

India's Act East Policy and Assam: An Assessment since Its Inception

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Abstract

India's Act East Policy (AEP), launched in 2014 as an evolution of the Look East Policy, seeks to deepen economic, cultural, and strategic engagement with Southeast and East Asia. Assam occupies a central role in this framework due to its geographical position as the gateway to the region, its historical trade and cultural linkages, and its strategic importance for India's security. This article assesses Assam's significance under the AEP by examining key developments in connectivity projects such as highways, railways, waterways, and transnational corridors, alongside cross-border trade initiatives with Myanmar and Bangladesh. It highlights Assam's economic potential in industrial growth, agro-based industries, and regional market access, while also underscoring the role of cultural diplomacy, tourism, and educational collaborations in strengthening people-to-people ties. At the same time, challenges including infrastructure gaps, insurgency, bureaucratic delays, and limited private sector participation hinder progress. The study concludes that with inclusive development, stronger connectivity, and effective security cooperation, Assam can emerge as a pivotal hub for India's AEP engagement and broader regional integration.

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Introduction

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation since the early 1990s, reflecting both internal economic reforms and changing global realities. In 1991, the Government of India under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao launched the *Look East Policy* (LEP) to strengthen economic and strategic ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. The policy initially focused on trade, investment, and regional integration as part of India's post-liberalisation outreach to dynamic Asian economies (Haokip, 2011). Over time, the Look East Policy evolved into a broader framework that included security cooperation, cultural exchange, and institutional partnerships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, by the early 2010s, it became clear that India needed a more proactive and result-oriented approach to engage with its eastern neighbours. This led to the launch of the *AEP* in 2014 by the Narendra Modi government (Bajpaee, 2023; Panda, 2016). The shift from 'Look East' to 'Act East' symbolised a change from passive observation to active participation. While the Look East

Policy was largely economic in nature, the AEP emphasised strategic, political, and cultural dimensions of engagement (Panda, 2016). According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, 2015), the AEP aims to enhance connectivity with ASEAN and East Asia through physical, economic, and institutional linkages. It also focuses on improving infrastructure, developing border regions, and promoting cultural and people-to-people contacts. Strategically, the policy seeks to balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific and to integrate India more deeply into regional economic and security networks (Lowy Institute, 2014). Economically, it aims to facilitate trade corridors, special economic zones, and digital connectivity that can boost regional development. Culturally, it revives India's civilizational links with Southeast Asia through shared traditions, Buddhism, and linguistic affinities (RIS, 2025). Within this framework, *Assam* and the *Northeast region* hold a central position. Assam acts as the gateway to Southeast Asia and the key land bridge for India's cross-border connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand

Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (Dutta, 2017). The state's geographical location makes it crucial for implementing India's regional diplomacy and trade integration under the AEP. Assam's cultural diversity, historical connections with Southeast Asian societies, and economic potential also support India's broader goal of linking domestic development with international engagement (India's Act East Policy and Its Impact on Assam, 2020). Thus, the successful implementation of the Act East Policy depends significantly on how Assam and the Northeast are integrated into the regional value chains and cross-border transport networks.

Theoretical Understanding

This study is informed by Regionalism, New Regionalism, and Borderland Theory to interpret India's Act East Policy (AEP) as a strategic framework linking foreign policy with sub-national development. Regionalism explains India's effort to integrate its eastern frontier into Southeast Asian economic and strategic networks, while New Regionalism highlights the growing importance of connectivity, local actors, and cross-border interactions. Borderland theory further situates Assam not as a peripheral space but as a dynamic interface of trade, security, and cultural exchange. Together, these perspectives enable an understanding of Assam's evolving role from a marginal border state to a geo-economic and strategic pivot within India's eastward engagement.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, analytical methodology, drawing upon primary and secondary sources. Primary data include official policy documents, government reports, and statements from the Ministry of External Affairs and DoNER, while secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journals, books, and think-tank publications. Content analysis and case-based examination of connectivity, trade, and infrastructure initiatives are employed to evaluate the outcomes of the AEP in Assam since its inception.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to assess the:

- Strategic and developmental implications of the AEP for Assam.
- Effectively integrated regional value chains and cross-border networks for Assam.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on India's AEP has evolved from its earlier focus on diplomatic engagement to a broader emphasis on connectivity, economic integration, and strategic balancing in the Indo-Pacific. Early analyses of the LEP viewed Northeast India largely as a geographical constraint rather than a strategic asset (Baruah, 2003). The transition to the AEP marked a conceptual shift, placing greater emphasis on infrastructure development, border trade, and regional integration, particularly through the Northeast (Haokip, 2011). Scholars argue that Assam occupies a pivotal position within the AEP framework due to its geographical centrality, transport networks, and political significance in the region (Das, 2016). Studies focusing on road, rail, inland waterways, and multimodal connectivity underline Assam's role as the logistical hub linking India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and beyond (De & Majumdar, 2020). The development of projects such as the India-Bangladesh Protocol Route, Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, and trilateral highway

has been widely discussed, though scholars caution that Assam's potential remains underutilised due to institutional and administrative bottlenecks.

