



Geo-strategic Saliency of North-East India

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ABSTRACT

India's North-Eastern Region (NER) possesses immense geo-strategic importance due to its location as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal, this region is vital to India's Act East Policy, which seeks to strengthen economic, cultural, and strategic connections with the Asia-Pacific. Abundant in natural resources like oil, gas, and hydropower, the North-East India holds considerable potential to boost India's economic growth and energy security. However, the region faces significant challenges, including border tensions, underdeveloped infrastructure, and internal insurgencies. Leveraging sub-regional cooperation frameworks like BIMSTEC, BBIN, and India-Japan Act East Forum, India can enhance regional connectivity, trade and stability. These initiatives offer opportunities to integrate the Northeast into regional economic networks and increase India's influence in Asia. This paper explores the strategic salience of India's Northeast and its potential to become a vital hub for economic activity and diplomatic engagement, contributing to India's long-term geopolitical aspirations in the region.

Introduction

Northeast India occupies a critical geo-strategic position, sharing international land borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. This region accounts for nearly one-third of India's total land borders, covering approximately 5,182 km, and serves as India's sole land corridor to

Southeast Asia, linking the Indian subcontinent with the broader Southeast Asian region (MHA, 2024). The Northeast is characterised by porous and sensitive borders: to the north lies China, Myanmar borders the east, Bangladesh the southwest, and Bhutan the northwest. The region’s only connection to mainland India is the narrow Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the “Chicken Neck”, which constitutes merely 2% of its overall boundary. This leaves 98% of its borders as international, significantly isolating the region from the rest of the country (Fazl-e-Haider, 2020).

Each of the northeastern states shares borders with neighbouring countries, highlighting the region’s strategic importance. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh shares its western border with Bhutan, its northern boundary with China, and its eastern border with Myanmar, while Assam is bordered by Bhutan and Bangladesh. Meghalaya is adjacent to Bangladesh, Manipur and Mizoram are bordered by Myanmar, and Mizoram also shares a border with Bangladesh. Tripura has a narrow connection to Bangladesh, Nagaland borders Myanmar, and Sikkim shares its eastern border with Nepal (Kumar, *et al.* 2019).

Table 1. North-East India Boundary with Neighbouring Countries

Country	India’s Northeast States	Boundary length (in km)
Bangladesh	Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura	1,880 km
Bhutan	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Sikkim	516 km
China	Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim	1,346 km
Myanmar	Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland	1,643 km
Nepal	Sikkim	99 km

Source: MDONER; Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India.

Given this unique geographical context and the region’s resource abundance, Northeast India offers significant potential for expanding India’s economic and diplomatic ties with its neighbours in South and Southeast Asia (Kalita, 2018). The Northeast is rich in cultural diversity, with numerous ethnic communities fostering cultural, linguistic, and historical connections across borders. This intermingling

of cultures plays a vital role in influencing regional dynamics, promoting cross-border collaboration, cultural exchange, and economic integration (Singh, 2023).

Collectively, the eight states contribute 7.9 percent of India's geographical area and 3.8 percent of its population (MHA, 2024). However, the region continues to grapple with challenges such as poverty, underdevelopment, and separatist movements, which hinder access to essential amenities and markets. The establishment of the "Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (MDONER)" underscores the government's commitment to fostering growth in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, providing special provisions like non-lapsable development funds and economic incentives.

The region's history of political unrest and insurgency carries substantial implications for both national security and the well-being of its residents. These challenges demand focused attention from policymakers, particularly in governance, social development, and conflict resolution. Serving as a gateway to Southeast Asia, the Northeast connects India with Myanmar and other markets in Southwestern China, positioning it as a potential hub for foreign and domestic investment (Bhagdikar, 2021).

With the shift from the "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy," the Northeast's role in strengthening ties with Southeast Asia is increasingly recognised. This transformation aims to change the perception of the region from a neglected, conflict-ridden area into a symbol of India's "soft power" (Bhalla, 2019). Infrastructure development, particularly in connecting the ports of Chittagong, Sittwe, and Haldia with the northeastern states, could serve as economic catalysts for the entire region.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive research method to analyse the geo-strategic significance of Northeast India within the context of India's foreign policy and regional dynamics. The descriptive method is chosen because it allows for a detailed examination and understanding of the region's geopolitical, economic, and strategic importance. By analysing existing literature, this approach facilitates a comprehensive overview of the topic, enabling a synthesis of various viewpoints and historical trends. This research relies primarily on secondary data for data collection. The collected sources include books, journal articles, published research papers, articles, newspapers, and internet sources.

