



Northeast India in the Contemporary Geopolitical Context: Strategic Imperatives and National Interest

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ABSTRACT

The region of Northeast India holds exceptional geopolitical significance due to its strategic location connected to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor and sharing international borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This study aims to analyse the strategic imperatives of Northeast India within the broader framework of India's national interest. It seeks to understand the region's geopolitical relevance in the contemporary context, examining the security, economic, and diplomatic developments influencing policy formulation. It also assesses how regional dynamics shape India's strategic priorities in the Northeast. The research adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on secondary sources including government policy documents, academic journals, strategic think tank reports, and news analyses. It utilizes geopolitical mapping, case studies, and content analysis of strategic initiatives such as the Act East Policy and border infrastructure development. The region's connectivity potential enhances India's economic and diplomatic engagement with ASEAN countries. However, persistent infrastructure deficits, ethnic conflicts, and porous borders continue to impede strategic consolidation. Additionally, China's growing interest across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and its growing influence in Myanmar and Bangladesh necessitate proactive and coordinated strategic planning in the region.

A strategically empowered Northeast India is imperative for India's emergence as a major player in the Indo-Pacific. A comprehensive approach integrating defence preparedness, regional development, cross-border diplomacy, and cultural integration is essential to transform the region into a gateway for economic growth and strategic outreach.

KEY WORDS: Northeast India, National Interest, strategic location, Act East Policy, cross border diplomacy

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Introduction

Northeast India, occupying the easternmost part of the Indian subcontinent with its diverse physiography and relief features, holds critical significance in contemporary geopolitics and strategic considerations from the perspective of national interest. It comprises the state of Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, together they are commonly known as the Land Seven Sisters (popularized in 1972 by Jyoti Prasad Saikia). Later in 1975, Sikkim added to it covering a total area of 32,87,263 Sq Km which is 7.97% of the country's geographical area and 3.78% of its population (MHA - Govt. Of India). The region shared an international land border of 5,484 Km with neighbouring countries includes China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the south - west, Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the north - west. The region is connected to mainland India only through its narrow Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "Chicken Neck", which Constitutes about 2% of the total boundary. This leaves 98% of its borders as international, significantly isolating the region from the rest of the country.

Table: North-East India Boundary with Neighbouring Countries

Country	India's Northeast States	Boundary length (in Km)
Bangladesh	Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram	1880 Km
Bhutan	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim	516 Km
Nepal	Sikkim	99 Km
China	Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim	1346 Km
Myanmar	Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram	1642 Km

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. Of India

This article aims to analyse the strategic imperatives of Northeast India within the broader framework of India's national interest. It explores the geopolitical relevance of the region in the contemporary context by examining its security dynamics, economic potential, and diplomatic engagements. Furthermore, it assesses how internal complexities and external pressures shape India's policy priorities in the region.

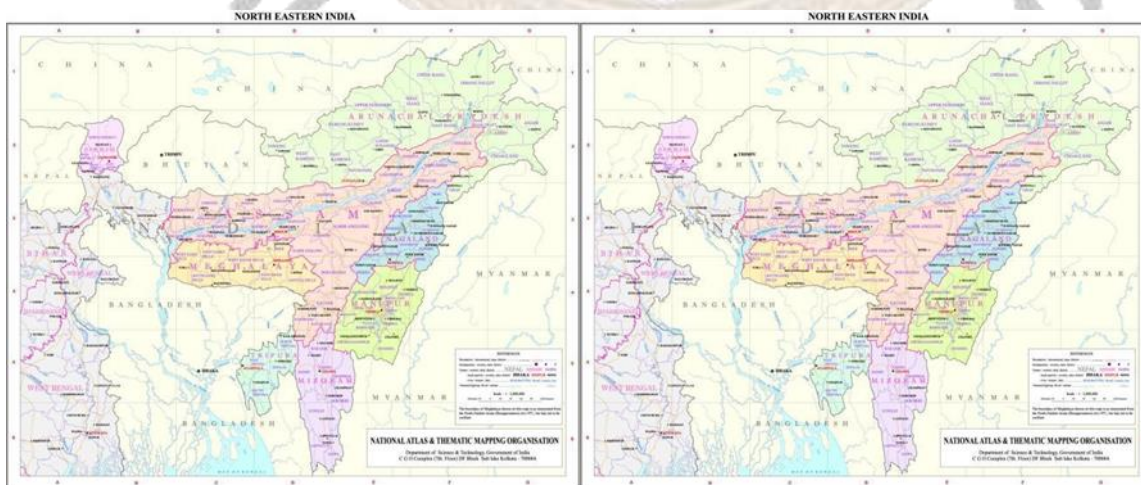
The relevance of Northeast India lies not only in its defence and border security considerations but also in its potential to serve as a backbone in India's Act East Policy, enhancing connectivity and engagement with ASEAN nations. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary sources such as government policy documents, academic literature, strategic think tank publications, and news reports.

