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NORTHEAST INSURGENCY AS AN IMPEDIMENT IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Government is in the process of developing the Northeast Region of India as a gateway to Southeast Asia. But due to the problems of insurgency, the process of development is being slowed down. There have been many initiatives taken by the Government of India for the development of the North-eastern states, as the region is considered the heart and soul of the Act East Policy. The objective of this paper is to highlight the role of the different groups of insurgents in the obstruction of India's important developmental projects for the Act East Policy and the actions being taken by the Indian Government in countering these insurgents. The paper examines different obstacles which the Indian Government is facing in the developmental process throughout the North-eastern region.

KEYWORDS: *Act East Policy, Look East Policy, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, and Insurgency.*

INTRODUCTION

The Act East Policy, which was announced in November 2014, is the upgradation of the Look East Policy launched in 1992. The Act East Policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the ASEAN countries. It also aims at promoting economic cooperation, cultural ties and development of strategic relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region with a bold and practical approach and thereby improving the economic development of India's Northeast Region, which is a gateway to the Southeast Asian region. The Northeast Region consists of eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura. The region shares an international border of 5,182 kilometres with the Tibet Autonomous Region of China in the north, with Myanmar in the east, with Bangladesh in the south-west, with Nepal in the west, and with Bhutan in the north-west. The Northeast Region of India consists of more than 50 ethnic insurgent groups. Among these insurgent groups, some have been demanding complete secession from India, and others fighting for ethnic identities and homelands.

The 'Act East' and the 'Look East' policies are two sides of the same coin towards the Asia-Pacific region. India's eastward drive since 1992 has emphasised the importance of this region in its contemporary international relations (Kesavan 2020). The Act East policy was originally formed as an economic initiative. But with time, it has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions, including the establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. India has also upgraded its relations to strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Singapore and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forged close ties with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region. India is involved in regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The Act East Policy has placed emphasis on India-ASEAN cooperation in the domestic agenda on infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, skills, urban renewal, smart cities, Make in India and other initiatives. Connectivity projects, cooperation in space, science and technology and people-to-people exchanges could become the starting line for regional integration and prosperity (Ministry of External Affairs 2015).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, India went through crucial years as the Indian economy underwent large-scale economic liberalisation. The tenth Prime Minister of India, PV Narasimha Rao, highlighted his vision for India to become a tiger economy, based on the similar developmental models that led to exponential economic growth in several East Asian states. This vision was aimed at fostering strong economic and maritime partnerships, and it came to be known as the 'Look East Policy' (Dewan 2021). In November 2014, the then Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announced the upgradation of India's 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy' at the India–ASEAN summit in Myanmar (Palit 2016). Due to the rise of China, there has been a scarcity of regional security, and India has developed gradually from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy through its own growing capabilities, profile, and obligations (Jaishankar 2019).

The Northeast region is of great importance geopolitically for the government of India. After independence, the Northeast region has been harmed by bloodshed, tribal feuds and underdevelopment. Due to the insurgency, there had been widespread violence in several parts of the region, and has been brought under the confines of the Disturbed Area Act (DAA).

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In 1958 the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)[1] had also been enforced in the region (Chauhan 2017). The Siliguri Corridor, with a width of 21-40 kilometres (or 13-25 miles) in West Bengal, connects the Northeast Region with mainland India. The Northeast Region is the tri-junction of three great civilisations, i.e., the Indian, Chinese and Southeast Asians, with a rich history of cultural and trade relations (Thapliyal 2016). The Northeast region is also economically important for India and is a part of the Act East Policy. So, it is apparent that the development and stability of the Northeast Region play an important role in India's Act East Policy. Projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which connects India's Manipur with Thailand via Myanmar, and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project, which connects Kolkata with the landlocked state of Mizoram via Sittwe port in Myanmar, are attempt to make the Northeast Region a gateway for Southeast Asia. These projects largely depend on the stability of the region (Lhaskyabs 2022).