Brief History of North-East India

The history of North-East India is closely linked to its strategic importance during British colonial rule, which commenced in the early 19th century. This region functioned as a buffer zone, separating British territories from the expanding Chinese influence to the north. Its rugged terrain, dense forests, and diverse ethnic communities posed both challenges and opportunities for British administration. The Northeast was not only seen as a vital frontier but also as a gateway to lucrative markets in Tibet and China, enhanced by its natural resources such as tea, timber, and minerals (Mishra, 2024).

The decline of the Ahom dynasty, especially after the “Moamoria uprisings,” heightened the region’s vulnerability. In the early 19th century, the kingdoms of both “Ahom” and “Manipur” succumbed to a “Burmese invasion” (Guha, 1988), which led to the “First Anglo-Burmese War” (1824-1826). This war ended with British control over the region, incorporating Northeast India into Bengal Province from 1839 until 1873. Eventually, Colonial Assam was designated as a separate province, which included Sylhet (http://www.indiaheritage.org/history/history_assam.htm).

As British rule progressed, the presence of powerful indigenous tribes and the threat of Chinese aggression necessitated a delicate balance in governance. The British adopted a policy of loose political control aimed at maintaining stability while allowing for the preservation of indigenous customs. Administrative policies evolved to reflect the region’s complex socio-cultural and geographical realities, with an emphasis on indirect rule through local intermediaries (Mishra, 2024).

After India gained independence in 1947, the North-Eastern Region initially included Assam and the princely states of “Tripura” and “Manipur” (Mukherjee, 2007). In 1956, Tripura and Manipur were reorganised as Union Territories, attaining full statehood in 1972. Nagaland achieved “statehood in 1963,” followed by “Meghalaya in 1972.” Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were granted full statehood on February 20, 1987, after being separated from Assam (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180627133346/>). Formerly known as the “North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)” during British rule, Arunachal Pradesh was part of Assam until it became a Union Territory in 1972 and subsequently a state in 1987. Sikkim joined the North Eastern Council as the eighth state in 2002 (TOI, 2002). In contrast to the linguistic reorganisation of states in mainland India, the formation of Northeast states was based on “ethnic and tribal identities,” each possessing “unique cultures,” “traditions,” and “art” forms (<https://indianculture.gov.in/north-east-archive/history-north-east>).

The term “Northeast” historically emerged from British colonial administration, initially referring to the northeastern frontier of British Bengal. After independence, it evolved to describe a collective of seven states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura—often referred to as the “Seven Sisters” (Choudhury, 2023). The Northeast comprises both plain and hill states: Assam dominates the plains, while Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Manipur encompass both terrains, with the remaining states classified as hill states.

The identity of the region was further solidified through political processes, particularly the Northeastern States Reorganisation Act of 1971, which redefined boundaries and created new states from undivided Assam. Despite significant cultural diversity and ongoing inter-ethnic rivalries, the Northeast is recognised as a distinct entity within the Indian nation-state, marked by unique ethnopolitical dynamics and a pronounced sense of otherness (Gogoi, 2019).

The region’s link to mainland India is maintained by a narrow corridor (approximately 22 km wide and 200 km long) at Siliguri, known as the Chicken’s Neck, which links the Northeast to the rest of India (Panda, 2013). This strategically vital corridor heightens the region’s geopolitical importance, given its shared international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and, in the case of Sikkim, Nepal. This positioning places Northeast India at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia, presenting both challenges and opportunities for diplomacy, trade, and security.

Key Features of India’s Northeast

India’s North-East Region is marked by diverse geographical features, including the plains of the “Eastern Himalayas,” the hilly terrain of the “Patkai-Naga and Lushai Hills,” the “Meghalaya Plateau,” the “Brahmaputra Valley,” and the “Barak Valley Plains.” Abundant in natural resources like coal, uranium, oil, natural gas, and hydropower, this region has the potential to serve as a major energy hub for India. Its fertile lands support extensive agriculture, making it the world’s largest tea producer and a key area for plantation fruits, medicinal plants, horticultural crops, vegetables, and spices.

