

Shifting Narratives under India's Act East Policy: Northeast India as a Connective Bridge in South-South Connectivity

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Abstract

India's Act East Policy has increasingly repositioned Northeast India from a peripheral frontier into a strategic gateway linking India to Southeast Asia. This paper argues that this transformation is best understood as a narrative shift with uneven material consequences. Rather than treating Act East as a straightforward success story of connectivity-led regional integration, the paper examines the gap between policy rhetoric and actual outcomes. It develops a causal argument linking policy narrative, infrastructure strategy and regional integration outcomes. The central claim is that the gateway narrative has legitimised infrastructure-led initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and BIMSTEC connectivity frameworks, but these initiatives remain constrained by domestic political economy conditions, governance fragmentation, conflict legacies and regional instability. The paper therefore situates India's Act East Policy within a hybrid model of South-South regional integration, where the language of partnership and mutual benefit coexists with India's leadership role and uneven implementation. Northeast India emerges as both the symbolic anchor of India's eastward strategy and the site where the limits of infrastructure-led regionalism become most visible.

Introduction

India's Act East Policy, formally articulated in 2014, is widely understood as an intensification of the earlier Look East Policy initiated in the early 1990s. The Look East

Policy was primarily associated with diplomatic engagement and trade normalisation with Southeast Asia after India's economic liberalisation. Act East, however, marked a more assertive phase in which external engagement with Southeast Asia was explicitly linked to the internal development and strategic repositioning of Northeast India. This shift is not merely semantic. It recasts the Northeast from a historically marginal and conflict-affected frontier into a strategic gateway connecting India to Southeast Asia (Basak, 2020; Khanyo, 2021).

The Northeast's geography makes this repositioning politically significant. The region shares nearly 95 percent of its borders with neighbouring countries and is contiguous with Myanmar, which functions as a land bridge to Southeast Asian markets (Basak, 2020; Das, 2022). It also has deep socio-cultural and ethnic linkages across the Indo-Myanmar border, creating possibilities for cross-border exchange that are older than the modern nation-state. In policy discourse, these features have been converted into a strategic claim: that Northeast India can become the connective bridge through which India's domestic development agenda and eastern foreign policy converge (Horam, 2024; Khanyo, 2021).

This paper argues that the Act East Policy's gateway narrative is best understood as a strategic narrative transformation with material ambitions. The narrative does not simply describe the Northeast differently; it authorises a specific policy logic. By portraying the region as a gateway, Act East legitimises infrastructure-led regional integration through projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the BIMSTEC connectivity framework. These projects are intended to convert the region's geography into mobility, trade and strategic influence.

Yet the central analytical problem is that the narrative has moved faster than the material transformation it promises. The gap between rhetorical repositioning and material outcomes is not simply a matter of delay or administrative weakness. It is a structural outcome of how Act East operates. The policy assumes that a change in strategic narrative can be translated into infrastructure, and that infrastructure can then produce regional integration. In practice, this causal chain is repeatedly interrupted by domestic political economy constraints, fragile borderland governance, insurgency legacies, land and identity disputes, and instability in neighbouring Myanmar (Das, 2022; IPCS, 2020; Sarmah, 2016).

The paper therefore asks two interlinked questions. First, how has the narrative of Northeast India shifted under Act East from peripheral frontier to connective gateway? Second, to what extent has India's infrastructure-driven engagement translated this narrative into a distinct model of South-South regional integration? The answer offered here is deliberately cautious. Act East has produced a real discursive shift and has generated serious infrastructure initiatives, but it has not yet produced the institutional, economic and political conditions required for sustained regional integration. Northeast India has become central to India's strategic imagination, but it remains only partially transformed in material terms.

This distinction is important because connectivity has often been treated in policy language as a self-evident good. The Act East Policy presents roads, ports and border routes as instruments that can simultaneously deliver development, strategic access and regional cooperation. The analytical task, however, is to examine whether these instruments actually produce the outcomes attached to them. A road can reduce distance, but it cannot by itself resolve political mistrust, weak market linkages, uneven industrial capacity or instability across a neighbouring border. The paper therefore treats connectivity not as an outcome in itself, but as an intermediate mechanism whose success depends on wider institutional and political conditions.

