

Connectivity projects of North-East India under Act East Policy

Tolivi H Sumi

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics
Peren Government College, Peren

Abstract:

This paper examines the key connectivity initiatives in North-East India under the Act East Policy (AEP), focusing on the transformative infrastructure projects designed to boost regional integration and India's economic and geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific. It investigates the impact of enhanced road, rail, and air connectivity, as well as multimodal transport systems, in promoting trade, fostering regional cooperation, and improving access to Southeast Asia. The study also evaluates how these initiatives have contributed to economic development in the North-East and strengthened India's strategic influence in the region. The paper identifies the challenges faced in their implementation, including infrastructural bottlenecks, political complexities, and security concerns, and discusses the potential strategies for overcoming these obstacles. The findings bring out the importance of connectivity in advancing India's role as a regional leader while highlighting the ongoing hurdles that need to be addressed to fully realize the potential of the Act East Policy.

Keywords: Connectivity; North-East India; Act East Policy.

Introduction:

The Look East Policy was introduced by India in the year 1991 for the economic and diplomatic relations with the neighbouring South East Asian countries. However, in the year 2014, the Look East Policy was renamed as Act East Policy.

India's Act East Policy (AEP), is a strategic initiative designed to enhance India's relationships with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, fostering deeper economic, cultural, and strategic ties. The policy is particularly significant for North-East India, which holds a crucial position as the gateway to Southeast Asia due to its geographical proximity. As a result, the region's infrastructure has become central to the success of the AEP, with a focus on improving connectivity through roads, railways, air networks, and multimodal transport systems. These infrastructure projects are not just about improving local connectivity but are seen as a means to strengthen India's economic ties with its eastern neighbors and to assert its presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Enhanced connectivity in North-East India has far-reaching implications. It promotes regional economic cooperation, facilitates trade flows between India and Southeast Asia, and creates opportunities for the North-East to integrate more closely into the regional economy. Additionally, these improvements contribute to India's strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific, allowing for greater geopolitical influence in the region. However, the road to realization has not been without its challenges. Issues such as political complexities, infrastructural bottlenecks, security concerns, and cross-border coordination have often hindered progress.

This paper examines the key connectivity initiatives in North-East India under the Act East Policy, assessing their impact on regional integration, economic development, and India's geopolitical strategy. Through this analysis, the paper will explore the role that enhanced connectivity plays in fostering trade, promoting regional cooperation, and improving India's strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the study will delve into the challenges that have emerged during the implementation of these projects, highlighting obstacles like political resistance, logistical limitations, and security challenges, while proposing potential solutions to overcome them. By exploring these issues, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges of the Act East Policy and its impact on India's regional leadership.

Objective:

- To explore the major connectivity initiatives in North-East India under Act East Policy.
- To evaluate their impact on regional integration, economic development, and geopolitical strategy.
- To identify the major challenges faced in its implementation.

Methodology:

Connectivity projects by the central and state governments will be evaluated through websites and documents available from various government sources. The study mainly looks into the secondary sources available.

Scope/ Significance of the Study:

This study is significant as it sheds light on the strategic role of North-East India in advancing the objectives of the Act East Policy, which aims to enhance India's engagement with Southeast Asia. By analyzing key connectivity initiatives, the research provides insights into how improved infrastructure fosters regional integration, stimulates economic development, and strengthens India's geopolitical presence in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, understanding the challenges in implementation—ranging from terrain-related difficulties to administrative and security issues—can help policymakers and stakeholders devise more effective solutions. The findings are valuable for scholars, government bodies, and development agencies seeking to optimize connectivity projects and ensure inclusive growth and strategic alignment with regional partners.

Connectivity Projects under Act East Policy

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project

The **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP)**, signed on 2nd April 2008 is a strategic infrastructure initiative jointly undertaken by **India and Myanmar** to connect the **eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata** with **Sittwe port in Myanmar** and further link it to **Mizoram** in India's northeast. The goal is to create an alternative route to the

landlocked northeastern states of India, bypassing the narrow and sensitive **Chicken's Neck (Siliguri Corridor)** via all the three modes of transport, sea, river, and road.

Table 1: Route that begins from Kolkata port through Sittwe of Myanmar to Mizoram in India.

Stretch	Mode	Distance
Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar	Shipping	539km
Sittwe to Paletwa (Myanmar)	Inland Water Transport	158km
Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar border (Myanmar)	Road	110km
Border to NH. 54 (Lawangtlai in India)	Road	100km

The project is funded and implemented by the Government of India and executed under India's Ministry of External Affairs. Initially, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (Iwai) and later IRCON International took over parts of the project

Progress & Challenges

Progress

- **Sittwe Port** completed and inaugurated in May 2023
- **Kaladan river dredging** and waterway navigation completed
- **Construction of the Paletwa Inland Terminal** was largely completed
- **Road stretch from Paletwa to Zorinpui** is partially complete

Reasons for Delay / Challenges

1. Insurgency and Political Instability in Myanmar

- Ongoing ethnic conflict and military rule disrupted construction, especially road projects in Chin State.

2. Challenging Terrain

- Remote and hilly areas in Mizoram and Chin State make infrastructure development slow and expensive.

3. Logistical and Bureaucratic Hurdles

- Multiple contractors and delays in approvals between Indian and Myanmar authorities.

4. COVID-19 Pandemic

- Work came to a halt in 2020–21 due to travel restrictions and supply chain disruptions.

5. Security Risks

- Increased presence of armed groups in Myanmar has led to attacks on project sites and personnel.