The water resources in the North-East India, notably the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, hold substantial potential for hydropower development, strengthening the region’s role as a key energy source. Additionally, the region’s natural beauty—featuring unique plant and animal species, scenic landscapes, and vibrant traditional arts and crafts—presents valuable opportunities for tourism development (Das, 2013).

Table 2. Topographic Division of North East

Topographic Regions	States
Eastern Himalaya	Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh
North-East Hill (Patkai-Naga Hills and Lushai Hills)	Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland
Plateau of Meghalaya	Entire state of Meghalaya.
Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley Plains.	Assam and Tripura.

Source: *Pranab Kr. Das, 2013.*

Despite historical ethnic conflicts, the current period of relative peace presents an opportunity to harness these strengths for national development. Coordinated efforts across ministries involved in defence, trade, commerce, and infrastructure are crucial to realising the Northeast’s full potential.

Sikkim and Siliguri Corridor: A Strategic Overview

Sikkim, located in the northeastern part of India within the eastern Himalayas, holds significant geostrategic importance due to its position along the sensitive India-China border. It shares borders with Nepal to the west, Bhutan to the east, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north, making it crucial for India’s security and diplomatic relations, particularly with China. Historically, Sikkim was a sovereign entity until it became an Indian protectorate in 1950 and officially joined India as a state in 1975. Despite its small size, Sikkim remains politically and strategically important to India due to its position along multiple international borders. (Chib, S. *et al.*, 2024).

One of India’s key strategic concerns is the possible threat from Chinese infrastructure developments near the Chumbi Valley. Such advancements could have a considerable effect on the Siliguri Corridor—a narrow, 20-kilometer-wide strip commonly referred to as the “Chicken’s Neck.” This corridor is essential for connecting India’s seven northeastern states to the mainland, playing a crucial role in safeguarding India’s territorial integrity. Its vulnerability means that any disruption could isolate the entire northeastern region. Indian military experts regard Sikkim as crucial due to its unique position, where Indian forces hold a tactical and terrain advantage. Sikkim not only provides a potential route for offensive operations in response to Chinese incursions but also underscores the strategic importance of the Chumbi Valley, which lies at the “tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and China” (BBC,

2021). The geographical presence of Bangladesh further emphasises the narrowness of the Siliguri Corridor as the sole connection between the Northeast and the Indian mainland.

The strategic significance of the ‘Siliguri Corridor’ extends beyond mere territorial integrity; it also functions as a vital logistical route for India’s rail and road networks to the northeastern states. This route is essential for sustaining military presence and facilitating timely reinforcements should tensions with China escalate. Given the landlocked nature of the Northeastern region, any blockage of the corridor would necessitate reliance on air transport, severely constraining India’s operational capabilities (Srivastava, 2017). Simultaneously, the Chumbi Valley holds considerable geostrategic importance for China due to its borders with Tibet and Sikkim. Any threat to the Siliguri Corridor would jeopardise India’s access to its northeastern region, making its defence paramount for national security. Chinese strategic interests appear to be driven by geopolitical considerations. Notably, Mao Zedong characterised Tibet as a hand with “five fingers—Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh”—underscoring the significant implications of the Chumbi Valley (Bisht, 2010).

A notable recent event underscoring the strategic sensitivity of this region was the 2017 Doka La (Doklam) standoff. The dispute, while primarily between Bhutan and China, drew India into the conflict due to its proximity to the Siliguri Corridor. China’s attempt to construct a road on the disputed Doklam plateau would have given it easier access to the tri-junction, thereby heightening the threat to India’s access routes in the Northeast. This potential encirclement would necessitate a significant recalibration of India’s military strategy.

China’s interest in controlling areas close to the Siliguri Corridor also stems from its desire to disrupt India’s administrative and logistical control over the Northeast. The isolation of the region from mainland India would severely limit India’s ability to respond to any escalation and could lead to internal instability. Additionally, China’s proximity to critical Indian infrastructure projects, such as the Jaldhaka hydroelectric project near the Bhutanese border, poses further concerns for India’s security establishment (Bisht, 2010).

