International Journal of Sociology and Political Science
www.sociologyjournal.in
Online ISSN: 2664-7745, Print ISSN: 2664-7737
Received: 22-11-2022, Accepted: 08-12-2022, Published: 23-12-2022
Volume 4, Issue 2, 2022, Page No. 116-119

Bridging the sub-region: Reassessing India's act east policy through the North East and Bangladesh

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.66856/ijsps.2022.4.2.8113

Abstract
Introduced in 2014 as an evolution of the earlier "Look East Policy," India's "Act East Policy" (AEP) seeks to institutionalize proactive, multi-tiered diplomatic, economic, and security engagements across ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Central to this policy is the strategic repositioning of North East India (NER) and neighboring Bangladesh as dynamic terrestrial and maritime gateways. Historically constrained by geographic isolation and connectivity bottlenecks through the narrow Siliguri Corridor ("Chicken's Neck"), the NER is being integrated through major infrastructure initiatives, sub-regional pacts like the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, and multilateral platforms such as BIMSTEC. Within this paradigm, Bangladesh emerges as an indispensable geopolitical pivot, offering vital transit corridors, maritime port access, digital infrastructure, and counter-insurgency cooperation that directly bolster regional stability. Simultaneously, the region confronts sensitive geopolitical and security considerations along the Sino-Indian border and the tri-junction near the Chumbi Valley. This article analyzes the strategic convergence between North East India and Bangladesh, evaluating how multimodal connectivity, cross-border economic integration, and regional transport architecture are transforming former border peripheries into catalysts for sustainable economic growth and regional security.

Keywords: Act East Policy, North East India, Bangladesh, Connectivity, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, BBIN MVA, Siliguri Corridor, Geopolitics

Introduction

From "Look East" to "Act East"

Launched in 2014, India's "Act East Policy" represents an upgraded, action-oriented continuation of the "Look East Policy" initiated in the early 1990s. While its predecessor focused heavily on trade and diplomatic outreach, the Act East framework establishes continuous, multilevel bilateral, regional, and multilateral engagement across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the wider Indo-Pacific. It prioritizes enhanced connectivity across four key pillars: political coordination, economic integration, cultural affinity, and people-to-people relations.

To actualize this vision, Indian foreign policy has placed Eastern and North Eastern India at the core of its strategy. Rather than treating the North Eastern Region (NER) as an isolated borderland, the contemporary framework envisions the region as an economic driver and India's natural bridgehead to Southeast Asia. Consequently, the Indian government expanded development outlays for the NER more than fourfold over the past decade.

North East India as a Strategic Gateway to ASEAN

The NER shares over 5,000 km of international borders with five nations, making its geographic disposition critical to national foreign policy:

Bordering Country	Adjacent North Eastern States	Boundary Length (km)
Bangladesh	Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura	1,880 km
Myanmar	Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland	1,643 km
China	Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim	1,346 km
Bhutan	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim	516 km
Nepal	Sikkim	99 km

Source: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDONER); Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India.

Catalysts for Integration

- **Geographical Proximity:** Bordering Southeast Asia directly via Myanmar, the NER offers direct terrestrial routes to rapid-growth Asian markets.

- **Resource Wealth:** The region is endowed with substantial deposits of coal, petroleum, natural gas, minerals, and massive untapped hydroelectric potential.
- **Cultural Ties:** Shared historical, ethnic, and socio-cultural affinities with communities across Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, and Vietnam serve as catalysts for cross-border cooperation and civil society engagement.

Sub-Regional Connectivity Architecture and Infrastructure Initiatives

Realizing the NER's full potential requires addressing legacy infrastructure deficits and geographic isolation. India has undertaken several bilateral and transnational connectivity projects:

