
Act East Policy, Border Trade & Kuki-Zo Identity: Towards A People-Centric Approach In India's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

India's Act East Policy (AEP), launched in 2014 as a reinvigoration of the earlier Look East Policy, aims to enhance economic, strategic, and cultural relations with Southeast Asian countries. The northeastern region, particularly Manipur, serves as the gateway to this policy due to its geographical proximity to Myanmar. However, the policy's implementation largely prioritizes infrastructural development, trade, and regional connectivity, often overlooking the socio-cultural and political aspirations of the local communities. The Kuki-Zo people, an indigenous ethnic group inhabiting the borderlands of Manipur, have historically played a crucial role in cross-border trade and cultural exchange. This paper argues that a people-centric approach to India's foreign policy, especially in the context of the Act East Policy and border trade, is essential to foster inclusive development and promote sustainable peace. It explores how the economic potential of border trade, if aligned with the aspirations of the Kuki-Zo people, can empower marginalized communities and address longstanding issues of identity, autonomy, and political exclusion. The study advocates for participatory governance, equitable resource distribution, and the recognition of indigenous identities in shaping India's foreign policy. By placing the Kuki-Zo people at the center of border trade policies, the Act East Policy can serve as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation and regional stability in Manipur.

**Introduction:**

India's Act East Policy (AEP) is a strategic initiative aimed at deepening economic, cultural, and strategic ties with Southeast Asian countries and beyond. Launched in 2014 as a successor to the Look East Policy, the Act East Policy represents a transformative vision not only for India's external relations but also for the socio-economic development of its northeastern region. The northeastern states, particularly Manipur, serve as critical linchpins in this policy due to their geographical proximity to Myanmar, India's gateway to Southeast Asia. Despite the policy's promise of regional integration and economic growth, the success of the Act East Policy is intricately linked to the internal socio-political dynamics of the region. One of the most pressing issues in this regard is the Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration in Manipur. The Kuki-Zo communities, predominantly inhabiting the hill districts of Manipur, have long faced socio-political marginalization, ethnic violence, and lack of economic opportunities. These issues have exacerbated their sense of political exclusion and hindered their participation in regional development initiatives. The Act East Policy, while envisioning infrastructural connectivity and economic integration, has largely overlooked the aspirations and identity of the Kuki-Zo people, further alienating the community from the broader development discourse.

This article argues that a people-centric approach to the Act East Policy—one that prioritizes the aspirations and identity of the Kuki-Zo people—holds the key to unlocking the region's economic potential and fostering sustainable peace. By incorporating the perspectives and participation of indigenous communities in border trade and regional development projects, the policy can not only enhance economic growth but also address the longstanding issues of identity, autonomy, and socio-political marginalization. The study advocates for participatory governance, equitable resource distribution, and the recognition of indigenous identities in shaping India's foreign policy. Furthermore, empowering the Kuki-Zo people through inclusive decision-making processes and targeted socio-economic programs will strengthen their role as key stakeholders in the region's development. Such an approach will not only empower the Kuki-Zo people but also contribute to the overall success of the Act East Policy by ensuring that the benefits of regional integration are equitably shared among all stakeholders.



By fostering an inclusive environment that acknowledges the unique socio-cultural fabric of the Kuki-Zo community, India's foreign policy can serve as a catalyst for sustainable development, conflict resolution, and regional cooperation. This study highlights the importance of adopting a bottom-up approach that recognizes the agency of indigenous communities, ultimately paving the way for a more harmonious and prosperous Northeast India.

Statement of the Problem:

India's Act East Policy aims to enhance trade, cultural, and strategic ties with Southeast Asian countries. However, the policy's impact on marginalized communities such as the Kuki-Zo in Manipur remains underexplored. The border trade infrastructure at Moreh, a vital hub for Indo-Myanmar trade, often neglects the aspirations, identity, and participation of local communities. This research seeks to address the gap by analyzing the intersection of the Act East Policy, border trade, and the Kuki-Zo identity. It examines whether the existing foreign policy framework is people-centric and how it can be reoriented to empower indigenous communities, ensuring their economic and cultural inclusion in India's broader strategic objectives.