Beyond its military importance, Sikkim plays a vital role in India’s economic diplomacy with its Himalayan neighbours, Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim serves as a key gateway for trade and cultural exchange, underscoring its importance in regional diplomacy (Raja Mohan, 2015). Furthermore, the reopening of the Nathu La Pass in 2006 for cross-border trade with China was a strategic move to enhance economic ties and reduce tensions. While trade through this route has provided economic

benefits, including a rise in tourism and increased exports, it remains crucial for India's military preparedness, as it provides an important monitoring point for Chinese military activity along the border.

Despite these advantages, trade through Nathu La has faced several challenges, including poor infrastructure, a fragile landscape, and harsh climatic conditions, which limit its effectiveness (Chettri, 2018). Additionally, the influx of cheap Chinese goods threatens local markets and the indigenous economy. However, beyond the economic realm, the reopening of Nathu La holds strategic significance, as it promotes regional stability and improves bilateral relations with China (Mishra, 2009)

Thus, Sikkim's strategic significance lies in its geographical location along the India-China border, its proximity to the Siliguri Corridor, and its role as a key point for military and economic diplomacy. As tensions between India and China continue, maintaining a strong defence presence in Sikkim is crucial to ensuring the security of India's northeastern region and preserving its strategic interests.

Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the northeastern most part of India, possesses significant strategic importance due to its geographical location bordering China, Bhutan, and Myanmar. The state's relevance is underscored by the long-standing border dispute with China, which claims the entire region as part of its territory, referring to it as "South Tibet." This territorial contention is a critical element in India-China relations, positioning Arunachal Pradesh at the forefront of India's defence and diplomatic strategies.

Located at the eastern edge of the Himalayas, Arunachal Pradesh is bordered by Bhutan to the west, China (Tibet) to the north and northeast, Myanmar to the east and southeast, and the Indian states of Assam and Nagaland to the south (Arunachal Pradesh State Portal, 2018). This unique geographical positioning, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—a 1,126 km border with China—enhances the state's strategic significance (Jacob, 2020). The Tawang district, in particular, holds both military and cultural importance, as it home to the Tawang Monastery, a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism. Given its historical and religious ties with Tibet, China has laid claim to Tawang, making it a sensitive flashpoint in India-China relations.

The Bum La Pass, located near Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, holds significant strategic importance for India. Historically, it was a focal point during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, witnessing intense battles as Chinese forces advanced through the pass towards Tawang (Raj, 2021). In recent years, the Indian government has prioritised enhancing infrastructure in this region to bolster defence

capabilities and improve connectivity (PTI, 2022). Upgrades to military installations and airbases near Bum La Pass have been undertaken to counter potential threats along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Additionally, plans are underway to connect Tawang with a railway network, aiming to strengthen logistical support and promote economic development (Sharma, 2023). These initiatives underscore the strategic significance of Bum La Pass and the broader Tawang region in India's national security framework.

Arunachal Pradesh's strategic significance extends beyond military considerations. Its location serves as a natural buffer against potential Chinese incursions into the Indian mainland, with its mountainous terrain providing geographical defences. However, the challenging accessibility also underscores the need for improved infrastructure to ensure rapid mobilisation of Indian forces in times of conflict.

Arunachal Pradesh also plays a key role in India's diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia. With its shared border with Myanmar, the state is central to India's Act East Policy, which focuses on strengthening relationships with Southeast Asian countries. The Pangsau Pass, situated along the India-Myanmar border, acts as an important trade and cultural exchange point, reinforcing the state's strategic significance in regional geopolitics.

India has improved its section of the road to "two-lane highways," while China has upgraded its segment to "six-lane highways." Once the Myanmar section is completed, Nampong will connect to several major cities, including "Muse, Lashio, Mandalay, and Yangon (Myanmar) via Asian Highway (AH)-14," as well as "Ruili, Wanding, and Kunming (China) through AH-3." Additionally, it will provide links to "Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and Singapore (Singapore) via AH-2," and will extend further to "Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) through AH-1," thereby facilitating trade within the 'Greater Mekong sub-region' (Pattnaik, 2021).