- **India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway:** Connecting Moreh (Manipur, India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) via Bagan (Myanmar) across 1,360 km. A 165 km stretch from the Indian border to the Tamu–Kalewa–Kalemyo sector in Myanmar has been upgraded, with future extensions planned toward Cambodia and Lao PDR.
- **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project:** Designed to link Kolkata port with the deepwater Sittwe Port in Myanmar, creating a combined sea, river (Kaladan River), and highway transit route into Mizoram and the broader NER.
- **ASEAN Highway and Asian Railway Corridors:** National Highways 39 and 36 through Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur (Dimapur–Kohima–Imphal–Moreh) interface with the Trans-Asian Railway and Asian Highway network, connecting to Southeast Asia. Proposed railway initiatives also consider linking Jiribam (Manipur) to Hanoi (Vietnam) through Myanmar.
- **Civil Aviation Outreach (UDAN International):** Initiatives designed to link key North Eastern airports directly with regional hubs including Dhaka, Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Kathmandu.
- **Domestic Highway Upgrades:** The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has prioritized critical links within the NER, including the construction of the Trans-Arunachal Highway, the Dhola–Sadiya Bridge extension toward Roing, bridge connectivity between Gohpur and Numaligarh across the Brahmaputra, and designated corridors like NH-127B (Srirampur–Dhubri–Phulbari–Tura) and routes toward Bhutan (NH-127C, NH-127D).

The Geostrategic Pivot of Bangladesh

Bangladesh forms the geographic link connecting mainland India, the NER, and maritime Southeast Asia. A stable, collaborative bilateral relationship with Dhaka is an essential condition for the Act East and "Neighbourhood First" policies.

Bilateral and Sub-Regional Dynamics

- **Transit Routes:** Direct transit via Bangladesh reduces the domestic transit distance between Kolkata and Agartala from 1,600 km (via the Siliguri Corridor) to under 600 km, or roughly 200 km when routing through Bangladesh's maritime port at Chittagong.
- **Port Access and Multimodal Links:** Operational trans-shipment through Bangladesh's Ashuganj inland port, agreements on Chittagong and Mongla ports, and cross-border rail connections like the Agartala–Akhaura rail link facilitate movement of freight and reduce landed goods costs across the NER.
- **BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA):** Signed in June 2015 by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, this framework establishes seamless vehicular cargo and passenger transit across sub-regional corridors. Supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under the SASEC program, the framework progressed with trial cargo runs between Kolkata and Agartala via Dhaka, despite domestic environmental reservations delaying Bhutan's formal parliamentary ratification.
- **BIMSTEC Transport Framework:** Under the *BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity (2018–2028)* supported by the ADB, Bangladesh and India serve as central nodes coordinating road, rail, maritime, inland water, and multimodal transport logistics across South and Southeast Asia.

