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NATIONAL SECURITY IMPERATIVES AND STRATEGIC POWER IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines India's Act East Policy as a central pillar of its contemporary global engagement, focusing on the interrelationship between strategic diplomacy, national security and the pursuit of regional and global influence. Moving beyond celebratory narratives that portray Act East as a decisive strategic shift, the chapter advances a continuity-change perspective to argue that India's eastern outreach reflects a pattern of pragmatic adaptation rather than policy rupture. Act East is interpreted not as a departure from earlier foreign policy orientations but as a recalibrated framework that consolidates long-standing security, connectivity and geopolitical objectives under evolving regional and global conditions. The analysis situates Act East within India's broader quest for strategic autonomy and global leadership, highlighting how diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific is shaped by national security imperatives, borderland stability concerns and competitive dynamics involving major powers, particularly China. Drawing on policy discourse, strategic analysis and regional case illustrations, the chapter demonstrates how India employs strategic diplomacy to manage risks, deepen partnerships and sustain influence while avoiding overt confrontation. Connectivity initiatives, security cooperation and institutional engagement are shown to function as instruments of power projection and risk management rather than as transformative integration mechanism. The chapter also underscores the significance of sub-national and borderland dimensions, particularly in India's eastern frontier regions where local governance, security dynamics and cross-border social ties directly mediate foreign policy outcomes. By foregrounding these multi-scalar dynamics, the chapter contributes to debates on how emerging powers operationalize diplomacy and security under conditions of constraint. Overall, the chapter argues that India's Act East Policy embodies a form of calibrated pragmatism through which power is exercised incrementally, reinforcing continuity while enabling adaptive responses to regional uncertainty and global strategic competition.

KEYWORDS: India's Act East Policy; strategic diplomacy; national security; pragmatic foreign policy; Indo-Pacific; continuity and change.

INTRODUCTION: ACT EAST POLICY AND INDIA'S GLOBAL STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

India's Act East Policy occupies a prominent place in contemporary discussions on the country's diplomacy, national security and global leadership ambition. Frequently portrayed as a decisive strategic shift toward Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific, the Act East Policy is often associated with enhanced diplomatic activism, expanded connectivity initiatives and a more assertive regional posture. Such interpretations, however, tend to privilege policy rhetoric over empirical practice, obscuring the deeper strategic logics that have shaped India's eastern engagement over time. This chapter argues that the Act East Policy is best understood not as a rupture in India's foreign policy trajectory but as a recalibrated framework that consolidates long-standing security, connectivity and geopolitical priorities through pragmatic adaptation.

Positioning India "in the world" requires attention not only to its declaratory ambitions but also to the constraints within which its foreign policy operates. India's eastern theatre encompassing Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal and the country's own Northeast frontier represents a complex strategic space where domestic security concerns, sub-regional governance challenges and intensifying great-power competition intersect (Baruah, 2017; Bouchard, 2021). The Act East Policy has emerged within this environment as a strategy of engagement that seeks to expand India's regional presence while carefully managing risk and vulnerability. The policy's emphasis on strategic diplomacy, connectivity-led regionalism and security cooperation reflects this balancing imperative rather than an unqualified pursuit of regional leadership.

This chapter advances a continuity-change perspective to analyze India's Act East Policy, foregrounding pragmatism as its organizing principle. Rather than assuming transformation as the default outcome of policy rebranding, the chapter interrogates how power is exercised incrementally through diplomatic engagement, security management and infrastructural initiatives under conditions of constraint (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The Act East Policy is thus interpreted as a strategic framework that enables continuity in core objectives like frontier stability, regional access and geopolitical hedging while allowing bounded adaptation to evolving regional and global conditions.

The chapter focuses on three interlinked dimensions of Act East: national security, strategic

diplomacy and connectivity embedded in borderland and sub-national contexts. National security considerations, particularly along the eastern frontier and maritime space of the Bay of Bengal shape the limits and priorities of India's engagement. Strategic diplomacy functions as the principal instrument through which India operationalizes its regional presence, relying on institutional participation, bilateral tailoring and crisis-responsive engagement rather than overt alignment or coercive leadership. Connectivity initiatives, meanwhile, serve as both strategic and developmental tools, linking the Northeast to Southeast Asia while remaining deeply embedded in local political economies and governance realities (Bhaumik, 2022).