Conceptual Framework: South-South Connectivity and Hybrid Partnership

South-South cooperation emerged in the postcolonial period as a framework through which developing states sought to cooperate on the basis of equality, solidarity and shared development. Its classical vocabulary was shaped by Bandung, the Non-Aligned Movement and the demand for a more equitable global economic order. In that form, South-South cooperation emphasised horizontal partnership among developing states and rejected the hierarchical logic associated with many North-led development frameworks (Klingebiel, 2023).

Contemporary connectivity initiatives complicate this classical understanding. Regional cooperation is now increasingly organised around infrastructure corridors, transport networks, energy grids, ports, customs systems and institutional platforms. Under Act East, India's engagement with Southeast Asia takes precisely this form. Connectivity projects such as the IMT Highway and Kaladan, and institutional spaces such as BIMSTEC, are presented as instruments for trade facilitation, mobility and shared regional growth (Ghising, 2021; Mahida, 2024).

However, the language of mutual benefit does not automatically imply equal power. India often occupies the central role in financing, designing and coordinating these projects. This does not make the model equivalent to older donor-recipient frameworks, nor does it make it identical to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has been widely discussed in relation to debt, state-to-state loan obligations and strategic asymmetry (Chakma & Dai, 2022). India's approach is looser and less conditional, but it still produces recognisable asymmetries in planning authority, coordination capacity and strategic agenda-setting.

This paper therefore uses the concept of a hybrid partnership model. A hybrid partnership is defined here as a form of cooperation in which the rhetoric of equality and mutual development coexists with material asymmetries in capacity, influence and institutional direction. India's Act East connectivity strategy occupies this middle ground. It is not North-led development and does not depend on formal conditionality. At the same time, it is not fully horizontal, because India's role as the principal driver gives it disproportionate influence over the direction and pace of regional integration (Chakma & Dai, 2022; Klingebiel, 2023).

The second conceptual problem is causal. Act East relies heavily on what may be called infrastructural determinism: the assumption that building corridors will produce connectivity, and that connectivity will generate integration. This assumption is politically attractive because it offers a concrete solution to a complex regional problem. Roads, ports and corridors appear measurable and visible. However, infrastructure alone cannot create integration. It requires functioning border institutions, customs coordination, local productive capacity, social legitimacy and political stability. Without these conditions, corridors can remain underused, delayed or politically contested (Das, 2022; Barua, 2020).

The causal framework used in this paper therefore links three stages: policy narrative, infrastructure strategy and regional integration outcomes. The Act East narrative frames the Northeast as a gateway. This narrative then supports infrastructure projects designed to operationalise that gateway. Regional integration is expected to follow through trade, mobility and deeper institutional cooperation. The paper shows that the breakdown occurs mainly in the translation from infrastructure strategy to integration outcomes. The problem is not only that projects are incomplete, but that the wider political and institutional conditions required for infrastructure to produce integration remain weak.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research framework focused on discourse analysis and policy interpretation. It examines how Northeast India has been repositioned within India's foreign policy discourse and how this repositioning has translated, or failed to translate, into material outcomes. The study relies on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, policy reports, government statements and analytical studies on Act East, Northeast India and regional connectivity.

The narrative shift is examined through the changing description of the Northeast across policy and analytical literature: from a security-sensitive frontier to a strategic bridge linking India to Southeast Asia. The material outcomes are assessed through three connectivity cases: the IMT Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the BIMSTEC connectivity framework. These cases are selected because they represent different forms of connectivity: a land corridor, a multimodal maritime-river-road project and an institutional regional framework.

The paper does not measure success through project completion alone. Instead, it asks whether infrastructure has produced broader integration outcomes, including mobility, trade facilitation, institutional coordination and regional economic transformation. This allows the analysis to move beyond a descriptive account of policy initiatives and toward an assessment of the gap between rhetoric and reality.