Objectives of the Study:

- a. To examine the socio-economic impact of the Act East Policy on the Kuki-Zo communities in the border areas.
- b. To analyze the role of Kuki-Zo identity in shaping local perceptions and participation in border trade.
- c. To assess the extent of community inclusion in India's Act East Policy implementation.
- d. To propose a people-centric approach that integrates indigenous perspectives into India's foreign policy framework.

Rationale of the Study:

The Kuki-Zo communities, who inhabit the Indo-Myanmar border region, have historically played a crucial role in cross-border interactions. However, the rapid push for economic integration under the Act East Policy has often sidelined indigenous voices. This study is significant as it highlights the need for a more inclusive foreign policy that recognizes the agency and contributions of borderland communities. By addressing the socio-economic marginalization of the Kuki-Zo, the research contributes to a broader



understanding of how India's foreign policy can become more participatory and sustainable. Moreover, it seeks to fill the academic gap on the intersection of indigenous identity, border trade, and international relations in the context of India's Northeast region.

Historical Overview of the Kuki-Zo Identity and Political Aspirations:

The Kuki-Zo people, a conglomerate of closely related tribes, have a rich cultural heritage and a distinct ethnic identity. Their historical homeland spans across the present-day northeastern states of India, Myanmar, and parts of Bangladesh. During the British colonial period, the Kuki-Zo communities were recognized as a separate ethnic group with autonomous administrative arrangements in the hill regions. However, post-independence political developments in Manipur failed to address the unique aspirations of the Kuki-Zo people. The merger of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949 was followed by the implementation of a centralized administrative structure that disproportionately favored the valley-dwelling Meitei community, leaving the hill-dwelling Kuki-Zo and other tribal communities politically marginalized.

The demand for separate administration gained momentum in the wake of recurrent ethnic conflicts and the state's failure to provide adequate political representation and economic development to the Kuki-Zo people. The 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur, which resulted in large-scale displacement of Kuki-Zo populations, further exacerbated these grievances and renewed calls for a separate political arrangement. The prolonged ethnic tensions, coupled with the lack of equitable governance, have deepened the sense of alienation among the Kuki-Zo communities. Moreh town, a strategic border town located along the Indo-Myanmar international boundary, is predominantly inhabited by the Kuki-Zo people. The town serves as a crucial trade hub and the gateway to Southeast Asia under India's Act East Policy. The continued marginalization of the Kuki-Zo people poses a significant challenge to the successful implementation of this policy. Without addressing the legitimate demands of the Kuki-Zo community, the Government of India's vision for regional connectivity and economic integration with Southeast Asia will remain a mere rhetoric with no tangible outcomes.

The Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration is not merely a political aspiration but a call for justice, equality, and recognition of their distinct identity. It represents a quest for self-governance that ensures the protection of their cultural heritage, political rights, and socio-economic development. The Government of India must engage in meaningful dialogue with the Kuki-Zo leadership to address their



grievances and work towards an inclusive political arrangement that guarantees lasting peace and stability in the region. Recognizing the Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration is essential not only for the well-being of the community but also for the broader goal of fostering regional cooperation and enhancing India's strategic interests in Southeast Asia. The time has come for the Government of India to break its silence and take concrete steps towards a political resolution that upholds the principles of justice, equality, and democratic governance.

Act East Policy and Its Strategic Vision:

The Act East Policy, launched in 2014 as a reinvigoration of the earlier Look East Policy, aims to position India as a pivotal player in the Asia-Pacific region by enhancing regional connectivity, cross-border trade, and strategic partnerships. This policy reflects India's strategic vision of fostering economic cooperation, cultural ties, and developing strategic relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The northeastern region of India holds paramount significance in this policy due to its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, serving as a gateway for India's eastward economic and strategic outreach. One of the primary objectives of the Act East Policy is to strengthen connectivity infrastructure between India and Southeast Asian countries. Key infrastructural projects have been undertaken to achieve this objective. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is a flagship initiative under this policy, aiming to establish a seamless road network connecting India's northeastern states to Myanmar and Thailand. This highway is expected to boost trade, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges, thus fostering economic integration between India and Southeast Asia.