By integrating these dimensions, the chapter situates the Act East Policy within India's broader quest for strategic autonomy and global relevance. While India is increasingly recognized as a consequential actor in the Indo-Pacific, its approach to leadership remains cautious and selective shaped by material constraints and regional sensitivities. The Act East Policy reflects this posture by privileging engagement over assertion and stability over rapid expansion. The Myanmar theatre, the Bay of Bengal and Northeast India together illustrate how foreign policy outcomes are co-produced across domestic and external arenas, reinforcing the importance of multi-scalar analysis.

Overall, the chapter contributes to debates on India's foreign policy by reframing the Act East Policy as a strategy of pragmatic power rather than transformational ambition. In doing so, it offers a grounded interpretation of how India navigates diplomacy, security and regional engagement in a contested and constrained strategic environment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PRAGMATISM, POWER AND STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY

This chapter adopts a concise conceptual framework integrating strategic pragmatism, relational power and strategic diplomacy to explain the logic and outcome of India's Act East Policy (AEP). Rather than viewing the Act East Policy as a doctrinal departure from the Look East Policy, the framework conceptualizes India's eastern engagement as a pattern of adaptive continuity, shaped by regional power shifts, domestic constraints and evolving national security imperatives. Drawing on neoclassical realism and foreign policy analysis, it highlights the interaction between systemic pressures, state capacity and elite-level strategic choice.

At the core of the framework lies strategic pragmatism, understood as a flexible, interest-driven approach that prioritizes outcome over ideological consistency. India's Act East Policy engagement reflects a pragmatic calculus in which security, connectivity and geopolitical positioning take precedence over normative diplomacy. This orientation explains India's willingness to engage with diverse political regimes while advancing democratic or human rights norms selectively when aligned with strategic interests (Mohan, 2015; Pant, 2019). Strategic pragmatism thus functions as an intervening variable between India's structural position and its foreign policy behaviour, enabling incremental and context-sensitive engagement in response to China's rise and intensified Indo-Pacific competition (Acharya, 2014).

Power within this framework is conceptualised as relational and context-dependent, rather than as a fixed material attribute. Although India enjoys asymmetrical advantages in economic and military capabilities, its ability to translate these into influence is mediated by domestic political constraints, institutional capacity and competing external actors (Nye, 2004; Walt, 1987). Power is exercised through a combination of security cooperation, economic instrument and soft power resources producing uneven outcomes across issue areas and national contexts.

Strategic diplomacy constitutes the operational dimension of the framework. It refers to the coordinated deployment of bilateral, sub-regional and multilateral diplomatic instruments to advance India's security objectives under the Act East Policy. Diplomacy functions both reactively, in managing crisis and security externalities and anticipatorily in shaping longer term regional alignments through platforms such as BIMSTEC and ASEAN-led mechanisms (Hall, 2016; Jaishankar, 2020; Hocking et al., 2012).

As a whole, pragmatism, power and strategic diplomacy provide an integrated analytical lens for explaining continuity and calibrated change in India's Act East Policy. Policy innovations are interpreted as adaptive responses within an enduring pragmatic framework shaped by national security imperatives and regional power competition.

From Look East to Act East: Strategic Continuity and Policy Recalibration

The evolution from India's Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP) is best understood as a process of strategic continuity accompanied by

calibrated recalibration rather than as a fundamental policy rupture. When examined through the integrated framework of strategic pragmatism, relational power and strategic diplomacy, the Act East Policy emerges as an adaptive extension of India's long-standing eastern engagement shaped primarily by national security imperatives.

Strategic pragmatism has provided the enduring logic across both policy phases. Under the Look East Policy, India sought to overcome post-Cold War marginalization through economic integration, diplomatic outreach and regional institutional engagement. Although economic diplomacy constituted the primary focus, the Look East Policy also carried implicit security objectives particularly balancing China's expanding influence and stabilizing India's eastern periphery (Pant, 2019; Walt, 1987). This pragmatic orientation privileged incremental gains and risk management over ideological consistency, laying the foundation for continuity in India's regional strategy.

