

India's Act East Policy & Development of Northeastern Region of India

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Abstract

After independence India followed the policy of protectionism and therefore in 1990s when USSR was disintegrated India became bound to adopt economic reforms in the country. As a result of it the then Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao adopted LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) under the New Economic Policy. At that time India also adopted the Look East Policy (LEP) in order to increase economic engagement with its eastern neighbors and specially the ASEAN member countries. This LEP also aimed at containing China's growing influence in India's neighborhood. Under this policy Government of India regarded the northeastern region of India as the 'gateway to the east Asia and beyond'. But for long time this policy could not bring any satisfactory result and therefore in 2014 when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the leadership of Mr. Narendra Modi came to power renamed the earlier LEP into the Act East Policy (AEP) (Look East to Act East Policy, 2016). Since then many significant initiatives have been taken under the AEP for the development and security of India's northeastern region which is a landlocked, underdeveloped and insurgent prone frontier of India. It is in this backdrop the present study is an attempt to study the evolution and objectives of India's Act East Policy. The study also examines the role of India's AEP in the development of India's northeast.

Keywords: India's northeast, China, Act East Policy, Look East Policy, Development.

Introduction

After independence India followed the policy of protectionism and therefore in 1990s when USSR was disintegrated India became bound to adopt economic reforms in the country. AS a result of it the then Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao adopted LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) under the New Economic Policy. At that time India also adopted the Look East Policy (LEP) in order to increase economic engagement with its eastern neighbors and specially the ASEAN member countries. This LEP also aimed at containing China's growing influence in India's neighborhood. Under this policy Government of India regarded the northeastern region of India as the 'gateway to the east Asia and beyond'. But for long time this policy could not bring any satisfactory result and therefore in 2014 when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the leadership of Mr. Narendra Modi came to power renamed the earlier LEP into the Act East Policy (AEP) (Dahiya & Behuria, 2012). Since then many significant initiatives have been taken under the AEP for the development and security of India's northeastern region which is a landlocked, underdeveloped and insurgent prone frontier of India. It is in this backdrop the present study is an attempt to study the evolution and objectives of India's Act East Policy. The study also examines the role of India's AEP in the development of India's northeast.

Objectives of the study

The present study is based on the following objectives;

1. To study the evolution and objectives of India's Act East Policy.
2. To examine the role of India's Act East Policy (AEP) in the development of India's northeast.

Methodology

The present study is mainly a secondary one. For the purpose of the study data had been collected from various secondary sources which include journals, articles, government websites, newspapers, government reports, internet and so on. To analyze the data, researcher has relied on descriptive method of analysis.

Literature review

Literature reviewed for the present study is discussed below;