Narrative Shift: From Periphery to Gateway

The Northeast has long occupied an uneasy place within India's political imagination. For much of the postcolonial period, it was framed through security, insurgency, border management and exceptional governance. Colonial mapping practices had already

converted the region into a frontier space, administratively separated from older patterns of mobility and exchange. Zou (2011) shows how cartography and geographical discourse helped objectify the Northeast as a manageable borderland, while Sarmah (2016) argues that colonial distinctions between plains and hills shaped postcolonial governance and contributed to continuing patterns of exclusion and conflict.

This older security framing did not disappear with economic liberalisation. The region continued to be shaped by insurgencies, militarised governance, identity movements and anxieties over migration. The Siliguri Corridor, often described as the Chicken's Neck, remains a strategic chokepoint linking the Northeast to mainland India. The region's international borders make it strategically valuable, but also vulnerable. As a result, the Northeast has historically been governed both as an internal frontier and as a sensitive borderland (Baruah, 2007; Harris, 2023).

The Look East Policy introduced a gradual shift by linking India's economic opening to Southeast Asia with the possibility of developing the Northeast. India-ASEAN trade expanded after the policy's launch, rising from US\$ 2.9 billion in 1993 to US\$ 81.33 billion in 2018 (MEA, 2018). However, the benefits for the Northeast remained limited. Policy discourse began to recognise the region's location, but investment, infrastructure and implementation remained weak. A 2010 parliamentary question to the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region reflected this gap by noting that improved connectivity and integration had not produced sufficient investment or effective ground-level transformation.

Act East marked a sharper narrative turn. Under this policy, the Northeast is not merely adjacent to Southeast Asia; it is presented as the necessary gateway through which India's eastern engagement becomes physically possible. Horam (2024) describes the region as a strategic bridgehead, while Khanyo (2021) conceptualises it as a geographic organism and transformational zone of peace. Such formulations matter because they recode the region's function. The Northeast is no longer only a problem to be secured; it becomes an asset to be activated.

This shift performs an important strategic function. By constructing the Northeast as a gateway, the policy legitimises large-scale infrastructure intervention in a region historically marked by mistrust of state-led development. Connectivity becomes the language through which security, development and diplomacy are brought together. Roads, rail links, inland waterways, border trade points and regional institutions are presented as mechanisms through which the Northeast can move from marginality to centrality.

However, the gateway narrative also contains a weakness. It assumes that geography can be converted into integration through infrastructure. This overlooks the fact that the Northeast is not an empty corridor. It is a politically complex region marked by land disputes, identity claims, insurgency histories, environmental concerns and uneven state capacity. The narrative of the bridge therefore risks reducing the region to a passageway for trade rather

than treating it as a political and economic space with its own priorities (Barua, 2020; Das, 2022).

The narrative shift is therefore real, but incomplete. Act East has changed how the Northeast is imagined within India's regional strategy. Yet this new narrative is layered over older patterns of securitisation and marginalisation. The region is simultaneously imagined as a gateway and governed as a frontier. This contradiction is central to understanding why the policy's rhetorical ambition has not fully translated into material integration.

This is why the language of the gateway must be read critically. It appears empowering because it places the Northeast at the centre of India's regional strategy. At the same time, it can reproduce older hierarchies if the region is valued mainly for the access it provides to external markets. A genuinely transformative gateway model would require the Northeast to be treated not only as a route to Southeast Asia, but as a political and economic actor whose local interests shape the terms of connectivity. Without that shift, the policy risks replacing a security frontier narrative with a corridor narrative, while leaving deeper questions of agency unresolved.

Domestic Political Economy Constraints

The gap between Act East's rhetoric and outcomes cannot be explained only through project delays. It must be located in the domestic political economy of the Northeast. Infrastructure projects are implemented in a landscape shaped by fragmented governance, weak administrative capacity, insurgency legacies, land tenure complexities and contested state legitimacy. These conditions mediate the relationship between policy narrative and integration outcomes (Sarmah, 2016; Baruah, 2007).