A growing body of literature also highlights the security development nexus in Assam under the AEP. Baruah (2015) and Singh (2018) note that unresolved border issues, migration concerns, and internal political instability continue to shape the implementation of regional connectivity projects. Strategic studies emphasise Assam's importance in India's broader geopolitical calculus, particularly in balancing China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal region (Bajpaee, 2017). Policy oriented research increasingly adopts a sub-national and people centric perspective, arguing that the success of the AEP depends on inclusive growth, local participation, and capacity building in Assam (Pethiyagoda, 2014; De, 2021). These studies stress that while infrastructure expansion has improved physical connectivity, economic spillovers remain uneven, with limited integration of local enterprises into cross-border value chains. Despite the growing volume of literature, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive, Assam-specific assessments that systematically evaluate policy outcomes over time. This study addresses this gap by critically examining Assam's experience under the AEP since its inception, thereby contributing to a more grounded and region-sensitive understanding of India's eastward engagement.

Assam's Geopolitical and Strategic Significance

Assam holds a distinctive place in India's strategic geography as both a frontier state and a bridge connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia. Located in the heart of the Northeastern region, Assam serves as the primary gateway through which India envisions expanding its economic and cultural engagement under the *AEP*. The state's unique geography gives it immense strategic value it lies close to international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh and provides land connectivity to Myanmar and China through neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. This central position allows Assam to act as a pivot between India's mainland and the wider Asian region, offering both economic opportunities and strategic challenges (Nath & Mrinal, 2025).

Assam's location makes it the core of India's regional connectivity agenda. The Brahmaputra River valley, with its navigable waterways, fertile plains, and dense transport network, has long been viewed as a natural corridor linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. The ongoing infrastructure initiatives such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are designed to integrate Assam and the broader Northeast with Myanmar, Thailand, and beyond (De, 2021). These projects aim to transform Guwahati, Dibrugarh, and Silchar into strategic transit hubs for multimodal trade that combine road, rail, and river transport systems. According to Nath and Mrinal (2025), such connectivity initiatives enhance trade and carry political significance by promoting subregional cooperation among India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal under the BBIN framework.

The state's proximity to sensitive border regions adds another layer to its strategic importance. Although Assam does not directly share a border with China or Myanmar, its immediate neighbours Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur do. Developments in these frontier areas have a direct bearing on Assam's security, migration patterns, and regional stability. Dean, Sarma, and Rippa (2024) note that infrastructure projects and border management initiatives along the China-

Myanmar frontier are reshaping political boundaries and influencing local economies, a trend that resonates with India's own concerns about balancing connectivity and security in the Northeast. Assam's long boundary with Bangladesh also makes it a focal point for trade, migration, and cross-border cooperation. Improved customs infrastructure, border haats (local trade markets), and integrated check-posts along this frontier are gradually redefining Assam's role as an emerging gateway to South and Southeast Asia (Nath & Mrinal, 2025).

In India's broader Northeastern corridor strategy, Assam functions as the anchor state linking domestic development goals with regional diplomacy. De (2021) emphasises that Assam is central to India's subnational foreign policy, which seeks to connect local economies to transnational production and transport networks. Guwahati has become a hub for regional aviation and logistics, while cities like Silchar and Dibrugarh connect the Brahmaputra valley with the hill states and the eastern borders. As Rippa (2019) observes in her study of Asian borderland infrastructures, the process of building roads, bridges, and industrial corridors is not only about physical connectivity it also shapes governance and redefines how peripheral regions relate to national and global systems. In this sense, Assam's infrastructural transformation reflects both developmental aspirations and geopolitical intent. Assam's significance is not purely contemporary; the region has played a vital role in regional trade and diplomacy. During World War II, the Ledo (Stilwell) Road constructed through Assam connected India to Northern Myanmar and China, serving as a crucial wartime supply route (Gordon, 2018). Long before colonial interventions, trade routes through the Brahmaputra valley facilitated exchanges between the Assamese plains, Tibet, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia, carried by traders, monks, and cultural emissaries. Recent research on cross-border migration and exchange along the China-Myanmar borders shows that these transregional linkages continue to shape political and economic interactions today (You, 2024). Assam's historical openness to transnational exchange thus provides a deep cultural foundation for India's present-day efforts to revive ancient trade corridors through the AEP. Assam's geopolitical and strategic importance lies in its ability to act as both a borderland and a bridge. Its geographical location, infrastructural potential, and historical networks position it as a central player in India's effort to connect the domestic economy with the dynamic markets of Southeast Asia. Strengthening connectivity and cross-border cooperation through Assam will therefore remain a key determinant of how effectively India can translate the vision of the AEP into tangible regional integration and prosperity.