Tools like geopolitical mapping and content analysis of major initiatives provide a comprehensive approach through which to assess the region's evolving strategic role.

Strategic Geography of Northeast India

Northeast India holds a unique and critical position in the strategic framework of the Indian subcontinent. The strategic geography of Northeast India is defined by a combination of unique physical, political, and cultural features that significantly influence India's national security and foreign policy. The region is connected to the Indian mainland through the Siliguri Corridor of a narrow 22-kilometer-wide strip of land in West Bengal is a strategic chokepoint. Any disruption to the Siliguri Corridor could critically hamper India's military and logistical access to the Northeast India. The 2017 Doklam standoff highlighted this risk, triggered by China's attempt to build a road in the contested Chumbi Valley near the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction, leading to a prolonged military stand-off.

Northeast India, due to its unique geographical boundaries and proximity to multiple nations, holds strategic significance. China's growing presence in and around India's Northeast is reshaping regional dynamics and strategic challenges. China rejects the McMahon Line as the legitimate boundary and claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of "South Tibet" is concerning to maintain India's strategic diplomacy. The dispute, rooted in the 1962 Sino-Indian war, continues to strain bilateral relations. The India-China-Myanmar tri-junction is located in the easternmost part of Arunachal Pradesh, near the Dibang Valley is also strategically sensitive areas located in the high-altitude terrain of the eastern Himalayas. The borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh are crucial for cross-border connectivity and regional diplomacy but are also marked by challenges such as illegal migration, trafficking, and insurgency.



Source: National Atlas & Thematic Mapping Organisation (NATMO) and ISRO CartoDEM.



The region's physiography is marked by challenging terrain including dense forests, the Purvanchal ranges of the Himalayas, and the riverine landscapes shaped by the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers— which hinders infrastructure development and complicates defence logistics. Demographically, it is home to more than 200 ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, cultures, and historical experiences. While this diversity enriches the region, it also presents governance challenges, often giving rise to identity-based movements and ethnic tensions.

Despite its vulnerabilities, Northeast India holds vast geopolitical and strategic value. Its location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia positions it as a critical gateway for advancing India's Act East Policy. With strategic development, the region can serve as a key corridor for trade, connectivity, energy transit, and cultural exchange, strengthening India's presence in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing regional integration, and counterbalancing external influences in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

Security Imperatives of Northeast India Region

Northeast India's security landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external challenges, making it a critical frontier in India's national defence and strategic architecture. Internally, the region has long been affected by insurgencies, ethnic conflicts, and identity-based political movements. Multiple armed groups like National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NCSN) (IM and K) in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Manipur, United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Muslim United Liberation Tiger of Assam (MULTA) in Assam, and Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HCLN), Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) in Meghalaya have historically pursued demands ranging from autonomy to complete secession. Although peace accords and negotiations have brought some stability, sporadic violence, inter-tribal tensions, and emerging ethno nationalist sentiments continue to threaten internal cohesion and governance.

China's aggressive posture in Northeast India presents a significant external security challenge. The most critical concern is the longstanding border dispute, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and also in Galwan Valley near Line of Actual Control (LAC). In addition, Chinese activities in the Doklam region of Bhutan, close to the Siliguri Corridor pose a direct threat to India's strategic access. China's influence is also growing through its partnership with Myanmar.

The India-China-Myanmar tri - junction, located in Arunachal Pradesh, is witnessing increased militarization. Through initiatives like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in Myanmar, hydropower projects in Nepal, and strategic infrastructure and military investments in Bangladesh, China



is building a web of influence that threatens to undermine India's regional aspirations and significantly hinder its flagship Act East Policy. Joint operations such as Operation Sunrise, CORPET with Myanmar have helped though sustained coordination remains a challenge.

The India-Bangladesh border poses security challenges, including illegal migration, arms and narcotics smuggling, fake currency circulation, and cross-border radicalization. These threats are aggravated by the insecure and densely populated terrain, making surveillance difficult. Despite improved diplomatic relations, persistent border vulnerabilities require robust management. Moreover, China's expanding military and economic connection with Bangladesh raise strategic concerns, as part of a broader effort to limit India's regional influence. In response, India is enhancing border cooperation with Bangladesh and deepening its strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific to safeguard its interests and maintain regional stability.

Finally, strengthening maritime-continental connectivity through Northeast India— initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project—is essential for regional integration and strategic outreach. However, the success of these corridors depends on securing them against threats from both state and non-state actors.

Another persistent threat is cross-border infiltration and trafficking. The porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh are mostly exploited for the smuggling of arms, narcotics, and human trafficking. These activities not only undermine internal security but also fuel insurgency networks.

