rule but plans to create a new constitution. Brunei is a monarchy, and the Philippines has its own style of democracy.

There is also a big problem with insurgency in the North Eastern Region, which is making development difficult. Because of this, investors are not interested in any projects due to the fear and instability. When people are always worried, it's very hard for any plan to succeed. In addition, there is a problem with poor teamwork between different government departments. Security is a big worry in the North Eastern part of India. This region has many military forces, and laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have been put in place here. The North East is a special area where the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the Ministry of Defence (MOD), and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) all take care of defence matters. Besides the issue of insurgency, there is also a large illegal trade network that deals in goods, weapons, and drugs. Also, there is not enough cooperation between the states on many issues, which makes it harder for policymakers to carry out policies and reach their goals. Besides these challenges, there are a few more that make the Act East policy hard to succeed. These challenges include:

- The issue of the South China Sea
- Regional security-China's strong position
- The Chinese community controlling economies in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore
- The growing friendship between China and Russia
- India not doing enough in trade and investment with

Southeast Asian countries

- The problem of connectivity, which is a major roadblock to development.

### Conclusion:

India's 'Look East' policy, now called the 'Act East' policy, has developed well over the last thirty years. At first, it was meant to build economic links with countries in Southeast Asia. But now, it covers more than just economics it also includes politics, culture, security, and social ties in the Southeast Asian region. The growth of the North Eastern part of India will help the people there become more prosperous.

The North Eastern region's close location and strong historical ties with the South Eastern region are the main reasons behind the 'Act East' policy. However, some people think there are many problems that are making it hard for the policy to work well. These problems include poor communication between government officials, slow decision-making in the bureaucracy, not enough rules to help investors, and ongoing conflicts in the area. Even with these difficulties, it's still fair to say that the 'Act East' policy for North East India is a good attempt to bring development and prosperity to the people there. There is a strong need to use a 'bottom-up' approach instead of a 'top-down' one. This means letting the people of the North East decide how the policy should work, with the central government helping them along the way.

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