Evolution of Act East Policy and Its Relevance to Assam

India's engagement with East and Southeast Asia has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades. The LEP primarily focused on enhancing economic and diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries. It was perceived as insufficiently inclusive of India's Northeastern states, which are geographically and strategically crucial for such engagements. Recognising this gap, the Indian government redefined its approach by launching the AEP in 2014. This policy aimed to shift from passive engagement to active participation, emphasizing the integration of India's northeastern region into broader regional frameworks (Barua, 2020; Ghosh, 2025). The AEP introduced several key objectives pertinent to Northeast India. These included

improving infrastructure connectivity, fostering economic growth through trade and investment, and enhancing cultural and people-to-people exchanges. The policy also aimed to address security concerns by promoting regional cooperation and stability. Assam, with its strategic location, rich cultural heritage, and economic potential, emerged as a focal point for implementing these objectives (Das & Guha, 2022; Saha, 2021). Assam's role in the AEP is multifaceted. Geographically, it serves as a critical link between India and Southeast Asia, facilitating trade and movement across borders. The state's infrastructure development, particularly in sectors like transportation and logistics, has been pivotal in supporting the policy's goals. Moreover, Assam's rich cultural heritage and historical ties with neighboring countries provide a strong foundation for fostering deeper regional connections (Saha, 2021; Sharma, 2023). The implementation of the AEP in Assam has had significant implications for India's regional security, trade, and diplomacy. By enhancing connectivity and economic integration, the policy has bolstered India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region, countering the influence of other powers. The emphasis on regional cooperation has contributed to a more stable and secure environment in Northeast India, aligning with broader national interests (Das & Guha, 2022; Saha, 2021). Thus, the transition from the LEP to the AEP marked a strategic shift in India's foreign policy, with Assam playing a central role in its execution. The AEP's focus on connectivity, economic development, and regional cooperation has underscored Assam's significance in India's broader geopolitical and economic strategies (Barua, 2020; Ghosh, 2025).

Economic Engagement and Infrastructure Development

Economic engagement and infrastructure development are central to the transformation of Northeast India from a historically isolated region into an integrated economic zone connecting South and Southeast Asia. Assam, located at the crossroads of this transformation, plays a crucial role in facilitating transport connectivity, trade, and regional cooperation. These developments are aligned with India's AEP, which seeks to build stronger economic and infrastructural linkages between the Northeast and ASEAN countries (Kamwang, 2019; Mathur, 2021).

Transport Connectivity

Roadways: Road infrastructure has been a cornerstone of regional integration in Northeast India. National Highways such as NH-27 and NH-37 serve as vital arteries for economic mobility. NH-27, which forms part of India's East-West Corridor, links Porbandar in Gujarat with Silchar in Assam, ensuring seamless movement of goods from mainland India to the Northeast. NH-37, running parallel to the southern bank of the Brahmaputra, connects important industrial and agricultural zones, including Dibrugarh, Jorhat, and Guwahati. These highways have improved travel time, reduced logistics costs, and facilitated trade flow both within Assam and across borders. Frequent landslides, flooding, and maintenance deficits still disrupt supply chains and raise freight costs (Asian Confluence, 2019; Kamwang, 2019). Assam's geographic position gives it strategic importance in transnational connectivity. The state serves as the entry point for the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, linking Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar. This corridor enhances India's outreach to ASEAN markets and provides an overland route for regional trade (Mathur, 2021).

Railways: The railways have emerged as another vital component of connectivity. The Guwahati-Imphal railway line, which includes the Jiribam-Imphal section, represents one of the most ambitious rail projects in the Northeast. When completed, it will connect Manipur to the national railway grid, improving both passenger mobility and freight movement. The project also includes one of India's highest railway bridges, symbolizing the engineering effort required to integrate the mountainous terrain of the region (North East Frontier Railway, 2022). Freight corridors from Assam to other parts of India are being modernized to improve logistics efficiency. Guwahati has evolved into a key logistics hub, serving as a redistribution center for petroleum, tea, coal, and agricultural goods. Enhanced railway connectivity not only reduces the cost of transportation but also enables industries to access raw materials and markets in a more efficient manner (NEDFi, 2021). Nevertheless, the lack of double-tracking in some segments and limited warehousing facilities continue to restrict rail-based freight potential.