Another significant project is the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which seeks to enhance connectivity between India's northeastern states and Myanmar's Sittwe port. This multi-modal project integrates waterways, roadways, and inland transport systems, offering an alternative transit route that bypasses the congested Siliguri Corridor, commonly referred to as the Chicken's Neck. Additionally, the establishment of Border Haats along the Indo-Myanmar border has been initiated to facilitate local trade and strengthen cross-border economic interactions between communities residing on both sides of the border. The construction of Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at strategic border points, such as Moreh in Manipur and Zokhawthar in Mizoram, represents another critical infrastructural component of the Act East Policy. These ICPs are designed to streamline cross-border trade, customs procedures, and immigration processes, thereby improving trade efficiency and bilateral cooperation.



Among these, Moreh stands out as the most crucial node in India's strategic vision, given its location as the primary land route for Indo-Myanmar trade.

However, the persistent ethnic conflicts and political instability in Manipur have posed significant challenges to the successful implementation of the Act East Policy. The ongoing ethnic violence, social unrest, and lack of adequate security infrastructure have hindered the region's potential to serve as a reliable trade and transit hub. The displacement of communities and the disruption of local economies further exacerbate the region's vulnerability, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty for both domestic and foreign investors. To unlock the full potential of the Act East Policy, there is an urgent need for the Indian government to prioritize conflict resolution, improve governance, and invest in the socio-economic development of the northeastern states. A comprehensive strategy that addresses the region's security concerns, promotes inclusive development, and fosters community participation will be essential in transforming the northeastern region into a viable corridor for India's eastward engagement.

Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at Moreh and Zokhawthar:

Manipur, particularly the border town of Moreh, plays a pivotal role in India's Act East Policy as a vital trade and transit hub along the Indo-Myanmar border. The Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh facilitates cross-border trade, immigration, and customs clearance, enhancing economic connectivity with Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, the ICP at Zokhawthar in Mizoram strengthens trade links through the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, furthering India's regional cooperation initiatives. However, persistent ethnic conflicts, political instability, and inadequate infrastructure in the region have significantly hampered the state's potential to serve as a reliable trade gateway. The ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur, particularly the displacement of communities, has disrupted trade activities and weakened investor confidence. Addressing these challenges through political stability, infrastructural development, and community reconciliation is imperative to fully harness the strategic importance of the ICPs. Strengthening border security and fostering peaceful coexistence among communities can transform Manipur into a thriving economic corridor, unlocking its potential as India's gateway to Southeast Asia.



The Border Trade Paradox: Opportunities Amidst Conflict:

The Indo-Myanmar border trade at Moreh holds immense potential for boosting local economies, generating employment, and fostering cross-border cooperation. Positioned as a key node in India's Act East Policy, Moreh could serve as a strategic hub for regional integration. However, the benefits of border trade have largely bypassed the local **Kuki-Zo** communities due to structural inequalities, lack of infrastructure, and the monopolization of trade by powerful elites from the valley regions.

The marginalization of **Kuki-Zo** communities from cross-border trade can be attributed to several factors:

- a. **Lack of Political Representation:** The absence of Kuki-Zo representatives in trade committees, border management bodies, and decision-making platforms has resulted in their exclusion from shaping trade policies and benefiting from commercial opportunities.
- b. **Absence of Targeted Economic Empowerment Programs:** Government-led economic programs rarely prioritize the economic upliftment of the Kuki-Zo communities, leaving them with limited access to credit, training, and market linkages.
- c. **Discriminatory Allocation of Trade Licenses and Permits:** The allocation of trade licenses and permits has disproportionately favored business groups from the Imphal valley, while local communities often face bureaucratic hurdles and delays.
- d. **Security Threats and Militarization of Border Areas:** Ethnic conflicts, militarization, and the volatile security situation along the border have deterred local entrepreneurs from actively participating in trade activities.

Without addressing these structural issues, the **Act East Policy** risks perpetuating existing inequalities and alienating the very communities that are meant to benefit from regional integration. Policy interventions such as inclusive trade governance, targeted economic empowerment programs, and equitable access to licenses are crucial to ensuring that border trade serves as a tool for equitable development and peacebuilding. Empowering the **Kuki-Zo** communities would not only promote social justice but also strengthen the sustainability of India's regional connectivity initiatives.