The road distances from "Nampong to Mandalay and Yangon (1428.2 km), Nampong to Bangkok (2091.1 km), Nampong to Kuala Lumpur (3436.7 km), Nampong to Singapore (3795.2 km), Nampong to Phnom Penh (2737.1 km), and Nampong to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (3066.6 km)" present a viable option from a "cost-benefit analysis" perspective. This is particularly favourable compared to the transshipment of goods to Southeast and East Asia from the North-East India via Kolkata port, which passes through the Siliguri Corridor. "The development of the Nampong Land Customs Station (LCS) would enhance sub-regional and regional cooperation, creating opportunities for Arunachal Pradesh to

engage with the ASEAN, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum on multiple fronts” (Pattnaik, 2021).

Arunachal Pradesh’s strategic location offers significant opportunities for international trade with neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Bhutan, and China. The state’s Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) for the fiscal year 2023-24 is projected to reach ₹37,870 crore (approximately US\$4.60 billion), reflecting a substantial growth of 28.9% compared to the budget estimates of 2022-23. Additionally, the per capita GSDP was ₹2,56,410 (around US\$3,115.08) in 2022-23, marking an 11.0% increase from the previous year (PRS, 2024).

Another crucial element of Arunachal Pradesh’s strategic importance is its abundant natural resources, particularly its vast hydropower potential. The state is characterised by its rugged terrain and encompasses five major river valleys—Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit, and Tirap—boasting an estimated hydropower capacity of 50,328 Megawatts (MW), which accounts for roughly 22% of India’s current power generation capacity. As of March 2024, “Arunachal Pradesh has an installed power generation capacity of 773.32 MW” (IBEF, 2024). The extensive water resources available from the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries offer significant opportunities for hydroelectric power development (Environmental Sustainability Index, 2011). India has already planned and launched several hydropower projects in the region (Sahu, 2020). Furthermore, control over these water resources is strategically important, especially as China continues to construct dams on the upper stretches of the Brahmaputra, raising concerns regarding water security for India’s northeastern states.

India’s ongoing efforts in infrastructure development and military modernisation in Arunachal Pradesh are crucial for countering Chinese influence and securing the northeastern frontier. Initiatives such as the construction and enhancement of roads, bridges, and the establishment of “vibrant villages” are designed to improve overland connectivity to the Chinese border (Bhattacharyya, 2022). China asserts territorial claims over 90,000 square kilometres in India’s northeastern region, encompassing nearly all of Arunachal Pradesh. There have been numerous reports of intrusions by the People’s Liberation Army into areas under Indian control, along with allegations that China has covertly encroached on territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Currently, “six zones” are classified as “disputed,” and “four” are deemed “sensitive” across the state. Among the ongoing projects initiated by the Indian government in the border states is the construction of 73 strategically important roads to enhance access to the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The government has reported that approximately 2,094 kilometres of roads have been constructed along the border at an expenditure of around \$1.8 billion over the past

five years. Efforts led by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) are facilitating improved access and quicker troop mobilisation in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2021). These initiatives not only help to protect India's territorial integrity but also encourage economic growth, thereby aiding the integration of this remote region with the rest of the country.

Therefore, Arunachal Pradesh's strategic importance arises from its function as a border state, acting as a buffer against China, its relevance to India's Act East Policy, and its abundant natural resources. The persistent border dispute with China heightens its status as a critical element in India's military and diplomatic strategies. Through investments in infrastructure, strengthening military presence, and promoting regional connectivity, India seeks to secure this essential region and integrate it effectively into the national security framework.

India's Northeast Potential and Role in Act East Policy

India's North-Eastern Region has garnered considerable attention from academics and policymakers due to its critical role in advancing India's "Act East Policy." Historically, the development of this policy has been largely centralised in New Delhi, often overlooking the perspectives and needs of the Northeastern states (Kumar, S., et al., p. 110). However, there is an increasing recognition that these states are vital for enhancing India's diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with ASEAN countries, underscoring the region's geo-strategic significance. This shift in focus emphasises the importance of integrating local viewpoints and fostering regional development to strengthen India's engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

The Act East Policy seeks to enhance both economic and strategic relationships between India and ASEAN. The India's Northeast close proximity to ASEAN makes it a vital gateway for India's connectivity initiatives. A prime example of this is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which represents infrastructure development aimed at improving road links between the Northeast and ASEAN markets. These initiatives are expected to promote increased trade, cultural exchange, and regional stability.