The first constraint is governance. Sanjib Baruah (2007) argues that governance in the Northeast has often focused on managing instability rather than resolving its underlying causes. This creates a political environment in which development projects may proceed formally, but without deep local legitimacy. When communities view infrastructure as externally imposed, or as serving national strategic goals more than local needs, connectivity can generate resistance rather than integration.

The second constraint is the region's social and territorial complexity. Pachuau (2022), drawing on the idea of Zomia, situates the Northeast within a wider mountainous borderland whose social networks exceed modern political boundaries. This suggests that connectivity in the region is not new. Communities have long moved through trade, kinship, religious and cultural networks across the Indo-Burma borderlands. The problem is that state-led connectivity often tries to formalise and redirect these flows through top-down infrastructure corridors. These projects do not always align with local patterns of mobility and livelihood.

The third constraint is the political economy of land and livelihoods. Barua (2020) criticises the tendency to treat physical connectivity as an automatic driver of growth. In practice,

road and corridor projects can produce contestation around land acquisition, environmental impact, displacement and local autonomy. If infrastructure enables through-movement but does not build local productive capacity, the Northeast risks becoming a transit corridor rather than a beneficiary of regional integration.

Security pressures further complicate this picture. Insurgency networks, cross-border movement, informal trade and migration anxieties continue to shape state policy. Laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act have embedded exceptional governance into everyday life in parts of the region. Public protests around the Citizenship Amendment Act in Assam demonstrated that questions of identity, belonging and demographic anxiety remain politically sensitive. ACLED recorded more than 130 CAA-linked demonstration events in Assam between July and September 2020 (ACLED, 2020).

The conflict in Manipur also illustrates the fragility of the gateway narrative. Manipur is central to India's land route to Southeast Asia through Moreh, yet violence and political mistrust weaken its ability to function as a stable node of connectivity. Since Manipur shares a border with Myanmar, domestic conflict and cross-border instability are directly connected. The Act East Policy therefore operates in Manipur not only as a development framework, but also as a security strategy shaped by migration, insurgency and identity politics.

Regional instability, especially in Myanmar, adds an external layer of constraint. Political instability and armed conflict in Myanmar affect both the IMT Highway and the Kaladan project. This means that even where India has a clear strategic vision, implementation remains vulnerable to conditions beyond India's control (Marchang, 2021; Lohar, 2025). Connectivity projects are therefore embedded in high-risk political geographies. Their success depends not only on Indian investment, but also on the political stability and administrative capacity of neighbouring states.

These constraints interrupt the policy's causal chain. The Act East narrative presents the Northeast as a gateway. Infrastructure is then expected to convert this gateway into mobility and integration. But domestic political economy conditions determine whether infrastructure can actually function as a connector. Where governance remains weak, local legitimacy is fragile and regional instability persists, infrastructure cannot by itself deliver integration.

Comparative Connectivity Cases: Infrastructure, Strategy and Uneven Outcomes

India's attempt to operationalise the gateway narrative is most visible in three major connectivity initiatives: the IMT Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and BIMSTEC. These cases show how the Act East Policy seeks to transform narrative into material integration. They also show why that transformation remains incomplete.

The IMT Highway is one of the most prominent land-based projects associated with Act East. Stretching roughly 1,360 kilometres from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand

through Myanmar, it is designed to connect Northeast India to mainland Southeast Asia and facilitate cross-border trade and mobility (Bana & Yhome, 2017; Nair, n.d.). In policy terms, it is the clearest expression of the Northeast's gateway role. It promises access to ASEAN markets, improved borderland mobility and deeper India-Southeast Asia engagement (Ghising, 2021; Horam, 2024).

Yet the highway reveals the weakness of infrastructural determinism. A road does not automatically produce integration. Its effectiveness depends on complementary conditions: political stability in Myanmar, functioning border posts, customs harmonisation, security coordination, logistics networks and local commercial capacity. Many of these conditions remain weak or uncertain. Political instability and armed conflict in Myanmar, difficult terrain, bureaucratic delays and coordination problems have slowed progress and limited the project's transformative potential (Bhowmick, 2024; IPCS, 2020).