Benefits of the Project

Strategic Benefits

- Strengthens India's Act East Policy and diplomatic ties with Myanmar.
- Enhances connectivity between India and ASEAN.

Economic and Regional Benefits

- Provides an alternate route for trade and transport to the Northeast.
- Boosts economic development and tourism in Mizoram and surrounding states.
- Facilitates faster movement of goods and reduces dependency on Siliguri Corridor.
- Opens up new markets in Myanmar and Southeast Asia for Indian businesses.

Security and Integration

- Encourages integration of the Northeast with the mainland, improving accessibility.
- Counterbalances China's influence in Myanmar and the region.

Figure 1: Map of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project



Inland Waterway Projects:

Waterway plays a crucial role in the Act East Policy. Some of the Inland Waterway projects are:

1. National Waterway-2 (NW-2) – Brahmaputra River: The purpose is to boost cargo, tourism, and connectivity in Northeast India. Key route is from Dhubri to Sadiya in Assam (~891 km)

2. India-Bangladesh Protocol Routes: To connect India's NE with Kolkata and Haldia via Bangladesh. Key Routes are:

- Kolkata–Dhaka–Ashuganj–Agartala
- Kolkata–Mongla–Tamabil–Dawki (Meghalaya)
- Karimganj (Assam) – Bangladesh – Kolkata

3. Indo-Myanmar Inland Waterway Collaboration: Integrated with Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project

- Sittwe Port → Kaladan River → Paletwa

4. Jogighopa Multimodal Terminal: This is a part of Bharatmala + Sagarmala projects, which will integrate road, rail, and river logistics.

Progress & Challenges

Progress

- NW-2 is **operational for cargo** movement; night navigation aids installed.
- **Tripura, Assam, and Meghalaya**, now linked through protocol routes via Bangladesh.
- **Cargo volumes** on inland waterways have steadily increased.
- **Kaladan's waterway** (Sittwe to Paletwa) is complete.

Challenges and Delays

1. **Shifting river courses and sedimentation** – especially in Brahmaputra
2. **Limited last-mile connectivity** – poor road/rail linkages from terminals
3. **Seasonal navigability** – water levels fluctuate drastically
4. **Delays in Indo-Bangla coordination** – bureaucratic bottlenecks
5. **Security concerns** – in border regions, especially with Myanmar

Benefits

Trade Enhancement: Faster, cheaper movement of goods to Northeast India and Bangladesh.

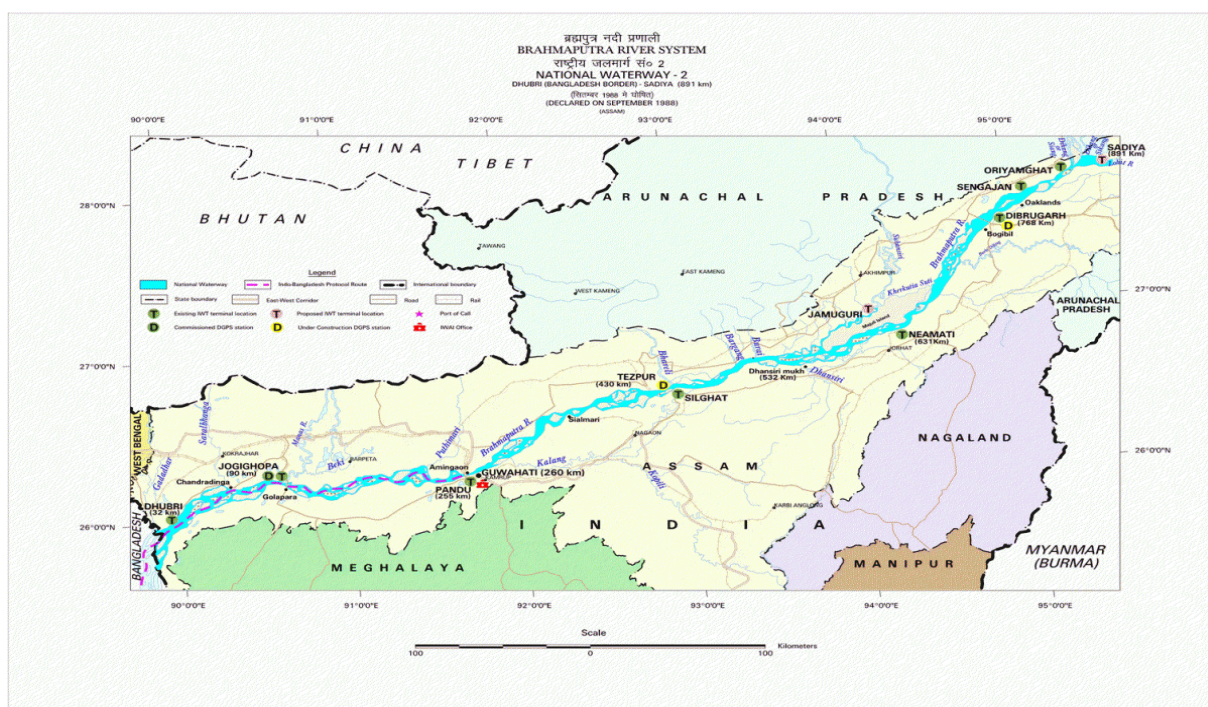
Cross-Border Integration: Stronger India–Bangladesh–Myanmar connectivity.

Environmental Advantage: Inland water transport is greener than road/rail.

Northeast Development: Boosts logistics, tourism, and economic integration of NE states.