People-Centric Approach to the Act East Policy

A **people-centric approach** to the Act East Policy would prioritize the aspirations, identity, and well-being of local communities, placing them at the core of India's foreign policy framework. This approach goes beyond mere economic integration, acknowledging the social, cultural, and political realities of borderland communities. For the **Kuki-Zo** people, such an approach entails recognizing their **distinct cultural identity** and **political aspirations** as a prerequisite for inclusive development. Inclusive policymaking would involve greater participation of Kuki-Zo representatives in trade committees, border management bodies, and developmental projects. Tailored economic empowerment programs, equitable allocation of trade licenses, and targeted capacity-building initiatives can help bridge existing inequalities. Additionally, addressing historical grievances and safeguarding the rights of indigenous communities would foster trust and social cohesion.

By aligning the Act East Policy with the **aspirations of the Kuki-Zo people**, India can create a more sustainable and inclusive model of regional integration, transforming border communities from passive beneficiaries into active partners in cross-border cooperation.

Key Components of a People-Centric Approach:

Political Empowerment: Recognizing the Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration through constitutional or administrative arrangements that guarantee local self-governance.

- a. **Economic Inclusion:** Prioritizing Kuki-Zo communities in border trade initiatives, vocational training programs, and small and medium enterprise (SME) development.
- b. **Cultural Preservation:** Promoting Kuki-Zo language, customs, and traditions through cultural exchange programs and community-led tourism initiatives.
- c. **Participatory Governance:** Involving Kuki-Zo representatives in decision-making bodies related to border trade, infrastructure projects, and security management.
- d. By adopting this approach, India can transform the Act East Policy into a vehicle for **empowering marginalized communities** and fostering **inclusive economic growth**.

Separate Administration: A Security Imperative for Lasting Peace



The demand for **separate administration** by the **Kuki-Zo** communities is not merely a political aspiration but also a **security imperative** in the conflict-ridden landscape of Manipur. The ongoing ethnic conflicts have created a fragile security environment that threatens both **internal stability** and **cross-border cooperation**, posing significant risks to India's Act East Policy and regional integration efforts. Granting separate administration to the Kuki-Zo communities could play a transformative role in fostering peace, stability, and inclusive development in the region.

Separate administration would significantly enhance the region's security by:

- a. **Reducing Ethnic Tensions and Fostering Inter-Community Reconciliation:** Autonomous governance would provide a platform for addressing long-standing grievances, creating an environment conducive to dialogue and peaceful coexistence.
- b. **Empowering Local Communities in Border Management and Conflict Resolution:** Kuki-Zo communities, as primary stakeholders in the region, could play an active role in managing borders, preventing smuggling, and mediating local conflicts.
- c. **Preventing the Rise of Insurgent Groups:** Political alienation and economic marginalization have historically fueled insurgency in the region. Addressing these root causes through self-governance would mitigate the risk of insurgent recruitment and violence.
- d. **Strengthening India's Counterinsurgency and Border Security Apparatus:** A separate administration with community-driven security initiatives would act as a force multiplier in India's broader counterinsurgency and border security strategy.

A **stable and secure northeastern region** is not only crucial for the well-being of its inhabitants but also for the success of the **Act East Policy** and India's broader **geopolitical ambitions in Southeast Asia**. Recognizing the **Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration** would not only address historical injustices but also serve as a strategic step toward promoting long-term peace, security, and economic cooperation in India's northeastern frontier

Separate Administration: A Path to Inclusive Development and Peace :

A **negotiated political settlement** that grants **separate administration** to the **Kuki-Zo** communities would represent a **win-win solution** for both the Indian state and the local population. This arrangement could take the form of an **autonomous hill council**, **territorial council**, or other



decentralized governance models tailored to the region's unique socio-political realities. By addressing the long-standing demand for self-governance, separate administration would lay the foundation for inclusive development, ethnic reconciliation, and sustainable peace in Manipur's hill districts.