Inland Waterways: The Brahmaputra River, designated as National Waterway-2, is a key inland transport artery with enormous economic potential. Studies show that developing the Brahmaputra for navigation can substantially reduce transportation costs for bulk commodities (Meena & Sarma, 2024). The river's depth and width make it suitable for cargo movement, but sedimentation, silt load, and seasonal variation in water levels remain major obstacles. Meena and Sarma (2024) emphasise that sustainable dredging and sediment management are necessary for maintaining navigability, particularly near Guwahati and Dhubri. The Government of India has established river ports, terminals, and navigation aids under the Jal Marg Vikas Project to improve inland water transport. Cross-border movement via the India-Bangladesh Protocol routes has also begun, linking Dhubri and Pandu with Kolkata. This initiative integrates the Northeast with Indian ports and international markets. Yet, Barua *et al.* (2019) argue that effective governance and inter-state cooperation in the Brahmaputra Basin are essential to manage shared waters and sustain river-based transport.

Airways: Within the framework of India's AEP, airway connectivity initiatives specific to Assam have played a strategic role in strengthening regional integration and accessibility. The expansion and modernisation of Lok Priya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport (Guwahati) as the primary aviation hub of the Northeast, along with enhanced operations at Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Silchar, and Tezpur airports, have significantly improved intra-state and inter-state air mobility. Under the UDAN Regional Connectivity Scheme, several Assam-based routes have been operationalised, linking remote districts with Guwahati and other major Indian cities, thereby reducing spatial isolation and promoting economic and administrative integration. These Assam-centric airway initiatives have facilitated tourism, trade, medical access, and disaster response within the state, while reinforcing Assam's gateway role under the AEP. Issues such as route sustainability, limited international direct flights from Assam, and infrastructure capacity constraints continue to shape the effectiveness of airway connectivity as a catalyst for Assam's development trajectory.

Trade and Investment

Cross-Border Trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh: Cross-border trade has become an essential element of the region's economic engagement strategy. Assam and other northeastern states have active trade points with both

Myanmar and Bangladesh. Formal trade through the Moreh-Tamu border and border haats along Meghalaya and Tripura have facilitated the exchange of agricultural and manufactured goods (NEDFi, 2021). Bangladesh, in particular, is a major partner for the Northeast, providing access to ports such as Chittagong and Mongla. The use of these ports has helped reduce shipping time and costs for goods from Assam and Meghalaya. Infrastructural bottlenecks, non-tariff barriers, and complex customs procedures continue to hinder trade efficiency. Informal trade remains prevalent due to the presence of ethnic linkages and cultural ties across borders (Marchang, 2020). Expanding formal channels through improved logistics hubs and integrated check posts can enhance bilateral trade and contribute to local income growth.

Industrial Clusters and Agro-Based Industries: The development of industrial clusters in the Northeast has focused largely on agro-processing, textiles, and bamboo-based industries. Agro-based clusters benefit from the region's fertile soil and favorable climatic conditions. Assam's tea industry, along with emerging fruit-processing units in Tripura and Meghalaya, demonstrates the potential for export-oriented agro-industries. The North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) provides fiscal incentives to attract industries, while specialized parks are being developed for food processing and bamboo crafts (Asian Confluence, 2019). Despite these efforts, private sector participation remains limited. Factors such as high transportation costs, low economies of scale, and infrastructure gaps discourage large-scale investments. According to Marchang (2020), linking industrial clusters with regional corridors like BCIM and the Trilateral Highway could help overcome market isolation by connecting producers to larger consumer bases.

Challenges in Private Sector Participation: Private investment in the Northeast faces structural and institutional barriers. Land acquisition difficulties, uncertain property rights, and poor logistics have created high entry costs for investors. Perceptions of political instability and limited financial infrastructure deter long-term investments (NEDFi, 2021). Public-private partnership (PPP) models have been introduced to attract private participation in infrastructure, yet implementation delays and coordination problems persist. Strengthening governance, improving credit facilities, and ensuring stable policy frameworks are crucial for building investor confidence.