Despite these ambitions, the Look East Policy's implementation was constrained by limited institutional capacity, infrastructural deficits especially in the Northeast and a cautious diplomatic posture. India's ability to convert material advantages into sustained regional influence remained uneven, reinforcing the framework's conceptualization of power as relational and context-dependent rather than as a fixed national attribute (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Power was exercised indirectly through economic engagement and diplomatic signalling producing gradual but limited strategic outcome.

The formal articulation of the Act East Policy in 2014 reflected a pragmatic reassessment of these limitations rather than a change in strategic worldview. The core objectives of regional access, influence and security management remained intact but the means of engagement were recalibrated. Under the Act East Policy, India placed greater emphasis on operational diplomacy, defence cooperation and connectivity-led initiatives recognizing that economic engagement alone was insufficient in an increasingly contested regional environment (Mohan, 2015).

This recalibration aligns with the framework's emphasis on strategic diplomacy as the operational mechanism through which pragmatic calculation and power resources are translated into policy outcomes. High-level political engagement, defence dialogues and participation in sub-regional and multilateral platforms such as BIMSTEC assumed greater prominence. These instruments enhanced

India's strategic signalling capacity and enabled more direct engagement with security challenges along its eastern frontier and the wider Indo-Pacific (Hall, 2016; Jaishankar, 2020).

National security considerations provide the principal explanatory link between the conceptual framework and the transition from Look East to the Act East Policy. The convergence of internal and external security threats including insurgency, illicit cross-border networks, border instability and intensified great-power competition necessitated a more proactive and coordinated diplomatic posture (Ripsman et al., 2016). Consequently, connectivity projects linking India's Northeast with Southeast Asia were reframed as strategic assets rather than peripheral development initiatives while defence cooperation and intelligence coordination became integral to eastern engagement.

These developments underscore that the Act East Policy represents a securitized extension of the Look East Policy and not a normative or ideological departure. India continued to engage pragmatically with diverse political regimes, selectively advancing normative commitments when aligned with strategic interests. Power under the Act East Policy was exercised through a multidimensional mix of security cooperation, economic leverage and diplomatic positioning consistent with a relational understanding of influence (Nye, 2004).

In sum, the transition from the Look East to the Act East Policy illustrates how India has adapted its foreign policy instruments to evolving regional dynamics while preserving core strategic objectives. Continuity lies in the enduring logic of pragmatic engagement where change lies in the recalibration of diplomatic, security and connectivity tools to address heightened national security challenges. This continuity-change dynamic supports the chapter's central claim that India's Act East Policy is best interpreted as an adaptive strategy shaped by structural constraints, relational power dynamics and security-driven pragmatism rather than as a radical policy transformation.

National Security and the Eastern Frontier

National security considerations constitute the structural core of India's Act East Policy, shaping both its strategic priorities and its operational limits. Far from being a peripheral concern, the eastern frontier stretching from the India-Myanmar borderlands to the Bay of Bengal functions as a decisive security interface where domestic stability, regional geopolitics and global strategic competition intersect. This section argues that Act East is

fundamentally anchored in frontier security logics that prioritize risk management, territorial stability and geopolitical insulation over normative activism or rapid strategic expansion.

A central dimension of India's eastern security calculus is borderland governance along the Indo-Myanmar frontier. The region has historically been characterized by insurgent mobility, porous borders and the persistence of informal networks that blur the distinction between internal and external security (Bhaumik, 2022; Haokip, 2023). Insurgent groups operating across Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Chin-Sagaing regions of Myanmar have compelled India to pursue sustained security cooperation with Myanmar's authorities irrespective of regime type or political legitimacy. This has resulted in a pragmatic security-first approach in which counter-insurgency coordination, intelligence sharing and episodic joint operations have remained consistent across both the Look East and Act East phases (Haokip, 2023). The continuity of these practices underscores that the Act East Policy did not dilute security imperatives; rather it re-contextualized them within a broader regional engagement narrative.