The IMT Highway therefore demonstrates a causal disjuncture between policy ambition and regional outcomes. The narrative frames the corridor as a route to integration, but the material reality shows that infrastructure is only one component of integration. Without stable institutions and local economic capacity, the road risks remaining strategically important but economically underperforming. It is a necessary but insufficient condition for regional integration.

The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project illustrates a similar problem through a different geography. Designed to link Kolkata with Sittwe port in Myanmar and then connect onward through river and road routes to Mizoram, Kaladan is intended to bypass the Siliguri Corridor and provide the Northeast with an alternative route to the Bay of Bengal (Thang et al., 2015). Strategically, it reduces dependence on India's narrow land corridor. Developmentally, it promises lower transport costs, better access to external markets and improved connectivity for Mizoram and the wider Northeast.

However, Kaladan has become one of the clearest examples of the gap between strategic vision and material execution. The project has faced prolonged delays, coordination difficulties across maritime, riverine and road segments, and instability in Myanmar's Rakhine State (Sang, 2019; IPCS, 2020). The result is not a simple failure, but a demonstration of how infrastructure is embedded in political context. A project may be strategically sound on paper and still struggle because the territory through which it moves is unstable.

Kaladan also shows the dual character of Act East connectivity. It is framed as a developmental project for the Northeast and as a strategic project for India's Bay of Bengal presence. These two logics are not always aligned. From a strategic perspective, Kaladan offers India an alternative access route and a stronger position in the Bay of Bengal. From a local development perspective, its value depends on whether it generates trade, employment and local economic linkages. The evidence so far suggests that the strategic logic has been clearer than the developmental outcome (Lohar, 2025; Sang, 2019).

BIMSTEC represents a broader institutional dimension of Act East. Bringing together India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, BIMSTEC is meant to strengthen transport links, trade facilitation, energy cooperation and customs coordination across the Bay of Bengal region (Yhome, 2017; Mahida, 2024). Unlike the IMT Highway and Kaladan, BIMSTEC is not a single corridor. It is a regional architecture through which South Asia and Southeast Asia can be connected.

BIMSTEC is often presented as a South-South platform based on shared prosperity and mutual benefit. In this respect, it fits the cooperative language of Act East. However, its institutional performance has been uneven. Regulatory differences, customs fragmentation, uneven infrastructure standards and varying state capacities have slowed progress (Thein, 2008; Mahida, 2024). Political instability in Myanmar further complicates regional connectivity planning.

BIMSTEC highlights a different constraint from the corridor projects. While IMT and Kaladan are limited by territorial instability and project execution, BIMSTEC is limited by institutional fragmentation. Its success depends on multilateral coordination across countries with different strategic priorities and administrative capacities. This makes integration slow, negotiated and vulnerable to political disruption.

Together, the three cases reveal a consistent pattern. First, infrastructure and institutions are framed as engines of integration. Second, India occupies a central coordinating role. Third, outcomes remain partial due to domestic, regional and institutional constraints. This pattern supports the paper's broader claim: Act East produces a hybrid connectivity model in which partnership rhetoric coexists with leader-driven coordination and incomplete delivery.

The comparison also shows that delays are not merely technical problems. They are indicators of deeper structural frictions. In the IMT case, the challenge lies in converting a physical route into a functioning economic corridor. In the Kaladan case, the challenge lies in managing a multimodal project through politically unstable territory. In BIMSTEC, the challenge lies in harmonising institutions across uneven state capacities. Each case therefore reveals a different point at which the policy narrative is interrupted before it can become an integration outcome.

Discussion: Hybrid Regional Integration and the Limits of Connectivity

The evidence suggests that India's Act East Policy cannot be understood either as a straightforward success of South-South cooperation or as a simple case of regional power projection. It sits between these categories. The policy uses the language of partnership, mutual benefit and shared regional development. At the same time, India plays the leading role in setting the direction, financing key projects and coordinating implementation. The result is a hybrid regional order (Chakma & Dai, 2022; Klingebiel, 2023).