Integration with Regional Corridors

BCIM Corridor: The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor represents a long-term vision for transnational cooperation. It aims to facilitate trade, transport, and investment between South and Southeast Asia. Marchang (2020) observes that for Northeast India, the BCIM Corridor could unlock access to large regional markets and stimulate industrial growth. However, political sensitivities between India and China, coupled with logistical challenges, have slowed its implementation. For Assam, participation in BCIM would mean improved border infrastructure and potential development of export hubs, but realizing this requires coordinated diplomacy and consistent infrastructure upgrades.

India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway: The India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway is a flagship project under the Act East Policy. Mathur (2021) notes that the highway's completion would enable India's overland connectivity to ASEAN markets, potentially extending further to Cambodia and Vietnam. The project's success depends on

improving road standards and customs harmonization across Myanmar. Kamwang (2019) further highlights that the IMT Highway promotes socio-economic integration by facilitating people-to-people contacts, tourism, and cultural exchanges. For Assam and Manipur, this corridor could serve as a lifeline to international trade routes, generating employment and business opportunities for local communities.

Impact on the Local Economy

Improved connectivity and economic engagement have begun to transform local economies in Assam and neighboring states. Construction activities linked to roads, railways, and waterways create direct and indirect employment. Better transport networks also expand market access for farmers, traders, and small-scale producers. As a result, regional trade has diversified, with more agricultural and manufactured goods reaching domestic and foreign markets (Barua *et al.*, 2019). The multiplier effects of connectivity projects include growth in logistics, warehousing, and tourism sectors. The Brahmaputra River transport initiatives, for example, generate jobs in port management and cargo handling. However, to ensure equitable growth, it is essential to align infrastructure investments with social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and skill development. So, economic engagement and infrastructure development in Northeast India are reshaping the region's economic geography. Assam's strategic role in highways, railways, and waterways makes it the nucleus of connectivity-driven development. Integrating the region with transnational corridors such as BCIM and the Trilateral Highway will not only strengthen India's economic diplomacy but also enhance local livelihoods and regional resilience.

Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Engagement

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people engagement form a vital component of India's AEP, particularly in the context of Northeast India. The region's historical, ethnic, and cultural links with Southeast Asia make it a natural bridge for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. The cultural heritage of Assam and neighbouring states resonates with that of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, reflecting deep historical linkages formed through migration, trade, and the spread of religious and artistic traditions. According to Tase (2024), the Tai-Ahom communities of Assam share ethnic, linguistic, and cultural similarities with Tai groups in Thailand and Myanmar, underscoring centuries of transnational cultural interaction. These shared roots are reflected in traditional dance, textiles, cuisine, and folklore, making cultural diplomacy a natural extension of longstanding civilizational connections.

Tourism plays a significant role in enhancing people-to-people engagement under the AEP. Assam's rich natural and cultural heritage exemplified by sites such as Kaziranga National Park and Majuli Island serves as a key driver of regional tourism and cross-border cultural exchanges. Majuli, one of the world's largest river islands, has emerged as a hub of Vaishnavite art, music, and monastic traditions, drawing visitors and scholars from across Asia (Konwar & Chakraborty, 2015). The Majuli Raas festival, for instance, has become a platform for intercultural engagement, promoting traditional Assamese performing arts to international audiences. Kaziranga's eco-tourism initiatives not only preserve biodiversity but also generate livelihood opportunities and cross-border tourism networks. Bonia and Goswami (2025) found that local communities around

Kaziranga and Majuli increasingly view tourism as a sustainable livelihood source, though they emphasize the need for infrastructure improvements and better environmental management.

Rural tourism further contributes to strengthening socio-cultural and economic linkages between Assam and the broader Southeast Asian region. Studies by Ali, Srivastava, and Anand (2015) highlight how villages like Hajo and Sualkuchi, known for their traditional crafts and religious harmony, have strong potential for developing as heritage tourism sites. The promotion of local crafts such as Muga silk weaving and bamboo art adds a dimension of soft power to India's regional diplomacy, showcasing cultural continuity and community resilience. These initiatives reflect the spirit of cultural diplomacy that emphasizes shared traditions and sustainable development. Educational and academic linkages also play an important role in building lasting regional partnerships. Though research on Assam's academic collaboration with ASEAN countries is limited, universities in Northeast India have started engaging in exchange programs, cultural studies, and student mobility under the AEP framework. Such initiatives foster mutual learning and understanding between Indian and Southeast Asian youth, strengthening the foundations for long-term cooperation. Tase (2024) argues that academic diplomacy complements cultural engagement by developing a new generation of scholars who understand and appreciate India's shared cultural geography with Southeast Asia.