The 2021 Myanmar crisis further reinforced the salience of frontier security. Escalating violence in Chin and Sagaing regions produced refugee inflows into Mizoram and Manipur while simultaneously increasing the risk of insurgent regrouping and arms trafficking across border corridors (McCarthy, 2023; Kipgen, 2024). India's response combining selective humanitarian accommodation at the state level with reinforced border monitoring and security coordination illustrates the layered nature of frontier governance. Rather than adopting a securitized closure or a purely humanitarian posture, New Delhi pursued calibrated pragmatism aimed at preventing spillover instability while avoiding diplomatic rupture with Myanmar's authorities. This crisis response exemplifies how security imperatives function as stabilizing anchors during periods of political disruption.

Maritime security in the Bay of Bengal constitutes a second pillar of India's eastern national security framework. The eastern seaboard and adjoining maritime space are critical to India's trade flows, energy security and naval posture making the Bay of Bengal a key strategic theatre within the Act East Policy and the wider Indo-Pacific construct. India's maritime engagement ranging from naval diplomacy and humanitarian assistance to maritime domain awareness initiatives reflects a strategy of presence without provocation. Rather than overt militarization, India has emphasized cooperative security framework, capacity-building and limited

power projection designed to secure sea lines of communication and reinforce its role as a net security provider (Bouchard, 2021).

The maritime dimension also intersects directly with the Myanmar theatre. Developments at Kyaukphyu port, energy pipelines linking Myanmar to China's Yunnan province and the broader China-Myanmar Economic Corridor have heightened India's sensitivity to strategic encirclement in the Bay of Bengal. However, India's response has remained characteristically restrained. Instead of countervailing megaprojects or confrontational signalling, India has relied on incremental naval engagement, diplomatic reassurance and selective infrastructure investment reinforcing a continuity-driven security posture focused on risk mitigation rather than dominance. This approach reflects the limits of India's material capacity as well as a strategic preference for avoiding escalation in a contested maritime environment.

The China factor constitutes the third and most structurally constraining element of India's eastern security strategy. China's expanding political, economic and infrastructural presence across Myanmar and Southeast Asia has transformed the Act East Policy into a competitive strategic space even as India has avoided explicitly framing the policy as counter-balancing (Bouchard, 2021). Infrastructure corridors, port access and political engagement by China amplify India's concerns regarding strategic displacement particularly in western Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal. Yet, the persistence of India's calibrated engagement strategy indicates that the Act East Policy functions less as a containment framework and more as a hedging mechanism designed to preserve strategic options under asymmetrical power conditions.

Northeast India occupies a pivotal position within this security architecture. The region is simultaneously a vulnerability and a strategic asset functioning as both a frontline security zone and the territorial anchor of the Act East Policy connectivity initiatives (Baruah, 2017). Governance deficits, infrastructural gaps and socio-political sensitivities complicate security management, limiting the feasibility of aggressive postures or rapid militarization. As a result, India's eastern security strategy remains deeply intertwined with domestic political stability, development imperatives and centre-state coordination. This interdependence reinforces the argument that national security under the Act East Policy is not exclusively an external policy domain but a hybrid construct shaped by internal governance realities.

When viewed collectively, these dynamics demonstrate that national security is not merely one component of the Act East Policy but its organizing logic. Border stability, maritime presence, geopolitical hedging and sub-national governance collectively shape a security architecture oriented towards continuity under constraint. Rather than enabling transformative regional leadership, the Act East Policy reflects a form of strategic consolidation in which pragmatism operates as both a guiding principle and a limiting condition. Understanding this security-centric orientation is essential for interpreting India's eastern engagement not as an aspirational departure but as a calibrated response to enduring structural pressures in a complex frontier environment.