Decongests Siliguri Corridor: Offers alternate trade routes via waterways

Figure 2: Map of Inland Waterways 2



Road Connectivity Projects

Road connectivity projects play a very important role in this Policy. Some of the road connectivity initiatives are:

1. The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH):

The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH) is a key regional infrastructure initiative under India's Act East Policy to improve connectivity between India and Southeast Asia by road. The route starts from Moreh, Manipur (India) and ends in Mae Sot (Thailand)

Objectives:

- Facilitate land trade and transport between India, Myanmar, and Thailand
- Improve regional connectivity under BIMSTEC and ASEAN frameworks
- Strengthen India's strategic and economic presence in Southeast Asia

Indian Contributions:

- India is responsible for upgrading multiple road sections in Myanmar, notably:
 - Tamu–Kalewa (TK) Road (160 km) – already completed
 - Kalewa–Yagyi Road (120 km) – under construction by Indian companies
 - 16 km bypass at Kalewa – part of the Kalewa–Yagyi segment

Progress & Challenges

Progress:

- Tamu–Kalewa section has been completed
- Detailed project reports (DPRs) and construction on Kalewa–Yagyi have advanced, with some parts completed
- India and ASEAN are exploring extending the highway to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam

Key Challenges:

1. Political instability in Myanmar
 - Military coup (2021) disrupted ongoing construction and slowed coordination
2. Security threats
 - Insurgency and armed conflict along highway zones, especially Chin and Sagaing regions
3. Geographical difficulties
 - Mountainous and remote terrain complicates construction
4. Logistics and resource constraints
 - Delays in transporting equipment, materials, and labor
5. Cross-border coordination
 - Slow administrative clearances and inconsistent standards between India, Myanmar, and Thailand

Benefits

- Trade & Commerce: Enables land-based freight movement between India and Southeast Asia.
- Tourism Boost: Road tourism, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people contact.

- Strategic Connectivity: Enhances India's engagement with CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam).
- Northeast Development: Strengthens infrastructure and economy in India's North-Eastern states.
- Reduced Dependency on Sea Routes: Land-based alternative to maritime shipping.

Figure 3: Map of India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)



2. Trans-Asian Highway Network:

The Trans-Asian Highway (TAH) is a pan-Asian road connectivity initiative launched by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in the 1950s.

India is a key part of this network, which aims to promote regional integration and enable seamless overland transport across Asia and Europe.

Key Routes in India Relevant to Act East Policy:

- TAH-1: From India (Kolkata) to Myanmar (Tamu) via NH-27 and NH-2
- TAH-2: Connects with Bangladesh and further to China and Southeast Asia
- The highway links to:
 - India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway
 - Asian Highway 1 (AH1) and Asian Highway 2 (AH2) corridors

Indian Sections Involved:

- NH-27 (East-West Corridor) – Assam, Nagaland, Manipur
- NH-2 – Connecting Imphal to Moreh (Indo-Myanmar border)

Progress & Challenges

Progress:

- India has developed and upgraded large segments of NH-27 and NH-2
- Border infrastructure at Moreh (India-Myanmar border) has seen improvements
- Protocols signed with Bangladesh and Myanmar for overland transit
- Efforts to standardize road design, signage, and customs integration

Challenges:

1. Poor quality roads in Myanmar and Bangladesh segments
2. Security concerns in Northeastern India and Myanmar
3. Political instability in Myanmar affecting continuity of cross-border work
4. Lack of integrated customs and border control mechanisms
5. Seasonal disruption – monsoon and landslides affect road travel

Benefits

- Pan-Asian Trade Corridor: Connects India to China, Southeast Asia, and Europe by land
- Boosts NE India's economy through better trade access and logistics
- Reduces transport cost for freight by replacing shipping for certain goods
- Tourism Potential: Enables road-based tourism across South and Southeast Asia
- Strategic Importance: Counters China's Belt and Road Initiative by enhancing India's road diplomacy.

The Trans-Asian Highway Network plays an important role in integrating North-East India with our neighbouring states like Myanmar and Bangladesh. This connectivity promotes economic growth, tourism and regional integration for the North-East states of India.

3. SARDP-NE (Special Accelerated Road Development Programme in the North East)

SARDP-NE is a comprehensive programme to develop and upgrade roads and highways

in the northeastern states of India. The region, which has a challenging topography, has historically faced road infrastructure deficiencies. The primary objective of SARDP-NE is to improve connectivity within the northeastern states and with the rest of the country.

The programme consists of several phases and targets the construction of national highways, border roads, and key link roads in areas that have limited infrastructure. SARDP-NE was launched in 2005 with two major components:

- Phase A: Involves the upgradation of existing roads into two-lane standards to enhance intra-region connectivity.
- Phase B: Focuses on the construction of greenfield roads, especially in remote and strategic areas.
- Phase C: Focuses on road development in the border areas and providing enhanced connectivity to strategic military locations.

Progress and Challenges

Progress

Several roads have been constructed or upgraded, enhancing mobility and reducing travel time in the region. The SARDP-NE programme has helped improve national connectivity between the northeastern states and other parts of India. Some notable progress has been seen in states like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Tripura, where important highways have been upgraded.