The road connectivity is the most vulnerable to insurgency activities in the Northeast Region. The ASEAN Highway network can be accessed from the existing NH-39 and NH-36 of Assam through Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal to reach Myanmar at the border town of Moreh. This route shoulders a lot of significance as it has been foreseen to connect Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia along with same highway network. This route has been declared Asian Highway No. 1. Another route is the NH-152 from Assam, which has a direct link to Bhutan. The NH-152, which is 38-40 km, has been developed as a highway with two-lanes and a paved shoulder under SARDP-NE (Phase A). Two new National Highways, viz. NH No.127(C) and NH No.127 (D) have been declared that it will connect the East-West Corridor with Bhutan. The Northeast Region is also connected with Bangladesh through the Guwahati-Jorabat-Shillong-Dauki-Sylhet-Dhaka route, stretching along NH-37 and NH-40 totalling 467 km, the Guwahati-Jorabat-Shillong-Karimganj-Sutarkandi-Sylhet-Dhaka route stretching along NH-37, 40, 44 and 151 totalling 657 km and the Guwahati-Paikan-Dalu-Dhaka route which stretches along NH-37and 51 totalling 261 km in the Indian territory only, of which the entire 22 km of NH-51 (Assam portion) has already been developed to a two-lane road with a paved shoulder by PWD under SARDP-NE. The development of these routes will be very beneficial for international trade and commerce, and also create new opportunities. The region also connects with the Republic of China through Arunachal Pradesh - the NH-52 on the north bank of the Brahmaputra from Baihata to Dhemaji - and is a major road connecting Arunachal Pradesh. This road can be further developed and extended through the Tibet Autonomous Region of the Republic of China through Tawang of Arunachal Pradesh. The proposed four-lane connectivity to Itanagar from the East-West Corridor near Nagaon is in an advanced stage of implementation[2].

Most of the Northeast Region is culturally, ethnically, socially, and linguistically closer to Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and even southern China rather than mainland India. The mixed presence of this region with the Southeast Asian countries is said to be the basis of the Act East Policy (Lhaskyabs 2022). The state of affairs of the New Delhi government has made the region stagnant in development. Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, has changed the Look East policy into the Act East policy with the hope of getting developmental works along with peace initiatives in the Northeast Region[3]. Although the Indian government has taken many initiatives like the Look East Policy and Act East Policy and has brought development to the North-eastern states, it has not been able to bring an absolute peace in the region[4]. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited the region frequently ever since he assumed office with an objective for developmental works and peace initiatives in order to transform the entire region for the benefit of the Act East Policy[5]

Historical Background

The insurgency in the Northeast Region started with the Nagas. Nagaland was foremost to experience insurgency in the region. During the British colonial period, the Nagas considered themselves to be sovereign and petitioned the British to declare them an independent country. After the independence of India, under the leadership of the Naga National Council (N.N.C.), headed by A.Z. Phizo, they declared themselves independent from India. In his declaration, Phizo argued that in a plebiscite held in Nagaland in May 1951, more than 99 per cent of the voters favoured independence. Later, the N.N.C. split into different factions, and many other ethnic insurgent groups emerged from Mizoram, Assam, Tripura and Manipur (Kumar 2018). Most of the insurgent groups from the Northeast Region claim that the Indian government has not helped their communities since independence and have been exploiting them for their assets, from rare herbs in Assam to metals like copper in Sikkim and gold in Nagaland (Purohit 2022). The government of India has created multiple forces instead of bringing in an authentic process of democratisation or autonomy in the region. In 1958, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was promulgated, which was a short-term measure to allow deployment of the army to counter an armed separatist movement (Lachungpa 2018: 255).