Strategic Diplomacy and Regional Engagement under the Act East Policy

Strategic diplomacy constitutes the principal mechanism through which India operationalizes the Act East Policy, translating security imperatives and connectivity ambitions into sustained regional engagement. Rather than functioning as an assertive or ideologically driven diplomatic project, the Act East diplomacy is characterized by calibrated engagement, institutional embedding and risk management. This section argues that India's regional diplomacy under the Act East policy reflects a pattern of pragmatic continuity in which diplomatic activism is carefully modulated to accommodate structural constraints, asymmetric power relations and sub-regional vulnerabilities.

ASEAN occupies a central position in India's Act East diplomatic architecture. Since the early phases of the Look East Policy, India has consistently emphasized ASEAN centrality as both a normative principle and a strategic convenience, allowing New Delhi to embed itself within multilateral frameworks without provoking regional anxieties or strategic overextension. Under the Act East Policy, diplomatic engagement with ASEAN has intensified rhetorically through summit diplomacy, institutional dialogues and the elevation of partnerships. However, the substantive orientation of engagement has remained continuity driven, prioritizing consensus building, functional cooperation and selective issue alignment over agenda-setting leadership (Bouchard, 2021). This diplomatic posture reflects India's preference for incremental influence within established regional institutions rather than disruptive strategic realignment.

Sub-regional groupings such as BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) further

illustrate the pragmatism underpinning Act East diplomacy. These platforms enable India to pursue functional cooperation in connectivity, security and development while avoiding the political and institutional complexities of broader multilateral regimes (Bhaumik, 2022). BIMSTEC, in particular, has emerged as a diplomatic bridge between South and Southeast Asia aligning with India's eastern security and economic priorities without displacing ASEAN's central role. The uneven institutional capacity and implementation record of these groupings, however, highlight the limits of sub-regional diplomacy and reinforce India's reliance on flexible, issue-specific engagement rather than comprehensive institutional leadership.

Bilateral strategic partnerships constitute a third layer of India's Act East diplomacy. Engagements with countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan and Indonesia demonstrate India's preference for differentiated diplomatic strategies tailored to specific political, security and economic contexts. In the Myanmar case, strategic diplomacy has involved maintaining working relationship across regime transitions to preserve security cooperation, connectivity projects and geopolitical access particularly after the 2021 crisis (Haokip, 2021; Egreteau, 2022). Similarly, India's deepening ties with Bangladesh have combined security cooperation, connectivity facilitation and economic integration reinforcing continuity in eastern neighbourhood diplomacy while incrementally expanding India's regional footprint (Bhaumik, 2022).

India's engagement with maritime Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific partners further underscores the risk-managed nature of Act East diplomacy. Strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia and Indonesia as well as participation in minilateral frameworks have expanded India's diplomatic reach without committing it to rigid alliance structures. These engagements are framed around shared interests in maritime security, infrastructure development and regional stability allowing India to balance its strategic autonomy with cooperative engagement. Notably, Act East diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific remains deliberately ambiguous enabling India to benefit from convergence with like-minded partners while avoiding overt alignment that could exacerbate regional tensions or provoke strategic retaliation.

The China factor exerts a pervasive influence on India's regional diplomatic strategy. While the Act East Policy is often interpreted as a response to China's expanding presence in Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal, India has consistently avoided

framing its diplomacy in explicitly counter-balancing terms (Bouchard, 2021). Instead, strategic diplomacy under Act East Policy functions as a hedging mechanism that preserves engagement options, mitigates vulnerability and signals presence without confrontation. This approach reflects both material constraints and a strategic assessment that overt rivalry would undermine India's capacity to sustain long-term regional engagement.

Crisis diplomacy provides a critical lens through which the continuity of Act East engagement can be assessed. India's response to political upheavals in Myanmar, maritime security incidents in the Bay of Bengal and regional humanitarian crisis demonstrates a preference for quiet diplomacy, multilateral coordination and calibrated signalling (McCarthy, 2023). These practices reinforce the argument that strategic diplomacy under the Act East Policy prioritizes stability and access over normative assertion or rapid leadership claims. Rather than leveraging crisis to assert influence, India has tended to absorb shocks through diplomatic adjustment, thereby reinforcing continuity under pressure.