Challenges/Reasons for Delay

- Geographical Terrain: The hilly and rugged terrain of the region poses significant challenges for road construction, leading to delays.
- Weather Conditions: The monsoon season brings heavy rainfall, landslides, and floods, disrupting construction activities.
- Security Concerns: Some areas are affected by insurgency or militant activities, making it difficult to work in certain parts of the region.
- Funding Issues: There have been occasional delays in fund allocation, affecting the timely completion of projects.
- Land Acquisition and Forest Clearances: Delays in land acquisition, environmental clearances, and forest clearances also contribute to the slow progress.
- Coordination Among Agencies: There are often issues related to coordination between central and state agencies, which leads to delays in approvals and implementation.

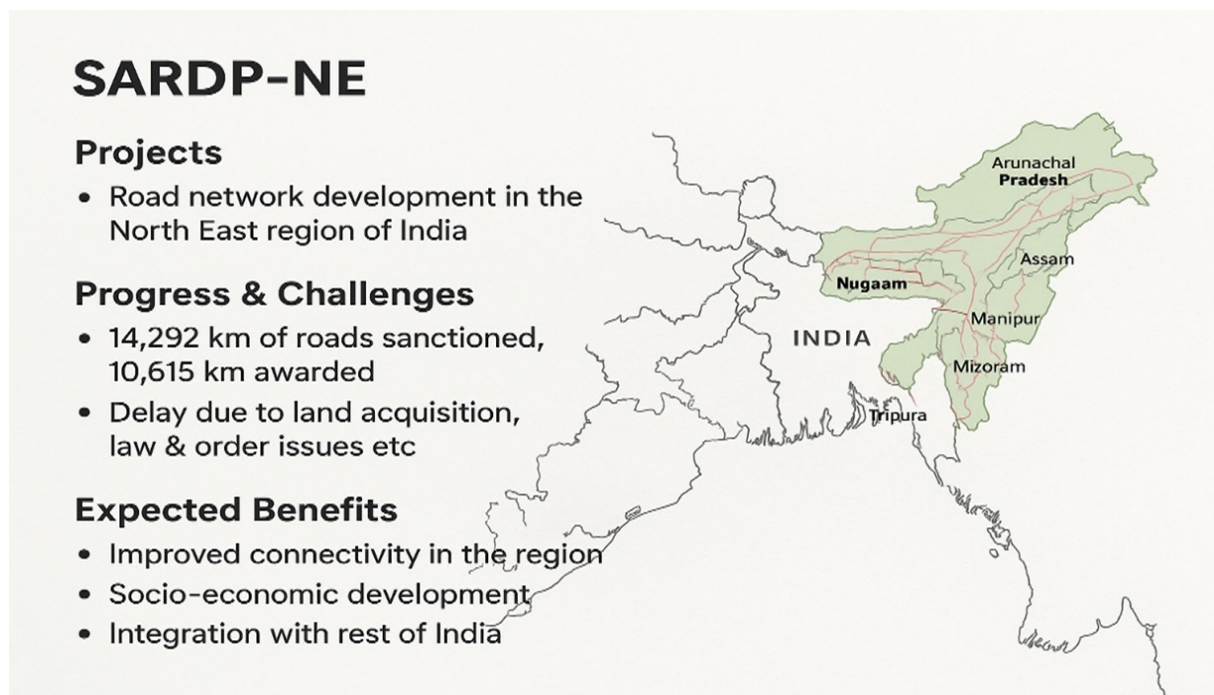
Benefits from the Project

- Improved Connectivity: The most significant benefit is the enhanced road

connectivity within the northeastern states and to the rest of the country.

- **Economic Growth:** Better road infrastructure will facilitate trade, tourism, and the movement of goods and services, boosting the region's economy.
- **Strategic Importance:** The construction of roads in border areas is expected to improve national security by ensuring better access to remote and sensitive regions.
- **Social Benefits:** Improved roads will make it easier for people to access essential services like healthcare, education, and markets.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** The programme includes measures to minimize environmental damage and enhance sustainability, which is crucial for maintaining the fragile ecosystems of the region.

Figure 4: Map of SARDP-NE (Special Accelerated Road Development Programme in the North East)



4. NHDP (National Highways Development Project) – NE Components

The objective of the project is to develop high-quality National Highways across India. In the Northeast, NHDP complements SARDP-NE by upgrading key National Highways like:

- NH-2 (Imphal–Moreh) – connects with Myanmar
- NH-10, NH-15, NH-27, NH-37 – across Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal, etc.
- East–West Corridor (part of NH-27) – Silchar to Saurashtra

Progress & Challenges

Progress:

- Over 60% of Phase A of SARDP-NE completed as of 2023
- Major road stretches like Silchar–Aizawl, Imphal–Kohima, Itanagar–Ziro, and Tawang roads improved
- Bridge construction on Brahmaputra (Dhola-Sadiya, Bogibeel) boosted connectivity

Challenges:

1. Difficult Terrain – Hills, rivers, landslides, and forested zones slow down work
2. Right-of-Way (RoW) issues – Land acquisition and tribal rights delays
3. Weather Dependency – Monsoon and flash floods affect construction
4. Security and Insurgency – In states like Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal
5. Contractor & Execution Delays – Poor contractor performance in remote areas

Benefits

- Enhanced Mobility: Better internal connectivity between NE states
- National Integration: Strengthens India's unity and presence in border zones
- Economic Growth: Facilitates trade, logistics, agriculture, and tourism
- Strategic Advantage: Faster troop and goods movement in border regions (especially near China and Myanmar)
- Cross-Border Trade: Supports trade routes to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan

Figure 5: Map of NHDP (National Highways Development Project) – NE Components



Rail Connectivity Projects

Under India's Act East Policy, rail connectivity projects are crucial for boosting economic integration, strategic security, and people-to-people linkages between India's Northeast (NE) region and Southeast Asia. The goal is to develop a robust rail network to connect remote northeastern states with the rest of India and eventually link them with neighboring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Thailand.