The problem of insurgency in the Northeast region has also become a hurdle in the path of development, as the investors are not willing to invest in any sector due to the feeling of insecurities and fear (Ahmed 2019:7). The insurgent groups of the region have been using the neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh as their safe havens. This has caused a serious concern for the region's stability (Lhaskyabs 2022). Along with customs, security, standards and certification, the

[1] *AFSPA is an act of the Parliament of India that grants special powers to the Indian Armed Forces to maintain public order in disturbed areas.*

[2] *https://assam.gov.in/stateportal/business/438.*

[3] *https://www.businessworld.in/article/Northeast-Now-Part-Of-Mainstream-India-BJP/02-04-2022-424383/.*

[4] *https://theprint.in/world/indian-govt-struggles-to-strike-balance-between-peace-development-in-northeastern-states/921454/.*

[5] *https://theprint.in/india/northeast-now-part-of-mainstream-india-bjp/899389/.*

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trade between the Northeast Region and Bangladesh, China, Myanmar and its immediate neighbours suffers from infrastructure congestion[6]. The insurgent groups operating in the region have formed linkages with both state and non-state actors in countries like Pakistan, China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Due to these linkages, the insurgent groups have received financial and organisational support, weapons, training and operational cooperation (Upadhyay 2006: 4996). The insurgents of Manipur, Assam and Nagaland have their links in the neighbouring countries from where they receive training, financial and material support (Patgiri & Hazarika 2016: 244). The Northeast Indian region has been viewed as a strategically sensitive region due to these insurgency problems. The Northeast region needs to be protected from its neighbours in order to safeguard India's national security (Patgiri & Hazarika 2016: 236).

Predicaments in Geostrategic Connectivity

Northeast India has three important border roads that can act as a driving force for an overall development of the region. The Stilwell road[7] or Ledo road which connects Ledo in Assam to Kunming in Yunnan, China; the Numaligarh-Moreh Road which connects the states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur with Myanmar through the border point at Moreh; and the Aizawl-Champhai-Zokhawthar road which connects Mizoram with Myanmar (Hussain 2009: 1). The Myanmar part of the Stilwell Road passes through the Kachin Province, which is overrun by the insurgent groups. This province is often used as a safe haven for the Northeast insurgent groups. It poses a security threat in maintaining cross-border trade and movement across the regions (Pattnaik 2016). Myanmar is India's land bridge to Southeast and East Asia (Bhaumik 2017). The Northeast Region of India also has geographical accessibility to the heroin-producing 'Golden Triangle' (Laos, Myanmar and Thailand). This accessibility has been exploited by the insurgents of the Northeast Region (Routray 2009: 2).

Northeast India has great potential to be connected to the South-East Asian countries. India has funded many infrastructure projects in Bangladesh in order to connect the Indian mainland through its North-eastern states and also in Myanmar, in order to facilitate its relationships with the rest of Southeast Asian countries. The Indian government has been negotiating with the Naga rebel group- the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, and has been neutralising its other factions. But the Government has not been much successful in negotiating with other rebel groups in the states of Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The insurgent groups of these North-eastern states remain active and continue to do large-scale extortions and reduce the investors' confidence and drive away business from the region (Bhaumik 2019). The insurgency is said to be the cause of the lack of development in the Northeast Region (Gurung 2018).

Cooperative Operations against the Insurgents

At the East Asia Summit in 2014, Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announced that he is going to eliminate the insurgency problem in the region in order to open it up to Southeast Asia. Since the Act East Policy seeks to overcome geographical hurdles in order to strengthen direct links of the insurgency-hit Northeast with the rest of India as well as to use the geographical and cultural advantages, the region needs to be cleared of all the obstacles (Dutta 2019). The aim of eliminating the insurgency problem in the Northeast region was opening up the region to Southeast Asia. So, both the Look East and Act East policies have had military, political and economic components[8]. In 2015, the then Minister of State for External Affairs Gen (Retd) V. K. Singh addressed the India-China Economic and Tourism Cooperation Forum on the sidelines of China's South Asia Fair in Kunming, China. There, he stated that as soon as the Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) corridor comes up, the problems of insurgency would be taken care of[9].