While the Northeast is strategically positioned to access East and Southeast Asia, simply labeling it as a "gateway" is insufficient. India must intensify its efforts to fully capitalise on this strategic advantage. Experts draw parallels between Northeast India's potential and that of Yunnan in Southwest China, which has successfully transformed from a remote region into a vibrant cultural and geopolitical hub linking China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. In contrast, North-East India has played a limited

role in the “Look East Policy” (Rana & Uberoi, 2012); however, there are significant opportunities for growth as the Act East Policy continues to evolve.

Collaboration across various sectors—such as tourism, culture, education, and transportation—is essential for integrating the Northeast into India’s broader policy framework. Under the Look East Policy, significant investments were made in infrastructure at key border points to boost trade connectivity (Baral, 2012). An example is the trade centre at Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh, established in 2006, which has become a hub for Indo-Myanmar economic activities, supported by enhanced lodging, shopping, and customs facilities (Mohapatra, 2015). Such initiatives need further strengthening under the Act East Policy to improve trade and connectivity with Southeast Asia.

The strategic location of the North-East has become increasingly significant in India’s relations with Southeast Asia. It serves not only as a ‘gateway’ but also as a vital passage for advancing India’s economic and diplomatic objectives in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the Northeast’s potential during the India-ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2015, where he announced a USD 1 billion credit line aimed at enhancing connectivity, cultural exchange, and commerce with ASEAN countries. The active participation of leaders from Northeastern states in forums like the Delhi Dialogue VII Ministerial Session in 2015 and the Northeast-ASEAN Summit in 2016 further reflects the growing recognition of the region’s importance (IANS, 2016). Former Indian Presidents Pranab Mukherjee and Ram Nath Kovind emphasised the importance of developing the Northeast through international cooperation. Mukherjee noted that expanding India’s relationships with Southeast Asian nations via “cross-border markets” could help uplift the Northeast from poverty and economic stagnation, fostering prosperity and entrepreneurial opportunities. Additionally, Kovind highlighted the region’s strategic significance as a ‘natural gateway’ to Southeast Asia and beyond (PIB, 2022).

North-East India in Sub-Regional Cooperation

North-East India has gained significant attention in recent times due to its engagement in multilateral initiatives aimed at enhancing regional cooperation. This region is strategically crucial, sharing international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. Its unique geographic positioning enables the Northeast to play a key role in several sub-regional cooperation frameworks designed to improve connectivity, trade, and integration in South and Southeast Asia (Gogoi, 2019).

Key initiatives such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal), and BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-

Myanmar) are particularly significant for the economic development and connectivity of North-East India. These frameworks possess substantial potential for promoting economic growth, fostering peace, and enhancing geopolitical stability in the region. By actively engaging in these initiatives, North-East India can capitalise on its strategic location to strengthen regional ties and facilitate collaborative efforts among neighbouring countries.

BIMSTEC: In a time marked by unparalleled global connectivity and interdependence, institutional regional collaborations are essential in influencing the geopolitical and geo-economic environment. The BIMSTEC occupies a strategic position, underscoring both its significance and untapped economic potential. Established to foster a network of relationships among the countries bordering the “Bay of Bengal,” linking “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia.” Its member nations include India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (Raju, A. S. et al., 2021).

This grouping not only facilitates cooperation across multiple sectors but also serves as a platform for addressing common challenges, promoting trade, and enhancing regional stability. As BIMSTEC continues to evolve, it has the potential to become a vital conduit for economic integration and collaboration among its member states, contributing to a more interconnected and prosperous region.

The “BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, covering the period from 2018 to 2028, is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing regional connectivity among the member states of the BIMSTEC. This comprehensive 10-year strategy, supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB),” focuses on improving transport linkages across the subregion (ADB, 2022). The plan addresses several key areas of transport infrastructure: “(1) roads and road transport, (2) railways and rail transport, (3) ports and maritime transport, (4) inland water transport, (5) civil aviation and airports, (6) multimodal and intermodal transport, (7) trade facilitation, and (8) human resource development in the connectivity sector.”