At the operational level, diplomatic practice under the Act East Policy is shaped by institutional capacity and bureaucratic coordination. The expansion of diplomatic missions enhanced engagement by the Ministry of External Affairs and increased involvement of defence and commerce ministries reflects a gradual institutionalization of eastern engagement. However, coordination challenges and resource limitations constrain India's ability to translate diplomatic intent into sustained leadership reinforcing a preference for selective engagement and partnership-driven diplomacy (Bhaumik, 2022).

Collectively, these dynamics demonstrate that strategic diplomacy under the Act East Policy operates as an instrument of pragmatic power. It enables India to expand its regional presence, manage security risks and pursue connectivity objectives while maintaining strategic autonomy and avoiding overextension. Rather than signalling a transformative shift in India's regional role, Act East diplomacy consolidates a continuity-oriented approach in which influence is accumulated incrementally through institutional participation, bilateral tailoring and crisis-responsive adjustment. Understanding this diplomatic logic is essential for interpreting the Act East Policy not as a declaratory leap toward regional leadership but as a calibrated strategy of engagement shaped by constraint, competition and long-term strategic patience.

Connectivity, Borderlands and Sub-National Dimensions

Connectivity occupies a central yet paradoxical position within India's Act East Policy. Frequently projected as the most visible marker of policy transformation, connectivity initiatives linking India's Northeast to Southeast Asia are often interpreted as instruments of economic integration and regional leadership. However, when situated within the borderland realities of eastern India and western Myanmar, connectivity emerges less as a transformative project and more as a pragmatic, risk-managed strategy shaped by sub-national governance, political economy constraints and security vulnerabilities. This section argues that Act East Policy connectivity reflects continuity-driven pragmatism in which infrastructure functions as a stabilizing and strategic tool rather than a catalyst of rapid regional integration.

The strategic logic of connectivity under Act East Policy is inseparable from the spatial marginalization and developmental challenges of Northeast India. Historically peripheral to India's political economy, the region has been reframed under Act East Policy as a "gateway" to Southeast Asia, thereby embedding domestic development objectives within foreign policy narratives (Baruah, 2017). Projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are thus simultaneously outward-looking and inward-oriented. They seek to enhance regional access while integrating the Northeast more closely into national and transnational economic circuits. This duality underscores that connectivity under Act East Policy is not purely an external engagement mechanism but a hybrid policy instrument straddling domestic and foreign policy domain.

Despite their strategic salience, connectivity initiatives have been persistently shaped and constrained by borderland political economies. In both Northeast India and western Myanmar, infrastructure development intersects with complex terrains of land ownership, ethnic politics, insurgency and informal economic networks (Bhaumik, 2022). Project delays, contractor withdrawals and repeated cost escalation are not simply technical failures but manifestations of governance fragmentation and conflict exposure. The Kaladan project's prolonged delays in Rakhine and Chin states exacerbated after the 2021 Myanmar crisis, illustrate how instability transforms infrastructure from a connectivity asset into a strategic liability requiring phased execution and constant recalibration (Chaudhuri, 2023).

These implementation challenges have reinforced a shift from corridor idealism to risk-managed pragmatism. Rather than abandoning flagship projects, India has adopted incremental execution strategies, selective rerouting and diplomatic reassurance to sustain engagement under adverse conditions. This approach reflects continuity in strategic intent combined with bounded adaptation in practice. Connectivity is thus treated not as a linear process culminating in seamless regional integration but as a long-term stabilization mechanism designed to preserve access, signal commitment and counter strategic displacement particularly in relation to China's infrastructural footprint in Myanmar (Bouchard, 2021).

Borderlands play a decisive role in mediating these outcomes. The India-Myanmar frontier is characterized by dense social linkages across ethnic communities such as the Naga, Kuki-Zo, Chin and Mizo whose kinship networks and mobility practices predate modern borders (Haokip, 2023). These cross-border ties sustain informal trade and everyday connectivity even when formal projects stall revealing a disjunction between state-centric connectivity visions and lived borderland realities. Attempts to formalize trade and mobility through infrastructure often encounter resistance or require negotiation with local actors reinforcing the necessity of adaptive governance rather than top-down policy imposition.