1. India–Myanmar Rail Link (Moreh–Kalay–Mandalay Project): The objective is to form part of the Trans-Asian Railway Network and strengthen trade and strategic connectivity with Myanmar and ASEAN nations. The proposed project is extending Indian railways from Imphal (Manipur) to Moreh on the India–Myanmar border and connecting it to Kalay in Myanmar.

2. Agartala–Akhaura Rail Link (India–Bangladesh): The purpose is to connect Tripura's capital Agartala with Bangladesh's Akhaura, enhancing cross-border trade, transit, and regional connectivity. The length of the connection is ~15 km (5 km in India, 10 km in Bangladesh).

3. Jiribam–Imphal Line: A 111-km railway line to connect Jiribam (Manipur) to Imphal, capital of Manipur. It includes India's tallest railway bridge (over Irang River). It will eventually extend to Moreh, facilitating future cross-border connections.

4. Sivok–Rangpo–Gangtok Railway Line (Sikkim): It is a strategic railway line connecting Sivok (West Bengal) to Rangpo (Sikkim), with a future extension to Gangtok. It is important for strategic access to the Indo-China border in north Sikkim.

5. Bhairabi–Sairang Line (Mizoram): It is a 51-km railway line connecting Bhairabi to Sairang, near Mizoram's capital, Aizawl. It aims to provide Mizoram with direct rail access to the rest of India.

6. Dimapur–Kohima Line (Nagaland): It is a Rail extension project from Dimapur to Zubza, near Kohima. It will enhance Nagaland's connectivity and access to economic centers.

b) Progress and Challenges

Progress

- Agartala–Akhaura: Construction is in advanced stages, with planned completion expected soon (partially operational).
- Jiribam–Imphal Line: Substantial progress made; several tunnels and bridges are complete.
- Bhairabi–Sairang: Over 85% of the work is complete as of early 2025.
- Sivok–Rangpo: Work is progressing steadily, with environmental clearances and tunneling underway.

Challenges and Reasons for Delay

1. **Difficult Terrain:** Hilly terrain, landslides, and seismic activity make rail construction extremely difficult.
2. **Land Acquisition:** Delays due to tribal land rights, compensation disputes, and forest clearances.
3. **Security Issues:** Insurgency and law-and-order issues in parts of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam disrupt work.
4. **Environmental Restrictions:** Many of these routes pass through eco-sensitive zones requiring complex approvals.
5. **Cross-Border Coordination:** Bilateral issues, delays in coordination with Bangladesh and Myanmar authorities slow cross-border links.

Benefits from the Projects

1. **Enhanced Regional Integration:**
 - Railways will bridge physical gaps between NE states and the Indian mainland, facilitating the free flow of goods and people.
2. **Boost to Trade & Economy:**
 - Cross-border rail links will open new trade corridors with ASEAN, especially Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Thailand.
3. **Tourism & Cultural Exchange:**
 - Improved access will promote eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and religious tourism in NE India and neighboring countries.
4. **Strategic & Security Advantage:**
 - Quick troop movement and supply logistics to sensitive border areas (e.g., China and Myanmar borders).
5. **Sustainable Development:**
 - Railways offer an eco-friendly mode of transport compared to road freight, reducing carbon emissions and traffic congestion.

Air Connectivity Projects

Key initiatives and projects include:

1. **UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik) – Regional Connectivity Scheme**
 - **Objective:** Improve regional air connectivity by making air travel affordable and widespread.

- Coverage: Under UDAN 4.0 and 5.0, a major focus has been placed on expanding services in NE states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.
- New routes have been added connecting smaller airports like Pasighat, Tezu, Ziro, Lengpui, Dibrugarh, Dimapur, and Lilabari to major cities.

2. Development and Expansion of Airports

- Guwahati (Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport):
 - o Upgraded to handle international traffic; serves as the air hub of the NE.
- Imphal, Agartala, Dibrugarh, Dimapur, and Shillong Airports:
 - o Expanded to accommodate more passengers and upgraded to meet international standards.
- Greenfield Airports:
 - o Constructed in Pakyong (Sikkim) and Holongi (Arunachal Pradesh) to improve accessibility to border and remote areas.
- Upgraded Infrastructure:
 - o Advanced navigation and communication systems, night landing facilities, and longer runways in hilly regions.

3. International Air Routes

- Direct flights from Guwahati to Bangkok, Dhaka, Paro (Bhutan), Mandalay, and other ASEAN destinations are being planned or operational.
- Air cargo routes and border area airstrips are also being developed to promote trade and emergency response capacity.

Progress and Challenges

Progress:

- Guwahati-Bangkok direct flights initiated under Act East push.
- Several UDAN routes operational, including Shillong–Agartala, Imphal–Dimapur, Tezu–Guwahati, and Pakyong–Kolkata.
- Holongi Airport (Donyi Polo Airport) in Arunachal Pradesh inaugurated in 2022, enabling faster access to Itanagar.
- Airports at Agartala and Imphal have been modernized with extended terminals.

Challenges:

1. Terrain and Weather:

- o Mountainous terrain and foggy weather conditions limit visibility and safe landing, especially in monsoon and winter.

2.Low Passenger Load Factors:

- o Sparse population in remote areas affects route profitability, deterring airlines from consistent operations.