- 1) Zulfiqar Ahmed in his article “India’s Act East policy and North East India: A Critical Review’ analyses the role of northeastern states of India in strengthening regional economic and socio-cultural ties with the neighboring countries. Author in his article also examines role of North Eastern states in making a robust regional diplomacy by New Delhi (Ahmed, 2019).
- 2) Ngaibakching and Amba Pande in their article “India’s Act East Policy and ASEAN: Building a Regional Order through Partnership in the Indo-Pacific” deals with evolution of India’s Look East Policy and its transformation into the Act East Policy. Authors in their article also attempt to examine the role of India’s Act East Policy in building a regional order by making partnership with the ASEAN members (Ngaibakching & Pande, 2020).
- 3) Ashok Sajjanhar in his article “Taking Stock of India’s ‘Act East Policy’” examines the motivations for launching the Look East Policy (LEP) or the Act East Policy (AEP) by the Government of India. Author in this article also describes the future implications of this flagship policy of India (SAJJANHAR, 2016) .
- 4) Achinta Kr. Saikia in his article “Act East Policy and North East India” deals with the history and evolution of the Act East Policy (AEP). Author in this article further makes an attempt to examine the benefits of the AEP for India’s northeast (SAIKIA, 2018).
- 5) Sanjeev Kumar Bragta in his article “Evolving India’s Look East to Act East Policy: An Analytical View” analyzes economic and strategic dimension of India’s ‘Look East’ or ‘Act East’ policy and diplomacy in general. Author in this article briefly describes the objectives and outcomes of India’s Act East Policy (Bragta, 2021).
- 6) Pema Tseten Lachungpa in his article “From Look East to Act East Policy: The Importance of the North East Region (NER) and the Emerging Challenges” examines the progress of India’s Look East to Act- East policy and the significance of India’s Northeast. Author also looks into the challenges and obstacles of the policy (Lachungpa, 2018).
- 7) Gurudas Das and C. Joshua Thomas in their edited book “Look East to Act East Policy” deals with the achievements of India’s Look East Policy and the Act East Policy. Authors in their book also highlight the role of the LEP in bringing a shift in India’s foreign policy. Authors in this work also deal with failure of the LEP in the development of India’s northeast (Look East to Act East Policy, 2016).
- 8) Sunil Kumar in his article “India-ASEAN Relations under Act East Policy: Progress and Possibilities” discusses the evolution of India’s Act East Policy (AEP). In this article author also examines the progress and possibilities of India-ASEAN relations under the AEP (Kumar, 2018).
- 9) S.D. Muni in his article “India’s ‘Look East’ Policy: The Strategic Dimension” deals with historical evolution of India’s Look East Policy. Author in his article also explains the achievements of India’s Look East Policy, where focus is given on bilateral relationship, institutional engagement, economic gains etc. Author lastly highlights the challenges of India’s Look East Policy (Muni, 2011).
- 10) Dr. Phatik Chandra Kalita in his article “The Act East Policy: It’s Impact in the Development of North East India” deals with the role of Act East Policy used for development of India’s northeast. Author in his article makes a detail analysis of India’s trade relationship with ASEAN and East Asian Countries (Kalita, 2019).

India's Northeast

The region comprising India's eight northeastern States that are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. It is a landlocked region of India which shares international borders with many Indian neighbors such as China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. This makes the region strategically very much significant for India. After long time from independence the region remained underdeveloped but the post liberalization period has been witnessing huge focus on the region's development by the Indian government. And in this regard the earlier Look East Policy has been renamed as Act East Policy (AEP) (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

Act East Policy of India

After the end of the Cold war (1991), India sought to build up a relationship with the USA and allies of the USA in Southeast Asia. In this pursuit, former Prime minister of India P V Narasimha Rao launched Look East policy in 1992, to give a strategic push to India's engagement with the South-East Asia region and to counter the strategic influence of the People's Republic of China (Act East Policy, 2015). The 'Act East Policy' announced in November, 2014 is the upgrade version of the "Look East Policy". It wants to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels. Another important aim of the AEP is improving the economic development of the North Eastern Region (NER) which is regarded as the gateway to the South East Asia Region (Act East Policy | Assam State Portal).

AEP and the development of India's Northeast

AEP came in existence in 2014 as a modification of earlier LEP (Look East Policy). Under this policy, the government of India has been now giving active and tremendous focus on the development and security of the landlocked northeastern corner of India. The Indian government has been very significantly working to counter Chinese design in the region by ensuring security and development of the northeast. And therefore the Indian government under this landmark AEP has been doing huge investments in building rail, road, air, and water connectivity in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

The IMT Highway is a part of India's LEP/AEP. The road has full potential to give boost to physical connectivity, trade and commerce in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, and in Southeast Asia. The Highway is about 1,360 km long that is to connect Moreh (India) with Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar. Work in this road is underway (India Myanmar Thailand Trilateral (IMT) Highway).

Under the AEP many international railway connectivity projects have been under way in India's NE. For example: Agartala-Akhaura International Rail Connectivity Project is about 15.6 km long and it will connect Gangasagar Railway Station, under Akhaura sub-division of Brahmanbaria district, Bangladesh with Nischintapur Rail Station, Tripura and from there to Agartala Rail Station, India (Tripura : "Agartala-Akhaura Railway Connectivity Project" Will Be Operational From August-End Of 2022; Says NFR Divisional Railway Manager, 2021).