In response, the Indian armed forces, paramilitary units such as the Assam Rifles and Border Security Force (BSF), and intelligence agencies play an indispensable role in maintaining security. They are supported by counter-insurgency operations, civic action programs, and coordinated intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Furthermore, India has accelerated strategic military infrastructure development in the region, including the construction of all-weather roads, advanced landing grounds, and forward bases to ensure rapid troop mobilization and enhanced deterrence capabilities. To ensure security in Northeast India is not merely a regional priority but a national imperative, crucial for maintaining territorial integrity and asserting India's strategic outlook in the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Significance and Connectivity Initiatives

Northeast India, despite its strategic location, remains economically underdeveloped compared to other parts of the country. The region faces persistent challenges such as poor infrastructure, low industrial base,



limited market access, and inadequate financial investment. Rugged terrain and a dispersed population further complicate the delivery of services and logistics, contributing to economic stagnation. Besides that, prolonged insurgencies and political instability have deterred private sector participation and foreign investment.

However, Northeast India holds immense economic potential, particularly as a hub for regional connectivity. Its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia positions it as a crucial transit zone for India's trade and diplomatic outreach under the Act East Policy. This policy aims to transform the region into a vital corridor linking India with ASEAN nations through improved connectivity, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships. It focuses on developing infrastructure, enhancing cross-border trade, and improving people-to-people relations, with Northeast India serving as a central hub.

Several infrastructure initiatives are currently underway to address the connectivity gap. Major highway projects under the Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for the North Eastern Region (SARDP-NE) aim to integrate the region's road network with the national highway to enhance military mobility and rapid deployment in border areas during times of crisis and strengthen the Siliguri Corridor's resilience by offering alternative routes to Northeast India. Railways are being expanded most recently such as Bairabi - Sairang Railway Line (Mizoram), Dimapur - Kohima Line (Nagaland) and Tatelia - Byrnihat - Shillong Line (Assam - Meghalaya) and air connectivity has been enhanced through the UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik) scheme. The most recent airport developed in Northeast India is Donyi Polo Airport¹² in Hollongi, Arunachal Pradesh which was inaugurated on November 19, 2022, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It serves as the first airport in Arunachal Pradesh and is the 16th in the Northeast region.

The revival of inland waterways, especially via the Brahmaputra River and linkages with Bangladesh, further supports multi-modal transport. National Waterway-2 (NW-2)¹¹ on the Brahmaputra River stretches for 891 kilometers, connecting Dhubri, near the Bangladesh border, to Sadiya in upper Assam. It is one of India's most important inland waterways, serving as a vital transport corridor for Assam and the broader Northeast region.

Its strategic location also allows seamless integration with Bangladesh's river ports under the India-Bangladesh Protocol Routes, making it significant for bilateral trade, regional connectivity, and logistics resilience in difficult terrain. Similarly, National Waterway-16 (NW-16) on the Barak River runs from Lakhimpur to Bhanga in Assam, covering a distance of 121 kilometers. It plays a critical role in improving transportation in the Barak Valley, benefiting towns like Silchar, Karimganj, and Badarpur. This waterway



enables cargo transport to and from Ashuganj Port in Bangladesh, making it an essential link for trade and supply chains in southern Assam. Both NW-2 and NW-16 significantly contribute to economic development, strategic mobility, and regional integration, especially under India's Act East Policy and efforts to boost infrastructure in the Northeast.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project¹³ (connecting Mizoram with Myanmar) and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are important projects that can convert the Northeast into a logistical and commercial gateway to ASEAN markets. With improved infrastructure and policy support, the region could host special economic zones (SEZs), agro-processing hubs, and trade logistics centres.

Accessing the economic potential of Northeast India is essential for India's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. By bridging infrastructure gaps and enhancing regional integration, the region can serve as both a buffer and a bridge driving inclusive development and international engagement.

Diplomacy and Regional Engagement in Northeast Region

Northeast India's strategic location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia makes it a critical foundation for India's regional diplomacy. Its shared borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan open approach for both bilateral and sub-regional engagement, fostering economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and strategic stability. Among these, Bangladesh plays a particularly pivotal role. Enhanced border management, water-sharing agreements, and the use of Bangladeshi ports like Chittagong and Mongla for Indian cargo have significantly improved Northeast India's connectivity with the rest of the country and ASEAN.

India and Myanmar share a dynamic synergy shaped by geography, culture, and strategic interests. As immediate neighbours, they collaborate on infrastructure, energy, and security. Projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project enhance regional connectivity. Both nations engage in counter-insurgency and border management cooperation. Economically, India invests in energy and telecom sectors, while culturally, shared Buddhist heritage fosters people-to-people ties. India's Act East Policy aligns with Myanmar's need for investment and development post-military rule. Amid China's growing presence, India's partnership offers a democratic, inclusive alternative, strengthening bilateral relations and broader integration with Southeast Asia.