Cultural diplomacy through art, festivals, and local industries has also become a medium for expressing soft power. Chutia and Sarma (2015) observe that traditional Mishing textiles from Majuli are undergoing transformation to meet global market demands, symbolising how indigenous art can become a channel for cross-cultural exchange. These cultural products not only preserve identity but also represent India's creative diplomacy. Collectively, such engagements demonstrate how the Northeast is evolving as a vibrant site for India's soft power projection and people-centered regional integration.

Security and Strategic Dimensions

Assam, situated in India's northeast, is strategically important due to its geographic location, bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh. This position makes it a focal point for national security, counterinsurgency operations, and India's AEP. Over the years, Assam has faced persistent insurgent activities driven by ethnic, political, and socio-economic grievances. To address these challenges, the Indian government has deployed both military and paramilitary forces, such as the Assam Rifles and Border Security Force (BSF), which conduct intelligence-led operations, cordon-and-search missions, and community engagement programs. These counterinsurgency efforts aim not only to neutralize insurgent groups but also to build trust among local communities, highlighting the need for a balance between security and civil liberties (Bhaumik, 2007; Dutta, 2020). Scholars emphasize that Assam's terrain forests, river valleys, and porous borders complicate conventional counterinsurgency strategies, making integrated civil security measures essential (Lacina, 2007).

Cooperation with Myanmar is a crucial component of Assam's security strategy. Insurgent groups often use Myanmar's borderlands as safe havens for regrouping, logistics, and arms acquisition. India has pursued a mix of diplomatic engagement and tactical coordination with Myanmar, including information sharing, joint patrols, and limited cross-border operations, to disrupt these networks and

prevent the flow of militants into Assam (Basit, 2018). While progress has been achieved, this cooperation remains constrained by Myanmar's internal political instability and the presence of multiple armed groups, which makes sustained coordination challenging (Basit, 2018). Border infrastructure development has emerged as another key strategy for enhancing security in Assam. Construction of roads and bridges improves rapid troop deployment and logistical support in remote areas, while fencing along inhabited stretches of the border aims to deter illegal crossings. Surveillance technologies, including radar, integrated cameras, and aerial monitoring systems, provide persistent situational awareness along long border sectors (Datta, 2018). Academic analyses caution that such measures must be implemented carefully to avoid adverse environmental impacts, disruption of local livelihoods, and community resistance, which could undermine long-term security objectives (Haokip & Marchang, 2022). Beyond immediate security concerns, Assam holds strategic significance in India's AEP. The state serves as a gateway for regional connectivity, trade, and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. Its road and rail corridors, airfields, and riverine networks provide critical nodes for transnational trade and logistics. Ensuring stability in Assam not only safeguards internal security but also supports broader geostrategic objectives, including regional integration and deterrence against cross-border threats (Saisin, 2025). India's national security strategy in Assam combines operational readiness, diplomatic engagement with Myanmar, infrastructure development, and development-oriented initiatives to achieve a holistic security framework. Assam's security landscape requires a multidimensional approach that integrates counterinsurgency operations, international cooperation, strategic border infrastructure, and development planning. Academic literature consistently underscores that lasting security gains depend on addressing local grievances, promoting economic development, and maintaining political inclusion alongside conventional military measures. Assam's dual role as a frontier state and a gateway to Southeast Asia highlights its critical place in India's national security and AEP.

Challenges in Implementing AEP in Assam

The AEP aims to enhance India's economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asia, and Assam is central to this vision. The implementation of AEP in Assam faces multiple challenges that limit its effectiveness and sustainability. One of the most critical barriers is the persistent infrastructure and connectivity gap. Although major projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project are designed to improve connectivity, Assam continues to suffer from poor internal transport links, limited border infrastructure, and inadequate logistics facilities (Pulla, Sarma, & Choudhury, 2020). Weak connectivity not only slows down the movement of goods and services but also hinders cross-border trade and regional integration. These infrastructural bottlenecks have made it difficult for Assam to realize its full potential as a trade hub connecting mainland India with Southeast Asia (Panda, 2022).