Sub-national actors are therefore integral to the functioning of the Act East connectivity. State governments in Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland operate as frontline intermediaries managing land acquisition, local opposition, refugee inflows and security coordination (Bhaumik, 2022). During the post-2021 Myanmar crisis, state-level humanitarian responses particularly in Mizoram demonstrated how sub-national priorities may diverge from central policy caution while remaining embedded within broader strategic pragmatism (Kipgen, 2024; McCarthy, 2023). These dynamics highlight that connectivity and foreign policy implementation are co-produced across governance levels, challenging unitary notions of state action.

The sub-national dimension also conditions India's diplomatic posture. Local instability, refugee pressures and insurgent mobility constrain New Delhi's capacity to adopt coercive or overtly normative strategies toward Myanmar reinforcing a preference for engagement and risk containment (Haokip, 2023). Connectivity projects thus acquire diplomatic significance not only as economic assets but as instruments that necessitate sustained

dialogue, coordination and political accommodation across borders. This further supports the argument that Act East Policy operates through negotiated continuity rather than assertive transformation.

From a broader analytical perspective, the connectivity-borderland nexus reveals the limits of leadership narratives associated with Act East Policy. While infrastructure diplomacy is often framed as a pathway to regional influence, the Myanmar and Northeast India experience demonstrates that power projection through connectivity is contingent, uneven and deeply embedded in local political economies (Bouchard, 2021). India's approach reflects an awareness of these limits, privileging durability and strategic patience over rapid expansion.

In sum, connectivity under Act East cannot be understood independently of borderlands and sub-national governance. Infrastructure initiatives function as pragmatic instruments of strategic continuity shaped by frontier vulnerabilities, local agency and geopolitical constraint. Rather than signifying a departure from past practice, Act East connectivity consolidates long-standing efforts to stabilize India's eastern periphery while cautiously extending regional engagement. Recognizing this embeddedness is essential for interpreting Act East Policy not as a transformative connectivity revolution but as a calibrated strategy operating within the structural realities of borderland politics.

Constraints, Global Leadership and the Limits of Act East Policy

The Act East Policy (AEP) reflects India's aspiration to play a more consequential role in the Indo-Pacific yet its outcomes have been shaped by a range of structural, domestic and regional constraints. Viewed through the framework of strategic pragmatism, relational power and strategic diplomacy, the limits of Act East Policy should be understood not as policy failure but as an expression of the boundaries within which India's regional leadership can realistically operate.

A persistent constraint lies in the gap between ambition and capacity. Despite its growing international profile, India continues to face infrastructural deficits, bureaucratic fragmentation and fiscal limitations that restrict its ability to deliver large-scale connectivity projects and sustain long-term strategic commitments. These challenges underscore the relational nature of power where influence depends not only on aggregate capabilities but also on implementation capacity and credibility (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Consequently, India's

leadership under Act East Policy has often been symbolic or selective rather than comprehensive.

Domestic political and security considerations further circumscribe Act East Policy ambitions. The strategic centrality of India's Northeast as both a gateway to Southeast Asia and a zone of internal vulnerability has imposed a security-first approach to regional engagement. Insurgency, border management challenges and uneven development have slowed cross-border initiatives and constrained diplomatic flexibility. National security imperatives have therefore frequently taken precedence over regional leadership aspirations, narrowing the scope of India's external engagement (Ripsman et al., 2016).

Externally, the regional strategic environment has imposed additional limitations. China's expansive economic and strategic presence across South and Southeast Asia has altered regional power balances, reducing India's relative leverage. Competing connectivity initiatives and infrastructure financing mechanisms have compelled India to adopt a hedging strategy rather than assertive leadership. These dynamics highlight the limits of India's soft and economic power in the face of structural asymmetries (Nye, 2004).

Institutional constraints within regional architectures also shape the outcomes of Act East Policy. While multilateral platforms such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC provide avenues for engagement, their consensus-driven processes and limited enforcement mechanisms restrict India's ability to shape agendas decisively. India's preference for inclusive and non-confrontational diplomacy though consistent with its pragmatic orientation, further limits its capacity to exercise directive leadership within these institutions (Acharya, 2014).