This hybridity matters because it shapes outcomes. India's leadership gives Act East strategic coherence, but it also introduces asymmetry. Smaller participating states may

benefit from infrastructure and connectivity, but they also become linked to India's regional priorities. This does not make the model exploitative, but it does mean that questions of influence, autonomy and uneven capacity cannot be ignored.

The more important finding is that Act East's infrastructure strategy rests on an incomplete causal assumption. It presumes that spatial connectivity will produce regional integration. Yet the case studies show that infrastructure does not operate in isolation. Roads, ports and institutions require political stability, customs coordination, local legitimacy and economic ecosystems. Without these, connectivity remains a promise rather than an outcome.

This is why the gap between rhetoric and reality should not be treated as accidental. It is built into the policy's logic. The gateway narrative compresses multiple goals into a single spatial metaphor. The Northeast is expected to support domestic development, cross-border trade, regional diplomacy and strategic competition all at once. But the region's domestic political economy is too complex for infrastructure alone to resolve.

The Northeast therefore becomes the place where the limits of infrastructure-led regionalism are most visible. It is central to India's eastern strategy, but it is also where that strategy encounters governance deficits, identity politics, conflict legacies and fragile borderland realities. The region is imagined as a bridge, but bridges require stable foundations. In the absence of those foundations, connectivity projects remain vulnerable to delay, contestation and underperformance.

The Act East Policy has nevertheless produced an important change. It has moved the Northeast into the centre of India's strategic geography. This matters because policy narratives shape state priorities, resource allocation and diplomatic imagination. The problem is not that the narrative is meaningless. The problem is that narrative transformation has not been matched by sufficient institutional and political transformation.

This does not mean that Act East should be dismissed as symbolic. Its projects have altered strategic priorities, produced new institutional conversations and placed the Northeast more visibly within India's foreign policy thinking. The problem is that the policy's ambition is greater than its institutional base. For Act East to move from narrative success to integration success, the emphasis must shift from corridor construction alone to corridor governance. This includes border management, customs reform, local enterprise development, conflict sensitivity and greater participation of state governments and local communities in project design.

Conclusion

This paper examined how India's Act East Policy has recast Northeast India from a peripheral frontier into a strategic gateway linking India to Southeast Asia. It argued that this shift is real at the level of discourse and strategic design, but uneven at the level of material transformation. The policy has successfully changed how the Northeast is imagined

within India's regional strategy. It has not yet fully delivered the infrastructure, governance and integration outcomes required to make that gateway functional.

The paper developed a causal framework linking policy narrative, infrastructure strategy and regional integration outcomes. It showed that the breakdown occurs mainly between infrastructure and outcome. Act East assumes that corridors will generate connectivity and that connectivity will produce integration. The evidence from the IMT Highway, Kaladan and BIMSTEC suggests otherwise. Infrastructure is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Outcomes depend on border governance, political stability, institutional coordination, local productive capacity and social legitimacy.

The paper also argued that Act East represents a hybrid model of South-South regional integration. It is not North-led development, and it does not reflect a genuine attempt to build regional connectivity within the Global South. Yet it is not fully horizontal either. India's role in funding, designing and coordinating key initiatives gives it a leadership position that complicates the language of equal partnership.

Northeast India is therefore both the anchor of India's Act East strategy and the site where its contradictions become clearest. It is expected to carry the weight of connectivity, development and strategic projection simultaneously. This has produced a powerful gateway narrative, but not yet a fully realised gateway. The region remains less a completed bridge to Southeast Asia than a space where the limits of infrastructure-driven regionalism are exposed.

The significance of Act East lies not only in what it promises, but in what it reveals. It shows how regional connectivity can operate as foreign policy, development strategy and political narrative at the same time. It also shows that turning a frontier into a gateway is not simply a matter of building roads and ports. It requires governance reform, regional stability and a development approach that treats local realities as central rather than secondary to strategic ambition.

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