Bureaucratic hurdles and policy coordination issues further complicate the implementation of AEP. The policy's success depends on coordination among central ministries, state governments, and multiple agencies involved in trade, security, and infrastructure. Overlapping jurisdictions, slow

decision-making, and procedural delays have often stalled projects (Haokip, 2021). Scholars note that fragmented governance and weak institutional capacity at the state level make it challenging to execute large-scale connectivity initiatives efficiently (Panda, 2022). As a result, many projects under the AEP framework face cost overruns and extended timelines. Strengthening institutional coordination and administrative efficiency is therefore essential for improving policy execution in Assam. Security concerns, including insurgency and ethnic tensions, remain significant obstacles to AEP implementation. Assam and other northeastern states have long experienced political unrest, insurgent violence, and ethnic rivalries that disrupt both governance and development activities (Mohan, 2018). The presence of armed groups and frequent inter-ethnic conflicts have created an atmosphere of instability, discouraging both domestic and foreign investors. These conditions make infrastructure construction difficult, especially in border areas adjoining Myanmar. Addressing such challenges requires a combination of political dialogue, local participation, and inclusive peacebuilding measures that can create the stability necessary for long-term development (Haokip, 2021).

Another challenge is the limited participation of the private sector and trade facilitation bottlenecks. Despite the region's strategic potential, the private sector remains hesitant to invest in Assam due to weak infrastructure, inconsistent policy frameworks, and logistical inefficiencies (Panda, 2022). Complicated customs procedures, limited warehousing facilities, and poor digital connectivity at border points restrict trade flow. The absence of efficient trade facilitation mechanisms makes it harder for Assam to compete with other regional economies that are better integrated with Southeast Asian markets (Pulla *et al.*, 2020). Public-private partnerships, if well structured, could help bridge investment gaps and accelerate trade-based growth in the state. Finally, socio-political challenges such as displacement and local opposition frequently delay development projects under AEP. Infrastructure expansion often involves land acquisition, which displaces indigenous communities and disrupts traditional livelihoods. This has triggered local resistance in several parts of Assam, reflecting tensions between development goals and community rights (Pulla, Bhattacharyya, & Bhatt, 2020). Displacement-related grievances can escalate into political protests, affecting project timelines and public trust. Therefore, a more inclusive approach that ensures community consultation, fair compensation, and social safeguards is vital to balancing development with social equity.

Thus, while Assam holds tremendous strategic and economic potential under India's AEP, its successful implementation requires addressing several intertwined challenges. Strengthening connectivity, improving bureaucratic coordination, ensuring peace and stability, facilitating private sector participation, and managing socio-political sensitivities are crucial for transforming Assam into a true gateway between India and Southeast Asia. Without these reforms, the vision of the AEP will remain constrained by the realities of governance, geography, and grassroots resistance in Assam.

Achievements and Opportunities

The AEP has played a significant role in reshaping Assam's economic, infrastructural, and strategic outlook. Since the policy's introduction, Assam has emerged as a key link in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. One of the main achievements has been the development of transport and trade

infrastructure that connects Assam to neighboring states and countries. The construction and upgradation of highways, bridges, and border trade posts have enhanced regional connectivity, reducing Assam's earlier isolation from mainland India and neighboring Southeast Asian countries (Barua, 2020). Projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have improved linkages with Myanmar and Thailand, facilitating trade and people-to-people contact. Economic infrastructure development has been another notable success under AEP. Empirical studies show that improvements in roadways, energy supply, and communication networks have contributed positively to Assam's economic growth (Patowary & Borgohain Baruah, 2025). These developments have attracted new investments and supported industrial expansion, particularly in sectors such as logistics, transport, and agro-processing. As a result, Assam's role in India's regional trade has strengthened, enabling it to function as a strategic economic corridor to Southeast Asia. The steady improvement of infrastructure has also helped in reducing transaction costs for trade, encouraging more local entrepreneurs to participate in cross-border commerce (Ghosh, 2025).

Trade and economic integration between Northeast India and ASEAN countries have also grown since the implementation of AEP. The Indo-ASEAN trade complementarity index shows positive trends for Northeastern states, including Assam, suggesting that these regions are gradually becoming part of broader regional production networks (Das, 2022). Enhanced border trade through land customs stations such as Moreh and Dawki demonstrates how Assam and the Northeast are benefiting from improved access to ASEAN markets. These developments present new opportunities for Assam's tea, bamboo, and handicraft industries to find buyers across Southeast Asia, creating employment and boosting local economies (Ghosh, 2023). Besides economic benefits, AEP has also created opportunities for cultural exchange and regional cooperation. Assam's rich cultural and ethnic diversity aligns well with the shared cultural heritage of Southeast Asia, particularly in terms of Buddhism and traditional crafts (Barua, 2020). These linkages can be further used to promote cultural tourism and educational exchange programs that strengthen people-to-people ties. The policy provides Assam with the chance to act as India's diplomatic and economic gateway to Southeast Asia. With continued investment in infrastructure, trade facilitation, and skill development, Assam has the potential to become a logistics and connectivity hub that drives not just regional but also national growth (Das, 2022). Overall, the achievements under AEP have positioned Assam as an emerging player in India's regional diplomacy and economic outreach. Yet, the opportunities ahead if properly managed through sustainable development and community participation can transform Assam from a peripheral region into a central link between South and Southeast Asia.