In the past years, there were a number of training and liaison camps and safe houses for the underground insurgents of Northeast India, like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) of Manipur, etc., in Bangladesh. ULFA leaders permanently resided in Dhaka and Chittagong and were running lucrative businesses in Bangladesh. From Bangladesh, the ULFA made contacts with arms dealers in Cambodia and Thailand, which made Cox's Bazar[10] a transit route of weapons. These weapons were obtained from the insurgent groups in Myanmar and were brought by small speedboats to Chittagong ports or to un-monitored Cox's Bazar's port and further purchased by other insurgent groups of the Northeast Region (Kamboj 2005).

India's neighbours- Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar- have also conducted counter-insurgency operations against these insurgent groups in the past years. In December 2003- January 2004, the three Indian Insurgent groups- Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), who had settled in the southern jungles of Bhutan, were cleared by the Royal Bhutan Army through 'Operation All Clear'. Also, the Awami League (AL) government after the 2008 elections adopted a very effective anti-terror approach that included zero tolerance for Indian insurgent groups. The leaders of such groups were rounded up and handed over to Indian security agencies, and other members were driven out of Bangladesh[11]. The Myanmar army also launched the 'Operation Golden Bird'

[6] *https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/act-east-north-east-unlocking-the-potentials/.*

[7] *Stilwell road, built by Chinese labourers, Indian soldiers and American engineers in 1942 and named after American General Joe Stilwell, provided a vital lifeline to relieve China's besieged army as it fought Japanese occupation. Today, much of the Stilwell Road is also known as the Burma Road.*

[8] *https://www.northeasttoday.in/2020/04/25/act-east-policy-and-northeast-the-road-ahead/.*

[9] *https://www.deccanherald.com/united-nations-terror-list-has-139-entries-from-pakistan-649656.html.*

[10] *Cox's Bazar is a town on the southeast coast of Bangladesh.*

[11] *https://www.efsas.org/commentaries/end-of-insurgency-in-north-east-nigh-but-myanmarese-terrorist-groups-threat/.*

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in April-May 1995 against the Northeast insurgents residing inside its territories (Kalita 2022). Prime Minister Narendra Modi also visited Bhutan after taking office as part of the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy[12]. Bangladesh is also an important part of the Act East policy, which connects ties between India and Southeast Asia (Roche 2021).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also emphasised about the Indian government's commitment to fighting against terrorism and the smuggling of illegal weapons and drugs. Generally, India's Northeast Region and Myanmar have long been afflicted with the problems of insurgency and drug trafficking (Kalita 2020). Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a land border with Northeast India, stretching some 1,624 km. So, it is geopolitically important to India as it stands at the centre of India and Southeast Asia. Many of the road links proposed by India that go through the Northeast Indian region to Southeast Asia are under the areas controlled by ethnic groups and separatist insurgent groups. These heavily armed groups delay the India-Myanmar transportation system. The problems cannot be solved unless armed insurgencies along the route to Myanmar in Manipur, Nagaland or the spill-over insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh are controlled. The Indian government realised the need to engage with the government of Myanmar, so that it took steps to expel Indian secessionist groups, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Naga rebels who had bases in their country (Hussain 2009: 4).

Manipur, one of the states in the Northeast Region is central to the future of India's Act East Policy. The insurgency problem in Manipur needs a long-term solution, and it needs the agreement of all three ethnic communities, i.e., Meitei, Kuki/Zomi and Naga. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) is well-armed and ready to protect 'no-man's land', an un-demarcated tract between Moreh and the neighbouring Sagaing Region of Myanmar. The KNO would not allow the un-demarcated tract to remain open if their demands for a Kuki state are not met. Other insurgent organisations in that area are the United People's Front (UPF) and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim- Isaac Muivah, or NSCN-IM (Miliate 2019). There are around 25 active insurgent groups in Manipur. Manipur is both India's and Southeast Asia's hottest insurgency theatres (Hussain 2021). Moreh is the hub for smuggling guns, drugs, teak, and is home to several underground groups of various ethnic organisations, who have positioned themselves along the highway collecting tax (Langer 2014).