3.Limited Runway Lengths:

- o Many regional airports can't handle larger aircraft due to short runways and lack of night landing facilities.

4. Security and Environmental Concerns:

- o Proximity to international borders (China, Myanmar, Bhutan) requires stricter aviation and security protocols.

5. Coordination for International Flights:

- o Bilateral agreements and cross-border aviation policies sometimes delay direct international flights.

Benefits from Air Connectivity Projects

1. Enhanced Regional Integration:

- o Faster movement of people within the NE region and to mainland India.

2. Boost to Tourism:

- o Promotes eco-tourism and adventure tourism in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Meghalaya.

3. International Trade and Investment:

- o Air cargo and passenger flights improve access to Southeast Asian markets.

4. Strategic and Defense Readiness:

- o Airports near borders enhance emergency and defense logistics capacity.

5. Economic and Employment Growth:

- o Development of aviation infrastructure creates direct and indirect job opportunities.

6. Medical and Educational Access:

- o People in remote areas gain faster access to hospitals and institutions in bigger cities.

Figure 6: Map of Air Connectivity under Act East Policy



Key major development includes airport modernization such as existing airports in states like Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh are undergoing upgrades to accommodate larger aircraft and improve passenger facilities. For example, Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati has seen significant upgrades.

There has been an increase in international flight options connecting cities like Guwahati to Southeast Asian destinations, including Bangkok and Singapore, facilitating easier travel and trade.

Budgetary Allocations Supporting the Act East Policy:

1. **Foreign Aid to Neighboring Countries:** In the Union Budget 2025-26, India allocated ₹350 crore in aid to Myanmar, reflecting its strategic importance in the Act East framework. This allocation aims to support infrastructure and development projects that enhance regional connectivity and stability.
2. **Development of Northeast India:** The budget for Central Sector Schemes/Projects under the NEC saw a 20% increase in 2024–25 compared to 2022–23, emphasizing the region's role as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Investments in road, rail, and air connectivity in the Northeast are crucial for facilitating trade and people-to-people exchanges with ASEAN countries.
3. **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Budget:** The MEA's budget has seen a cumulative increase of 67% from 2014 to 2025, underscoring India's commitment to strengthening diplomatic and strategic ties in the Indo-Pacific region.

How Act East Policy could balance China's influence?

India's Act East Policy (AEP) is a strategic and economic initiative aimed at enhancing engagement with Southeast and East Asian countries. One of its key geopolitical goals

is to balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. Here's how the AEP contributes to that:

1. Strategic Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

- India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project help India gain direct land and sea access to ASEAN markets.
- These projects counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by offering alternative infrastructure and supply routes, particularly in Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal.

2. Deepening Economic Ties with ASEAN

- India is working to reduce trade barriers and increase regional trade with ASEAN and East Asian economies.
- Strengthened trade partnerships make India a viable economic alternative to China in sectors like IT, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing.

3. Defense and Security Cooperation

- India has increased military diplomacy through naval exercises (like MILAN and SIMBEX) and defense exports to ASEAN countries.
- This helps build regional capacity and trust, offering a counterweight to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

4. Cultural and People-to-People Links

- Initiatives like Buddhist tourism circuits, educational exchange programs, and diaspora engagement build soft power — something China also pursues actively through Confucius Institutes and cultural diplomacy.

5. Strengthening Regional Multilateralism

- Through forums like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Quad, India pushes for a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" — a direct contrast to China's more hierarchical regional vision.

6. Focus on Northeast India as a Strategic Pivot

- By developing India's northeastern region as a gateway to Southeast Asia, AEP strengthens India's internal integration and boosts security in border areas, indirectly countering Chinese influence in neighboring countries like Bhutan and Myanmar.

The Act East Policy acts as a multi-dimensional balancing tool—through infrastructure, diplomacy, defense cooperation, and cultural outreach, it offers Southeast Asia an alternative to Chinese dominance, while reinforcing India's role as a regional power.

Act East Policy: Boosting ASEAN Relations

1. **Connectivity:** Enhances physical (highways, ports) and digital links between India and Southeast Asia, improving trade and mobility.
2. **Trade & Economy:** Expands trade, investment, and supply chain integration in key sectors like IT, pharma, and textiles.
3. **Defense Cooperation:** Increases joint military exercises and maritime security efforts, supporting regional stability.
4. **Cultural Ties:** Promotes shared heritage, tourism, and education exchanges to build trust and soft power.
5. **Multilateral Engagement:** Strengthens India's role in ASEAN-led platforms (e.g., East Asia Summit), supporting ASEAN centrality.
6. **Northeast Development:** Turns Northeast India into a strategic gateway to ASEAN, improving regional integration.

How will better connectivity strengthen India's position in the Indo-Pacific?

Better connectivity under the Act East Policy will significantly strengthen India's position in the Indo-Pacific by enhancing its strategic relevance, economic influence, and diplomatic outreach.

1. Strategic Access and Influence

- Roads, ports, and maritime corridors (like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway and Kaladan project) provide India direct access to Southeast Asia and beyond.
- This counters China's Belt and Road Initiative and reinforces India's role as a security provider and alternative development partner.

2. Economic Integration

- Seamless connectivity improves trade efficiency, lowers costs, and promotes regional value chains.
- It boosts India's exports to ASEAN and Pacific nations, making it a more competitive economic player in the Indo-Pacific.

3. Regional Stability and Security

- Improved land and sea access allows faster deployment of humanitarian aid or defense assets in times of crisis.
- It also supports joint maritime patrols and security coordination with like-minded nations.