Policy Recommendations

For Assam to fulfil its strategic and economic potential under India's Act East Policy (AEP), a set of integrated policy measures is needed to address existing gaps and harness new opportunities. The first priority should be the strengthening of infrastructure and connectivity, as it remains the backbone of regional integration. Assam's growth is closely linked to the quality of its transport, power, and communication networks. Research indicates that improved road and energy

infrastructure contributes significantly to the state's long-term economic development (Patowary & Borgohain Baruah, 2025). Expanding road and rail links through projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project would strengthen Assam's role as a commercial and logistical gateway to Southeast Asia (Barua, 2020). Moreover, investments in digital infrastructure and inland waterways would help streamline cross-border trade and enhance connectivity with other northeastern states. Another major recommendation is to promote private sector participation in Assam's development. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can play a crucial role in mobilizing resources and improving the efficiency of large-scale infrastructure projects. Studies show that PPPs help overcome fiscal constraints and accelerate project completion in India's infrastructure sector (Nagesha & Gayithri, 2014). Encouraging private investment in sectors like transport, tourism, and renewable energy can diversify Assam's economy and generate employment. For this, transparent regulatory frameworks, single-window clearances, and incentives for industrial innovation are essential to build investor confidence (Barua, 2020).

The enhancement of border management and security cooperation is equally important for sustainable regional engagement. Effective collaboration with Myanmar on cross-border transport and security operations would help maintain peace and ensure trade continuity (Bajpaee, 2022). Strengthening integrated border management systems combining surveillance, fencing, and digital customs procedures will enhance both trade facilitation and security (Bana & Yhoma, 2023). Inclusive development and engagement with local communities should form the foundation of AEP implementation in Assam. As Holslag (2018) notes, connecting rural markets and involving local entrepreneurs in regional trade networks ensures more equitable development. Policymakers must prioritize social safeguards, local consultation, and fair compensation during land acquisition to reduce resistance and promote public support for AEP projects. Assam can advance India's soft power diplomacy by leveraging its shared cultural and historical linkages with Southeast Asia. Promoting Buddhist heritage circuits, cultural festivals, and educational exchanges can deepen people-to-people ties and strengthen India's image as a culturally connected regional partner (Barua, 2020). By integrating economic strategy with cultural outreach, Assam can position itself as a hub of connectivity, trade, and cultural diplomacy fulfilling both regional and national objectives of the AEP.

Conclusion

Assam occupies a central position in India's AEP, serving as both a geographic bridge and a cultural link between South and Southeast Asia. Strategically located at the heart of Northeast India, Assam acts as a vital gateway for India's outreach to Myanmar, Thailand, and other ASEAN countries. The state's connectivity to international borders, its access to inland waterways, and its growing transport network make it indispensable to India's vision of regional integration. Culturally, Assam's shared heritage with Southeast Asia reflected in Buddhist traditions, crafts, and festivals enhances India's soft power in the region and strengthens people-to-people ties. Since the inception of AEP, Assam has witnessed notable progress in infrastructure, trade, and regional cooperation. Projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral

Highway have expanded road connectivity, while land customs stations and border trade points have stimulated cross-border commerce. Economic growth has been supported by improvements in logistics, power, and communication infrastructure, creating new opportunities for industries like tea, bamboo, and tourism. However, the pace of development has varied across sectors, with persistent challenges such as bureaucratic delays, security issues, and socio-political tensions continuing to limit the full potential of the policy. Despite these constraints, Assam's participation in AEP has helped integrate the Northeast into national and regional economic networks, marking a shift from its earlier image of isolation to one of strategic relevance.

Looking ahead, Assam's role in India's engagement with East and Southeast Asia is likely to grow stronger. The state has the potential to emerge as a logistics and economic hub if infrastructure development is matched by effective governance and private-sector participation. Promoting cultural diplomacy, enhancing trade facilitation, and ensuring community inclusion will be key to sustaining the gains of AEP. As India deepens its cooperation with ASEAN and East Asian countries, Assam can serve not only as a transit corridor but as a vibrant center for trade, connectivity, and cultural exchange. In this sense, the success of AEP will depend largely on how well Assam transforms its geographic advantage into sustainable economic and strategic strength for both the state and the nation.

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