The formal adoption of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity took place during the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 30 March 2022 (BIMSTEC, 2022). This adoption underscores the commitment of BIMSTEC member states to improving regional connectivity and fostering economic growth through enhanced transport infrastructure. By focusing on these areas, the Master Plan aims to create a more integrated and efficient transport network within the BIMSTEC region, thereby promoting economic development, trade, and cultural exchange among the member countries (Bose, S., *et al.*, 2024).

BIMSTEC is particularly significant for India's North-Eastern Region (NER), as it emphasises the promotion of connectivity, trade, and economic cooperation throughout the Bay of Bengal (De, 2019). From a geopolitical perspective, BIMSTEC aligns seamlessly with India's "Act East Policy," positioning the NER as a vital bridge between "South Asia" and "Southeast Asia."

The NER's strategic location at the intersection of these two regions enhances its role in achieving BIMSTEC's objectives, especially in fostering regional cooperation in trade, connectivity, and energy. As a conduit for economic and cultural exchange, the NER has the potential to facilitate increased interaction between member states, thereby promoting trade and investment opportunities.

This alignment not only strengthens India's role in regional diplomacy but also elevates the NER's significance as a hub for infrastructural development, which is crucial for realising BIMSTEC's goals. By integrating its development initiatives with BIMSTEC's framework, India can leverage its northeastern states to enhance connectivity projects, energy cooperation, and trade facilitation, ultimately contributing to a more stable and prosperous region.

BBIN: Initiated in 2014, the BBIN Initiative seeks to enhance collaboration among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. A fundamental aspect of this initiative is the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA), which was signed in 2015 to promote the efficient transit of goods and people among these countries. Under this agreement, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal have developed operational protocols for passenger vehicle movements, with plans for further trial runs regarding cargo transportation (PIB, 2018).

Discussions have also focused on the necessary Passenger and Cargo Protocols to operationalise the MVA, which regulates passenger, personal, and cargo vehicular traffic among the four nations (MEA, 2022). This framework is particularly vital for the development of India's Northeast Region (NER), as it promises to enhance connectivity, reduce transportation costs, and promote trade. By improving transportation infrastructure and facilitating cross-border movement, the BBIN Initiative can significantly contribute to the economic growth and integration of the NER within the broader South Asian context.

The BBIN framework plays a crucial role in reducing the geographical isolation of the NER and integrating it with India's neighbouring countries. By enabling cross-border vehicular movement, the MVA enhances trade and facilitates people-to-people exchanges between India's northeastern states and Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Improved road and rail connectivity through BBIN would grant the

NER access to Bangladesh's ports, such as Chittagong and Mongla, significantly expanding trade opportunities.

The BBIN corridor offers substantial economic and cultural value to the region, given its strategic location, and it is poised to enhance connectivity. However, despite strong support within the northeastern states, development has been slow, with only a few programs currently facilitating regional trade, transport, and passenger movement. The natural complementarities between northeastern India and its neighbouring countries provide opportunities to establish robust, mutually beneficial economic relationships. Historical trade ties between these nations and northeastern India date back centuries; strengthening these relations could significantly boost the region's development (FICCI North East Advisory Council).

Overall, the BBIN initiative not only promotes connectivity and economic integration but also contributes to regional security and stability by fostering greater interdependence among the four nations, with the NER serving as a critical hub for these connections.

BCIM-EC: The BCIM-EC is a sub-regional cooperative initiative aimed at creating a vital trade link that connects "southwestern China" with "eastern India" and the "Bay of Bengal" via "northern Myanmar," the "India's North-Eastern Region," and "Bangladesh." Due to its geo-strategic and geo-economic importance, the BCIM-EC (Wasi & Ahmad, 2023) will traverse NER, positioning this area as a key player in the initiative.

For the NER, the BCIM Corridor offers significant opportunities for trade, infrastructure development, and fostering people-to-people exchanges. By enhancing overland connectivity between the NER and major markets in China and Southeast Asia, the corridor would facilitate greater trade in goods and services. Additionally, the increased cross-border movement could bolster tourism and cultural exchanges, both vital for the socio-economic development of the region.