As a result, Act East Policy has produced a pattern of issue-specific and selective leadership rather than sustained regional dominance. India has demonstrated leadership in niche areas such as maritime security cooperation, capacity-building and diplomatic norm-setting yet has struggled to convert these initiatives into enduring strategic influence. Act East Policy thus reflects a strategy of calibrated ambition where leadership claims are moderated to avoid overextension and strategic backlash (Mohan, 2015).

Importantly, these constraints do not negate the strategic relevance of Act East Policy. Instead, they reveal the rationality of India's pragmatic approach. Strategic diplomacy under Act East Policy has functioned primarily as a tool of risk management and influence preservation rather than hegemonic

assertion. In this sense, global leadership remains aspirational and conditional while Act East Policy represents a cautious assertion of regional relevance shaped by material, institutional and geopolitical constraints (Hall, 2016; Jaishankar, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined India's Act East Policy as a strategic framework through which diplomacy, national security and regional engagement are pursued under conditions of constraint. Moving beyond narratives that frame Act East Policy as a decisive foreign policy shift, the analysis has demonstrated that the policy is best understood as a recalibrated extension of long-standing strategic priorities rather than a rupture with past practice (Das, 2018). Across national security management, strategic diplomacy and connectivity initiatives, Act East Policy reflects a pattern of pragmatic continuity shaped by structural vulnerabilities, asymmetric power relations and complex borderland realities (Bouchard, 2021; Haokip, 2023).

The analysis of national security highlighted the centrality of the eastern frontier and the Bay of Bengal in India's strategic calculus. Border stability, insurgency management and maritime security concerns continue to anchor India's engagement with Southeast Asia, reinforcing a security-first orientation that constrains normative activism and rapid leadership projection (Baruah, 2017; Bhaumik, 2022). Post-2021 developments in Myanmar further illustrated how crisis conditions tend to consolidate rather than displace these security logics underscoring the durability of continuity in India's eastern engagement (Haokip, 2023).

Strategic diplomacy under Act East Policy emerged as the principal instrument through which India manages this security environment while expanding its regional presence. Engagement with ASEAN, sub-regional groupings and bilateral partners has been characterized by institutional embedding, differentiated partnerships and calibrated signalling (Bouchard, 2021). Rather than pursuing agenda-setting leadership or overt alignment, India has employed diplomacy as a hedging mechanism preserving strategic autonomy, mitigating geopolitical risk and sustaining access in a contested Indo-Pacific. This restrained diplomatic posture reflects both material constraints and a deliberate preference for incremental influence over confrontational assertion.

Connectivity initiatives further reinforced the chapter's central argument. While frequently presented as emblematic of Act East Policy's transformative potential, infrastructure projects linking Northeast India to Southeast Asia operate within dense borderland political economies and sub-national governance frameworks (Baruah, 2017). Delays, contestation and conflict exposure have transformed connectivity from a symbol of regional integration into an instrument of strategic patience and risk management (Chaudhuri, 2023). Connectivity under Act East policy thus functions less as a catalyst of rapid integration and more as a stabilizing mechanism that anchors India's long-term regional engagement (Bhaumik, 2022).

When considered together, these findings suggest that the Act East Policy embodies a form of pragmatic power when influence is exercised incrementally through engagement, adaptation and strategic restraint (Bouchard, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Rather than signalling policy stagnation, continuity under Act East Policy reflects a rational response to enduring structural constraints and regional uncertainties (Haokip, 2023). This interpretation challenges rupture-centric readings of Indian foreign policy and contributes to broader debates on how emerging powers navigate diplomacy and security in complex, multi-scalar environments.

For India's global role, the implications are significant. The Act East Policy reveals the limits of leadership narratives that overlook frontier vulnerabilities and governance constraints while highlighting the effectiveness of calibrated engagement in sustaining regional presence. Understanding Act East as a continuity-driven strategy of pragmatic power offers a more grounded lens through which to assess India's evolving position in the Indo-Pacific and the wider international order.

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