4. Strengthening Partnerships

- Better connectivity fosters closer ties with ASEAN and Quad countries, making India an essential pillar in Indo-Pacific strategies.
- It also enables more multilateral engagement and leadership in shaping regional rules and norms.

5. Northeast India as a Strategic Bridge

- Infrastructure development in the northeast turns the region into a bridge to Southeast Asia, boosting both domestic cohesion and external diplomacy.

Through improved connectivity, the Act East Policy enhances India's strategic depth, economic footprint, and diplomatic leverage, solidifying its role as a key Indo-Pacific power.

Act East Policy: A Decade- How has it impacted India

The key areas where AEP has significantly impacted India:

1. Enhanced Regional Connectivity

- Improved Infrastructure:
 - o India has focused on infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, which connect India's Northeast to Southeast Asia.
 - o Ports, roadways, and railways in the Northeast have been upgraded to foster trade and people-to-people exchanges.
- Northeast India's Transformation: The region has seen increased investments in infrastructure, making it an essential gateway for trade and connectivity to Southeast Asia, thus integrating India more closely with the ASEAN region.

2. Boost in Trade and Economic Growth

- Increased Trade with ASEAN: AEP has led to a boost in trade between India and Southeast Asia, especially in sectors like pharmaceuticals, textiles, IT, and infrastructure. India has signed numerous free trade agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN countries to enhance economic cooperation.
- Investment and Market Access: India has attracted greater investments in the form of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), especially from countries like Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, through economic corridors and initiatives under the Act East framework.

- **Diversification of Trade Partners:** The policy has helped reduce India's dependency on traditional markets like the U.S. and Europe, opening up newer avenues in the Indo-Pacific region.

3. Increased Geostrategic Influence

- **Maritime Security Leadership:** India has assumed a leadership role in promoting maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. The Act East Policy has strengthened India's naval capabilities through joint exercises, defense cooperation, and maritime patrols with countries like Singapore, Australia, and Japan.
- **Countering China's Influence:** By focusing on strategic connectivity projects, India has provided an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). AEP helped India carve out its own space in the Indo-Pacific, balancing China's growing dominance in the region.
- **Active Role in Quad:** India has played an instrumental role in the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, which has become a critical platform for maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.

4. Increased Diplomatic Engagement

- **Stronger Ties with ASEAN:** Through bilateral agreements, joint meetings, and cultural diplomacy, India has strengthened its ties with ASEAN countries. The AEP has solidified India's role as a reliable partner in Southeast Asia.
- **Bilateral Cooperation:** India's relations with countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have grown, particularly in areas such as trade, defense, and connectivity.

5. Cultural and Soft Power Diplomacy

- **Cultural Diplomacy:** India has used its cultural diplomacy to build strong people-to-people ties with Southeast Asian nations. Shared cultural heritage like Buddhism and educational exchange programs have enhanced India's soft power.
- **Educational and Humanitarian Cooperation:** India has provided scholarships, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs to Southeast Asian nations, making it an influential player in regional humanitarian initiatives.

6. Strategic Focus on the Indo-Pacific

- **Indo-Pacific Security:** India's focus on the Indo-Pacific has been reinforced through a combination of defense agreements, humanitarian aid missions, and multilateral exercises, ensuring India plays a pivotal role in shaping the regional order.
- **ASEAN Centrality:** India has continued to emphasize ASEAN centrality in the

region, supporting ASEAN-led initiatives like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

7. Internal Growth and Development

- **Economic Growth in the Northeast:** The Act East Policy has stimulated growth in India's Northeast region, bringing investment and development. Improved transportation infrastructure has also boosted trade and tourism.
- **Regional Stability:** The improved relations with neighboring countries through economic cooperation and security ties have enhanced stability in India's border areas, reducing regional tensions and fostering cooperation.

Conclusion:

- The Act East Policy (AEP), launched in 2014 as an upgrade of the Look East Policy, aims to strengthen India's economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia through increased connectivity and cooperation, particularly by leveraging the Northeast as a land bridge. While the intent is sound and progress has been made in some areas, the policy faces significant challenges and limitations that hinder its full realization.

1. Political Instability in the Region

- One of the most critical roadblocks is the political turmoil in neighboring countries, particularly Myanmar:
- Military Coup in Myanmar (2021) derailed several bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP).
- Civil unrest, ethnic conflicts, and border violence in Myanmar have made project execution risky, forcing India to slow down work and reevaluate security protocols.
- India's balancing act between strategic interests and democratic values further complicates diplomatic engagement in the region.

These geopolitical uncertainties undercut the policy's regional ambitions and reduce India's credibility as a dependable partner.

2. Slow Implementation and Institutional Bottlenecks

- The implementation pace of Act East-related infrastructure projects has been sluggish, due to:
- Bureaucratic red tape and coordination issues between central and state governments.
- Funding delays, especially in cross-border projects requiring trilateral financing or cooperation with international partners like Japan and Thailand.

- Poor project planning and execution in difficult terrains like the Northeast, where land acquisition and construction delays are common.

For example, both the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan project are running years behind schedule, with repeated cost escalations.

The gap between vision and execution undermines investor confidence and erodes local support in the Northeast.

3. Environmental and Ecological Sensitivities

Most of the Northeast region falls within biodiverse and ecologically fragile zones:

- Projects like roads, railways, and airports require deforestation, tunneling, and land use changes, which face stiff resistance from environmental groups and tribal communities.
- There is insufficient integration of environmental impact assessments (EIA) into project planning.
- Climate change impacts, such as landslides and flash floods, further delay infrastructure development.