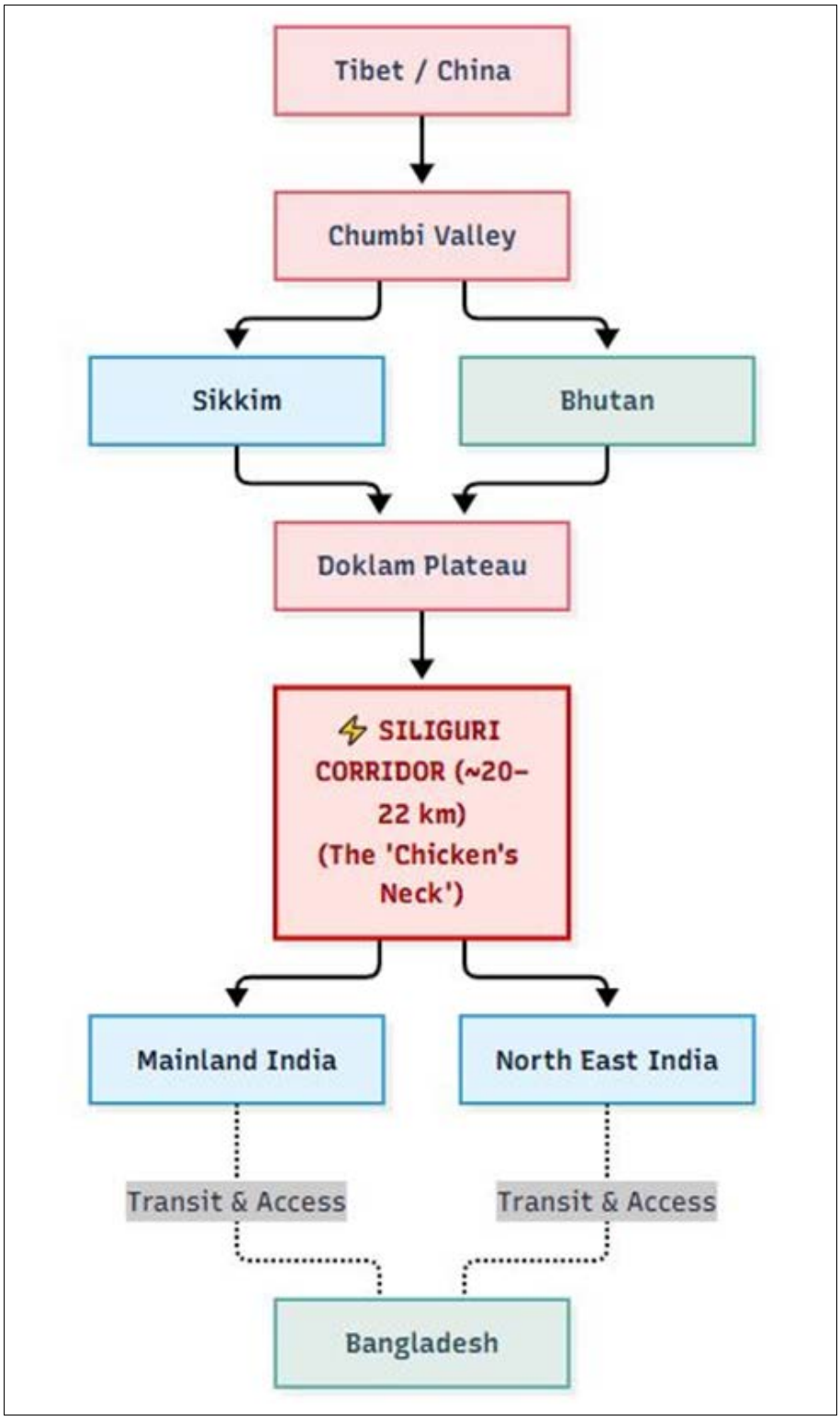
Key Cooperation Sectors

1. **Trade:** Bilateral trade expanded from $1 billion in 2002 to over $6 billion, supported by India's duty-free market access on most Bangladeshi exports since 2011. High-potential synergies remain in agricultural produce, food processing, and border haats.
2. **Digital Connectivity:** High-speed bandwidth (10 Gbps) delivered from Cox's Bazar to Tripura has bolstered digital infrastructure across the NER.
3. **Energy Trade:** Cross-border grids transmit power from India to Bangladesh (including supplies from Tripura). Future plans envisage Bangladesh acting as an energy corridor for evacuating northeastern hydroelectricity to mainland India, progressing toward an integrated BBIN regional electricity pool.
4. **Security and Strategic Alignment:** Bilateral counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing have curtailed safe havens for insurgent groups (such as ULFA and NDFB), pacifying long-standing security challenges in the

NER. Furthermore, a cooperative Dhaka supports maritime security in the Bay of Bengal, discourages extremist elements, and helps balance regional security dynamics.

Strategic Vulnerabilities: Sikkim and the Siliguri Corridor

The geostrategic necessity of securing alternative routes through Bangladesh and the maritime domain is underscored by the physical vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor ("Chicken's Neck").



- **Vulnerability of the Corridor:** Measuring approximately 20 to 22 kilometers in width, this narrow land strip connects mainland India to the seven northeastern states. Any military or logistical interdiction here risks severing terrestrial surface links to the entire NER.
- **The Chumbi Valley and Doklam:** Sikkim occupies a tactically advantageous forward position, but the proximity of China's military infrastructure in the Chumbi Valley—located at the tri-junction of India,

Bhutan, and China—poses an ongoing operational challenge. The 2017 Doklam (Doka La) standoff highlighted the risk of Chinese road construction extending toward the southern ridges, which would directly overlook and threaten the Siliguri funnel.

- **Mitigating Chokepoint Risks:** Enhancing riverine, rail, highway, and digital connectivity through Bangladesh offers strategic depth, diversifying India's logistics architecture away from exclusive reliance on the Siliguri corridor.

Conclusion

The North Eastern Region of India and Bangladesh together constitute the primary land-sea pivot for India's Act East Policy. The shift away from peripheral isolation toward cross-border connectivity networks—spanning IMT, Kaladan, BIMSTEC, and the BBIN MVA—repositions the NER as an economic engine for sub-regional trade and industry. For India, sustaining deep diplomatic, security, and economic partnerships with Bangladesh, coupled with the rapid completion of domestic infrastructure corridors, remains vital to safeguarding territorial integrity, fostering regional prosperity, and realizing sustainable integration with Southeast Asia.

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