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway connects from Moreh (Manipur) to Mae Sot (Tak Province, Thailand). So, it is important that the insurgency problems in those areas should be solved for better connectivity (Singh 2021). Myanmar is the gateway to Southeast Asia and an important trade partner for India; it is also the only neighbour of India which shares both land and sea borders. It has also helped India in combating extremism and insurgency (Patel 2021). In 2019, from January to May, and in March 2020, the Myanmar Army conducted 'Operation Sunrise', through close cooperation with the Indian Army against the Indian insurgent groups. During these operations, 26 cadres were apprehended and awarded two years of imprisonment in Myanmar (Singh 2020). The Indian Army carried out the first phase of 'Operation Sunrise' between 17th February to 2nd March, and destroyed almost 12 camps of the Arakan Army[13] as it was threatening to sabotage the Kaladan project (Talukdar 2019). During 'Operation Sunrise 2', conducted on 16th May and 8th June, the Indian and Myanmar armies coordinated with each other to clear the camps of militant outfits, including the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), the NSCN (Khaplang), the United Liberation Front of Assam (I) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)[14]. The Myanmar army launched 'Operation Sunrise 3', in 2020 in order to suppress the various remaining insurgent groups gathered at the Indo-Myanmar border[15].

The peace negotiations by the Government of India with the Northeast insurgents have not been much of a success. The exact number of these insurgent groups is unknown, but it is estimated that there were at least six Manipur rebel groups active on Myanmar territory in addition to Naga rebels belonging to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) (Zaw 2020). Peace initiatives were taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to end insurgency problems, which had been prevalent for decades in order to improve roadways, railways and air connectivity (Times of India 2021). The Manipur government started the 'Go to Village'[16] scheme in order to reach out to the remotest corners to provide basic facilities to people across the state by sending officials to visit all the villages and keep tabs on the progress made by them. The army blamed insurgents for the lack of development in the state and are supportive of AFSPA in Manipur which is considered the centre of the Act East policy[17].

Implications and Future Prospects

[12] *The Government of India had initiated the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy which is regarded as a significant factor in the Act East policy.*

[13] *The Arakan Army (AA) is a Rakhine-based insurgent group in Myanmar, founded on 10th April, 2009. It is the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA) and is currently led by Major General Twan Mrat Naing. The purpose of the Arakan Army is to protect the Arakan people, and to establish peace, justice, freedom and development.*

[14] *https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/operation-sunrise-india-myanmar-armies-target-northeast-based-militants-1549912-2019-06-16.*

[15] *http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2020/10/myanmar-army-launches-operation-sunrise.html.*

[16] *It is a government initiative to reach out to its citizens at their doorsteps, explaining government programmes and its benefits to the people and ensure timely delivery of services to eligible beneficiaries, it redresses their problems and queries in a smooth and citizen-friendly manner and provides on the spot solutions, on the same day, without any delay,* wherever possible. Special focus is given to schemes relating to *social benefits, health, education and identification of left out eligible beneficiaries for inclusion in government programmes.*

[17] *http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2018/11/under-act-east-policy-manipur-focuses.html.*

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had signed a peace deal with a leading Naga separatist group, bringing to an end one of the country's oldest insurgencies in the Northeast Region. Since the development of India's Northeast Region is the priority for the Act East Policy, talks between the Indian government and the rebels have been taking place since 1997. The agreement was signed by the Naga leader Thuingaleng Muivah, who once led rebel raids from neighbouring Myanmar (Bhattacharjee 2015). The Assam government has also opened a new department called the 'Act East Department' and set-up a new research centre on Southeast Asia at Guwahati University (De 2019). Under the chairmanship of Mr. P. Chidambaram, the Standing Committee on Home Affairs submitted its report on the security situation in the North-eastern states of India on 19th July, 2018. The committee observed that insurgency-related incidents have declined in the North-eastern states of India and the overall security situation has improved (PRS Legislative Research 2018).