Bhutan, a traditionally close partner of India, contributes to regional stability and energy cooperation through hydroelectric projects. It also acts as a geopolitical buffer in the eastern Himalayas, where India



faces an assertive China. India's sub-regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC 14 (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement, and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation 14 platform are instrumental in fostering regional integration. These frameworks promote connectivity, trade, and cultural ties, with Northeast India positioned as the gateway for implementation.

The increasing Chinese investments in Bangladesh and Myanmar highlight the pressing need for India to enhance its diplomatic engagement. A proactive and well-supported regional strategy is essential to transform Northeast India into a hub of collaboration and connectivity,

Challenges to Strategic Integration of Northeast India Region

Despite its strategic potential, Northeast India faces persistent challenges that hinder its seamless integration into the national and regional mainstream. One of the foremost issues is ethnic and political fragmentation. The region is home to over 200 ethnic groups, many of whom have long-standing demands for autonomy, recognition, or independence. This has resulted in decades of insurgencies, identity-based politics, and inter-community tensions that complicate governance, policy implementation, and nation-building efforts rather than a zone of strategic rivalry.

Environmental and logistical barriers further delay development. The region's difficult terrain—characterized by mountains, dense forests, and high seismic activity—makes infrastructure projects expensive and time-consuming. Frequent landslides, floods, and ecological sensitivities challenge the construction of roads, railways, and communication networks. These physical obstacles, combined with the area's remoteness from administrative centres, delay the pace of strategic infrastructure deployment. The lack of coordination among central, state, and local agencies leads to project delays, cost overruns, and a trust deficit among local populations.

Balancing development with local aspirations and ecological sustainability is another serious concern. While economic growth and connectivity are crucial, many indigenous communities are cautious of losing their cultural identity and environmental resources to rapid modernization. Therefore, strategic integration must go beyond infrastructure and defence. It requires a holistic approach that includes inclusive governance, culturally sensitive development models, environmental managements, and genuine community participation. Without addressing these foundational challenges, the region's transformation into a gateway for economic and strategic outreach will remain incomplete and fragile.



Policy Frameworks and Strategic Initiatives

To address the multifaceted challenges and strategic potential of Northeast India, the Government of India has introduced several targeted policy frameworks and initiatives. Among them is the Act East Policy, which positions the region as a critical bridge for economic and diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia. By prioritizing infrastructure, trade corridors, and cultural linkages, the policy seeks to transform the Northeast into a gateway to ASEAN.

The North Eastern Region Vision Document 2020 outlined a long-term development strategy, focusing on connectivity, employment, and inclusive growth. Building on this, the Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region (PM-DevINE) was launched to fund impactful infrastructure and social development projects with a focus on health, education, and entrepreneurship.

Civil-military coordination is also an essential aspect of the region's strategic development. Programs such as the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) aim to enhance the quality of life in remote areas while strengthening border security. Military and paramilitary forces are increasingly involved in civic action programs to build trust and contribute to local development.

However, sustainable success depends heavily on local governance and stakeholder engagement. The active involvement of state governments, tribal councils, civil society organizations, and local communities is vital for ensuring that development is culturally appropriate and widely accepted. Effective decentralization and community participation are key to translating strategic policies into lasting transformation on the ground.

Conclusion and Strategic Outlook

Northeast India holds a crucial position in India's strategic vision, acting both as a sensitive border area and a potential gateway to Southeast Asia. This article explored its importance in terms of geography, security, economy, diplomacy, and governance. While the region faces ongoing challenges such as ethnic diversity, weak infrastructure, and external geopolitical pressures, it also presents great strategic opportunities. To realize this potential, India must adopt a well-rounded approach that combines strong defense, active diplomacy, inclusive development, and respect for local cultures. True strategic strength will come not just from infrastructure, but also from cooperation, good governance, and environmental care.

Northeast India is not just a remote region it plays a key strategic role in India's emergence as a major power in the Indo-Pacific. Its closeness to ASEAN countries and location along important trade and



connectivity routes make it essential to the success of India's Act East Policy, as well as regional initiatives like BIMSTEC and BBIN.

- To strengthen the region's long-term strategic value, the government should focus on:
- Speeding up connectivity and development projects
- Actively involving local communities in policy decisions
- Improving intelligence sharing and border security
- Promoting development that respects cultural diversity and protects the environment

Empowering Northeast India will not only ensure internal stability but also strengthen India's external posture in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region. The transformation of this region from a security concern to a strategic asset is both a necessity and an opportunity for India's national interest.

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