The MoCA (Ministry of Civil Aviation) under the Government of India had launched the RCS- UDAN scheme on 21st October 2016 under the NCAP 2016 (National Civil Aviation Policy). As of now the scheme has gone through various phases and these are – UDAN 1.0, UDAN 2.0, UDAN 3.0, UDAN 4.0, UDAN 4.1 and UDAN 4.2. The 3rd and 4th round of UDAN has been given much priority to ensure better air connectivity to the remote and hilly northeastern corner of India. Under the AEP, the Indian government has been constructing and upgrading several new airports in its northeastern corner to connect the region with the Indian mainland and the Southeast Asian countries (New Civil Aviation Policy, 2017).

India's northeastern region has some important rivers such as the Brahmaputra (NW-2), the Barak (NW-16) and their tributaries. Under the AEP the Indian Government has been focusing on these northeastern river ways to promote trade, tourism, investment in India's northeast. It is in this regard the National Waterways Act, 2016 has come into force on 12th April, 2016. This Act has declared 111 (5 existing and 106 additional) waterways in the country as National Waterways. Declaration of these nineteen new waterways in the India's NE (except NW-2 because it was declared in 1988) as the National Waterways is a significant initiative of India's AEP (Connectivity gains for India's North East via waterways, 2017).

Besides, Bogibeel Bridge over the mighty river Brahmaputra has 02 rail lines on its lower part and a 03 lane path on its upper part. On 25 December 2018 Indian PM Modi dedicated the bridge to the Indian nation (PM dedicates Bogibeel bridge to the nation; flags off first passenger train, 2018). Another milestone achieved by the Indian government under the AEP is India's longest road bridge (the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge) over the mighty Brahmaputra

River. It connects Assam and eastern Arunachal Pradesh (near Indo-China border) (Dhola-Sadiya Bridge | Government Of Assam, India). Another significant achievement in this regard is the 'Maitri Setu'. On 9th March 2021, Indian PM Modi inaugurated the 1.9 km long India-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge or 'Maitri Setu' on the Feni River, Bangladesh which is a big achievement of India's AEP. This bridge is regarded as the gateway to the India's NE as it will connect the region with the Indian mainland via Bangladesh and Tripura. This bridge connects the Sabroom ICP on Indian side with Ramgarh on Bangladesh side and will also provide an alternative route to Siliguri Corridor which will reduce travel time between Kolkata and Agartala from earlier 38 hours (via Siliguri Corridor) to just 16 hours (PM to inaugurate 'Maitri Setu' between India and Bangladesh on 9th March, 2021).

The development of ICPs along the northeastern border of India is one of the key focus areas of India's AEP to ensure border security and to improve cross border trade, tourism and connectivity in the region transparently. At present 04 ICPs are operational in the northeast and 03 are under construction. 04 operational ICPs are Agartala ICP, Moreh ICP, Sutarkandi ICP and ICP Srimantapur. Other three under construction ICPs are to be built in Dawki (Meghalaya), Sabroom (Tripura) and Kowaru Pichua (Mizoram) (Strengthening Border Connectivity at India-Myanmar Border, 2021).

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that India's northeast is very much important strategically and economically. This frontier region is India's gateway to the East Asia and beyond. Since independence the region has not received any impetus in terms of development and due to security reasons all the border trading points remained close. Besides the northeastern region shares international border with China which is continuously encroaching the LAC (Line of Actual Control) which makes the northeastern frontier a very sensitive zone for the country's security point of view. Although after independence there was less focus over the security and development of northeast, the post-cold war Narasimha Rao government had made landmark LEP by recognizing northeast as the core of the policy (Look East to Act East Policy, 2016). After its renaming as the AEP, government of India has been focusing more actively over the development of India's northeast and the above study reveals the fact that the government of India has been focusing on overall development of the region. But along with all these developments permanent solution of border issue with China and military modernization near the LAC are very much important to counter China in the region and to ensure development & security of India's northeast.

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