The setting up of the Act East Policy Department is to ensure the implementation of the Act East Policy in a limited time frame. Along with the shift from 'west to east', this policy is also a shift from mainland India to Northeast India, a region which was traditionally neglected by the centre[18]. Assam has also witnessed the improvement of law and order as peace accords have been signed with the insurgency groups[19]. On 23rd January 2020, around 644 cadres belonging to eight different militant outfits, including the United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and the Rabha National Liberation Front (RNLF) surrendered in Assam. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and all of its four factions disbanded themselves in 2020 after 34 years of their formation in the state of Assam. 1,615 NDFB members surrendered in January 2020 by signing a memorandum of settlement of the outfits with the Centre (Chauhan 2021).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also promised to withdraw the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) from all North-eastern states in the future, as violence in the Northeast region came down by 75 per cent, which led to improvement in law and order (Singh 2022). According to Lt Gen Nair, through the economic development of the region, the youths of the area would benefit in employment opportunities, which would guide them on the right path, away from insurgency[20]. Union Home Minister Amit Shah also invited the industries to take advantage of the favourable environment of the Northeast region in order to invest[21].

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (K-faction) and Manipuri outfits such as the People's Liberation Army have been operating from the Sagaing region in north-western Myanmar for over a decade. In 2020, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) handed over as many as 22 rebels to Indian authorities in what was seen as a policy shift of Myanmar towards Indian rebels (Kalita 2020). In Bangladesh, only the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), and remnants of the ULFA's Dhristi Rajkhowa-led group are present as of now. As mentioned by BSF Meghalaya Frontier Principal Staff Officer D. Haokip, there are no camps of these insurgent groups, as confirmed by the Government of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Border Guards. The members of these groups are either staying at their relatives' places or in the care of their sympathisers[22]. The ULFA leader Paresh Baruah is believed to be operating from China's south-western province of Yunnan and has not shown interest in talks. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM)'s Phunting Shimrang is also said to be residing in Ruili in Yunnan Province across the Myanmar border with China (Kalita 2022).

In February 2021, after the takeover of the government by the military junta, India has specifically not criticised the military and has responded cautiously to the coup in Myanmar. The main intention behind India's shift in its policy is to balance China's influence and to contain insurgencies along the Indo-Myanmar border (Min 2022). In January 2022, the Myanmar military carried out operations against anti-Indian insurgent groups operating from their camps inside Myanmar. The Military Government in Myanmar, whose representatives are in constant touch with Indian security officials, reported to the Indian government about the operation conducted against the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Kangla Yawol Kanna Lup[23]. The Tatmadaw government had previously conducted operations alongside the Indian Army to root out insurgents. But the junta has now begun redeploying the same insurgent groups to fight against rebel forces in Myanmar. The Indian insurgents had been forced to join Myanmar's army ranks and operate alongside it (Zeeshan 2022). The Indian insurgent groups were compelled to sign an agreement with Myanmar's army and join hands with the junta to end the rebellion that had erupted after the 1st February 2021 coup (Saikia 2022).