The potential benefits of separate administration include:

- a. **Enhanced Local Governance and Political Representation:** Separate administration would empower the Kuki-Zo communities to exercise greater political autonomy, enabling local leaders to shape policies that reflect the community's needs, culture, and aspirations. This would correct the historical underrepresentation of the Kuki-Zo people in decision-making bodies.
- b. **Greater Economic Participation in Border Trade:** With locally governed institutions, the Kuki-Zo communities would gain better access to trade licenses, economic empowerment programs, and infrastructural development projects. This would promote the **equitable distribution of cross-border trade benefits** and stimulate the local economy.
- c. **Improved Security and Stability:** Autonomous governance would allow local communities to play a more active role in **border management, conflict resolution, and counterinsurgency efforts**, reducing ethnic tensions and fostering peaceful coexistence. Enhanced security would also create a more conducive environment for cross-border trade and investment.
- d. **Equitable Distribution of Act East Policy Benefits:** Separate administration would ensure that the **economic dividends of India's Act East Policy** are shared equitably among borderland communities, addressing the structural inequalities that have historically excluded the Kuki-Zo people from regional development initiatives.
- e. Moreover, granting separate administration would signal India's commitment to **inclusive development** and **ethnic reconciliation**, setting a **positive example** for other conflict-affected regions in the northeastern states. It would demonstrate that India's foreign policy ambitions are not only driven by economic considerations but also grounded in the principles of **justice, equity, and community empowerment**.

By embracing a decentralized governance model, India can transform the Indo-Myanmar borderlands into **zones of cooperation and prosperity**, turning historical fault lines into bridges of regional integration. Separate administration for the Kuki-Zo people is not just a political demand — it is a strategic opportunity to build a more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient northeastern region.



ACT EAST POLICY, BORDER TRADE, AND KUKI-ZO IDENTITY: TOWARDS A PEOPLE-CENTRIC APPROACH IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The Act East Policy, introduced by India to strengthen economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries, holds immense significance for the Northeastern region, especially Manipur. The border town of Moreh, serving as a vital trade hub, has the potential to transform into a thriving economic corridor. However, the success of this policy depends on the inclusion of indigenous communities, particularly the Kuki-Zo people, whose identity, culture, and socio-economic well-being are intricately linked to the region.

This study contributes significantly to academic discourse by highlighting the intersection of international relations, border trade, and indigenous identity. It provides scholars with a comprehensive understanding of how global policies impact marginalized communities. For policymakers, the research advocates for a people-centric approach, emphasizing community participation and equitable benefits in cross-border trade initiatives. The findings encourage the formulation of policies that safeguard the socio-cultural identity of the Kuki-Zo people while fostering regional economic growth.

For society and communities, this study empowers the Kuki-Zo people by amplifying their voices and asserting their role in shaping the region's future. It promotes inclusive development and social cohesion, bridging the gap between state-centric policies and local aspirations.

Ultimately, the research underscores the necessity of integrating indigenous perspectives into India's foreign policy framework, ensuring sustainable development and lasting peace in the border regions.

Significant contribution of the study:

The study on **“Act East Policy, Border Trade & Kuki-Zo Identity: Towards a People-Centric Approach in India's Foreign Policy”** holds significant relevance for **policy makers, government officials, academicians, scholars, and the Kuki-Zo community**. It provides a critical understanding of how India's **Act East Policy (AEP)** and cross-border trade impact the socio-economic well-being of the Kuki-Zo people residing along the Indo-Myanmar border. The study will serve as a valuable reference for **policy makers and government officials** in formulating **inclusive trade policies** that prioritize local community participation. It will offer **academicians and scholars** fresh insights into



borderland communities and their role in India's foreign policy. Furthermore, the findings will empower the **Kuki-Zo community** by advocating for their **economic integration, cultural preservation, and equitable participation** in cross-border trade initiatives.

Conclusion:

The Act East Policy holds immense potential to transform India's northeastern region into a thriving economic and strategic corridor connecting South and Southeast Asia. However, the success of this policy depends on addressing the long-standing political grievances and aspirations of local communities, particularly the Kuki-Zo people. A **people-centric approach** that prioritizes the **Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration** can unlock the region's economic potential, foster inclusive development, and strengthen India's position in the Asia-Pacific region. By integrating local communities into the Act East Policy, India can transform its foreign policy vision into a powerful instrument of **peace, prosperity, and regional integration**.

The path to regional integration begins not with highways or trade agreements, but with ensuring **justice, dignity, and self-determination** for all communities along the Indo-Myanmar border. Without the Kuki-Zo homeland, India's Act East Policy will remain a distant dream—an unfulfilled promise on the margins of India's foreign policy ambitions.

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