Without sustainable practices, development may cause long-term ecological damage, leading to backlash from environmentalists and locals, and defeating the inclusive growth goals of the policy.

4. Security Challenges and Border Instability

Persistent internal security issues in the Northeast and along international borders remain a major hurdle:

- Insurgent groups in Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam often disrupt construction and oppose greater integration with mainland India.
- Cross-border crimes including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and illegal immigration strain bilateral relations.
- Infrastructural projects close to sensitive borders (e.g., China in Arunachal, Myanmar in Manipur) are often delayed due to strategic concerns and military restrictions.
- These security concerns limit the scale and pace of development and reduce the feasibility of seamless cross-border movement.

Critical View:

While the Act East Policy is visionary in scope and essential for regional integration, it suffers from major structural, geopolitical, environmental, and logistical challenges. The policy's effectiveness is hindered by execution deficits, external instability, and lack of synergy between strategic, economic, and environmental goals.

To enhance its impact, India must:

- Engage in proactive regional diplomacy (especially with ASEAN and Myanmar).
- Strengthen federal coordination and project governance.
- Integrate sustainability into all development planning.
- Ensure local stakeholder participation in decision-making.

The Act East Policy of India initiated to connect with the South-East Asian countries mainly benefits the North-Eastern states of India. Many infrastructure projects have been completed and many are underway through the Central Government initiative and various state governments. The North-Eastern states of India is connected with the Myanmar, Bangladesh which is a boon as these states benefits from the connectivity infrastructure. This will boost tourism, cultural growth and economic development of the North-East Indian states.

However, a major concern on these connectivity projects is their implementation on the ground level. So many projects are delayed for completion due to certain internal and external factors. Thus, in general these connectivity projects would benefit the North-East states and the whole of India.

References

1. ASEAN Magazine. (2023, February 27). A decade of India's Act East Policy. The ASEAN Magazine. <https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/a-decade-of-indias-act-east-policy/>
2. Bhowmick, S. (2024). Trilateral highway is the road to regional economic connectivity. East Asia Forum. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2024/xx/xx/trilateral-highway-is-the-road-to-regional-economic-connectivity>
3. Ghosh, S. (2020, January 14). India's Act East policy and regional cooperation. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-act-east-policy-and-regional-cooperation-61375/>
4. Jaishankar, S. (2023, December 16). ASEAN: Cornerstone of India's Act East Policy and its Indo-Pacific Vision. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/asean-cornerstone-of-indias-act-east-policy-and-its-indo-pacific-vision-eam-jaishankar/article68448912.ece>
5. Lian, T. (2023). The Indian Trilateral Highway Project and Myanmar Spring Revolution. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/xx/xx/indian-trilateral-highway-myanmar-revolution/>
6. Mahajan, S. (2025, February 10). 10 years of India's Act East Policy: A decade of connectivity, trade, and diplomacy. Samvada World. <https://samvadaworld.com/world/asia/10-years-of-indias-act-east-policy-a-decade-of-connectivity-trade-and-diplomacy/>
7. Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India. <https://www.civilaviation.gov.in/>
8. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/>
9. Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India. <https://shipmin.gov.in/>
10. Ministry of Railways, Government of India. <https://indianrailways.gov.in/>
11. Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India. <https://morth.gov.in/en>
12. Nayak, A., & Dutta, D. (2021). 110-km road is final challenge for long-delayed India-Myanmar Kaladan connectivity project. The Print. <https://theprint.in/india/110-km-road-final-challenge-kaladan/>
13. NewsOnAir. (2022, November 12). PM Narendra Modi reaches Vientiane in Lao PDR to attend ASEAN-India Summit and East Asia Summit. NewsOnAir. <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/pm-narendra-modi-reaches-vientiane-in-lao-pdr-to-attend-asean-india-summit-and-east-asia-summit/>

14. Press Information Bureau. (2018, October 3). Government approves new initiative for expanding connectivity in the Northeast. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837>
15. Press Information Bureau. (2019, November 22). Act East Policy and rail connectivity. Government of India. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1592787>
16. Press Information Bureau. (2022, March 29). Projects under the 'Act East Policy'. Government of India. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1809760>
17. Press Information Bureau. (2023, March 27). 16 airports are being operationalized in the North Eastern Region under the UDAN. Government of India. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1909586>
18. Press Information Bureau. (2023, July 25). Improvement of maritime infrastructure. Government of India. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1942500>
19. Sivaranjini, R. (2018). From Look East to Act East: A review of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project. Centre for Public Policy Research. <https://www.cppr.in/article/from-look-east-to-act-east>
20. The Geopolitics. (2023, February 5). The synergy between India's Act East policy and Indo-Pacific strategy with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The Geopolitics. <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-synergy-between-indias-act-east-policy-and-indo-pacific-strategy-with-japan-south-korea-and-taiwan/>
21. The Indian Express. (2023, May 30). Thailand key to India's Act East, Indo-Pacific policies: Modi meets counterpart. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/thailand-key-to-indias-act-east-indo-pacific-policies-modi-meets-counterpart-9923572/>
22. The Times of India. (2023, March 18). PM Modi's Act East policy strengthening India's regional leadership. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modis-act-east-policy-strengthening-indias-regional-leadership/articleshow/119986418.cms>
23. (2025, February 10). Decade of Act East: The need for closer ties. The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2025/feb/10/decade-of-act-east-the-need-for-closer-ties/>