According to Lieutenant General Rana Pratap Kalita, the insurgent groups of Northeast India have lost their ideological beliefs and are carrying out extortion as well as arms and drugs smuggling[24]. There might be a decline of insurgency in the region due to India's continued political and military steps, but

[18]*https://www.northeasttoday.in/2020/04/25/act-east-policy-and-northeast-the-road-.*
[19]*https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/northeast-now-part-of-mainstream-india-bjp/cid/1858734.*
[20]*https://www.etvbharat.com/english/national/bharat/assam-rifles-northeastinsurgency/na20220506163201814814791?utm_source=JioNews&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=JioNews.*
[21]*https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/amit-shah-cites-improved-security-pushes-for-investment-in-northeast-india/articleshow/87920068.cms.*
[22]*https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/northeast-insurgents-staying-in-bangladesh-but-not-operating-from-there-bsf-1056230.html.*
[23]*(https://www.opindia.com/2022/01/myanmar-military-operation-against-anti-india-terrorists-inside-their-territory-reports/amp/#aoh=16533175737579&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&amp_tf=From%20%251%24s.)*
[24]*(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/insurgents-in-ne-have-lost-their-ideological-moorings/articleshow/91606755.cms).*

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it has not died down (Bedi 2019). The year 2020 recorded the lowest insurgency incidents and casualties among the civilians and security forces (Kalita 2022). According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Northeast region will play an important role in India's Act East Policy. Which is why, the Government of India is building infrastructure so that Northeast region emerges as an important centre in India's involvement with Southeast Asian countries (Singh 2017). External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also declared that Assam is the starting line of India's Act East Policy and its all-round development is central to the success of the policy. So, the state of Assam also needs to be safeguarded for stable development in achieving the goals of the Act East Policy[25].

Japan has been involved in a free and open Indo-Pacific vision aligned with the common interests of growth, connectivity and mutual development in the context of China's increasing regional aggression. Northeast India holds a perimeter of the broader Indo-Pacific framework, and the proposed connectivity projects are likely to open up trade opportunities for the Northeast region, along with the revival of ethnicities among territorially divided trans-border communities (Chakraborty 2025). On 30th April 2026, the last of the insurgent groups based in the state of Mizoram have laid down their weapons and made the state insurgent-free, paving the way for better connectivity (The Hindu 2026). The Government of India has been promoting the unique cultures of the region through tourism, agriculture, horticulture, handicrafts, with modern techniques, better market access, and value addition. The Government has also advocated Guinness World Records by organising the largest Bihu[26], Jhumur[27], and Bagurumba[28] dances in Guwahati, Assam. Through skill development programmes, institutions of higher education and sports infrastructure, the youths of Northeast India have been provided opportunities; as a result, it can foster them to cooperate with the Government in the coming years for the development of the region vis-à-vis with the Act East Policy (The Sentinel 2026).

CONCLUSION

Although there has been partial success in solving the insurgency problems, the Northeast region is moving towards a better future. But this can continue only if the Indian government follows a secured policy in dealing with the ethnic communities and the insurgency problems. If the government of India is negligent of the sensitivities of the region, the situation might recuperate back to its former circumstances. This might ultimately lead to a serious impediment for the future of the Act East Policy. The Indian government has to be aware of the regrouping of the insurgent groups in the region. Eventually, if the Tatmadaw government in Myanmar changes its policy towards India, insurgent groups of the Northeast Region might return. The ideological beliefs of the ethnic communities of the region may have been suppressed due to the present scenario, but in the future, the situation may arise where these groups may have to come out of their hiding and continue their demands, which their predecessors have been making. Economic development of the region cannot hamper the societal values and culture, as it is deeply rooted in the minds of the people. It will not be an easy process for them to give up their deeply rooted cultural values and ethnicity, for which they have been fighting since the independence of India. It is more apparent that North-eastern culture is more similar to Southeast Asia and East Asia. The Indian government needs to preserve the culture of the Northeast region because it is a very important part of the Act East Policy in terms of cultural linkages. If the culture is preserved, then the next generation might not have to fight for their identity like their predecessors did. But if the government shows any signs of negligence in terms of culture and ethnicity in the name of development, then the issue of identity politics might arise again in the future and ultimately another new generation of insurgent groups might be formed. Hence, it is a big challenge for the Indian government in formulating the Act East Policy.

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