Despite these potential benefits, there are considerable challenges associated with the BCIM project, particularly regarding India's security concerns. Ongoing border tensions with China have led India to adopt a cautious stance toward full participation in the BCIM initiative (Marchang, 2021). India remains wary of the project's potential to expand Chinese influence in the NER, which could affect national security interests. However, if approached with careful consideration of these concerns, the BCIM Corridor could unlock new avenues for economic growth and integration, particularly for India's northeastern states, by strengthening their links to the global economy.

Moreover, various other sub-regional cooperation initiatives and frameworks underscore the importance of the NER in promoting collaboration and integration. These initiatives include:

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC): The MGC is a sub-regional initiative between “India and five ASEAN nations—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—designed to foster collaboration in culture, education, tourism, and transport and communications” (<https://mgc.gov.in/service/view/11>). Established in November 2000 with the signing of the Vientiane Declaration in Lao PDR, the initiative was originally named the Ganga Suvarnabhumi Programme (GMSP). The MGC underscores the historical and civilisational significance of two major rivers, the Ganga and the Mekong (Panda, 2021), symbolising the longstanding cultural and commercial ties between the people inhabiting their respective basins.

The MGC framework plays a crucial role in strengthening cultural and economic connections among its member nations. For India, especially its NER, this collaboration offers substantial prospects for improving interpersonal connectivity and promoting trade. Positioned as India’s gateway to Southeast Asia, the Northeast occupies a strategic role that can significantly contribute to the goals of the MGC and enhance regional relationships.

India-Japan Collaboration in the Northeast: Japan has become a key partner for India in advancing infrastructure development in the North-Eastern Region (NER). As part of its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” Vision, Japan has made investments in multiple projects, such as road construction, hydropower facilities, and forest management programs. This collaboration not only bolsters infrastructure in the Northeast but also improves the region’s connectivity with Southeast Asia, fostering deeper integration into sub-regional cooperative frameworks (Panda, 2022).

In 2017, India and Japan initiated the “Act East Forum (AEF)” to advance the development of the North-Eastern Region (NER) and enhance connectivity both within the region and with Southeast Asia. The AEF embodies the convergence of India’s “Act East Policy” and Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Vision. To date, six formal meetings of the AEF have taken place, complemented by regular coordination between teams to ensure effective progress (Act East Forum). Key projects under this collaboration include the Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project, along with water supply and energy initiatives, reflecting Japan’s substantial contribution to infrastructure development and capacity building in the region (Murayama, M. *et al.* 2021). As part of this collaborative vision, India and Japan plan to launch a comprehensive initiative aimed at the sustainable development of the NER, supporting ongoing efforts by State Governments and the Government of India.

Asian Development Bank (ADB) Initiatives: The ADB has funded several connectivity and infrastructure projects in the Northeast region, particularly focusing on improving transport corridors and energy infrastructure. ADB's involvement in developing border trade and transport infrastructure helps the India's Northeast in its broader sub-regional cooperation efforts.

Including these sub-regional and international cooperative frameworks can enrich the analysis of the NER's role in enhancing India's connectivity with neighbouring countries and regions, beyond the traditional BIMSTEC, BBIN, and BCIM corridors.

Conclusion

The geo-strategic saliency of India's Northeast is evident in its geographical positioning, natural resources, and role in regional cooperation initiatives. Bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal, the region is of great strategic significance for India's security, trade, and diplomatic engagements. The Siliguri Corridor, its critical link to mainland India, further underscores the region's vulnerability but also highlights its pivotal role in national security strategies. Despite its challenges due to its sensitive borders, particularly with China, as well as internal issues like ethnic tensions, insurgency and infrastructure gaps, the NER's role in India's "Act East Policy" positions it as a key player in India's efforts to strengthen ties with ASEAN and enhance regional connectivity. Additionally, the region's natural resources, including oil, gas, hydropower, and fertile land, make it a resource-rich area capable of driving economic growth and energy security.

The NER's integration into sub-regional cooperative frameworks, such as BIMSTEC, BBIN, and India-Japan Act East Forum, strengthens India's position in regional geopolitics. With targeted infrastructural development, cross-border collaboration, and resource utilisation, India's Northeast can serve as a powerful engine for economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional stability. For India, leveraging the full potential of the NER will not only contribute to regional development but also reinforce India's position as a major power in Asia.

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