

## The “China Factor” in the Northeast Component of India’s Act East Policy: Implications for Security, Connectivity, Commerce

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### Abstract

The Act East Policy of India, earlier known as the Look East Policy, was launched in the early 1990s to reach out to the neighbours of the country to its east and beyond. The policy has also acquired a prominent Northeast India component to it. The Northeast of India – comprising of eight states – Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, is presently a landlocked region ensconced, barring a small section, between Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. This paper is on the ‘China factor’ in the Act East Policy with special regard to the aspects of this policy covering the Northeast of India. It is argued here that China impacts the Northeast India component of the Act East Policy in various ways and that the aspects of security threats cast a shadow over the implementation and realization of this policy especially those pertaining to sub-regionalism and infrastructure projects. It is also seen that the provincial governments of India in the Northeast are attempting to carve a space for themselves on matters pertaining to neighbouring countries including China. Furthermore, it is noted that China also reacts to India’s actions or inactions in the Northeast under the policy.

**Keywords:** *Security threats, insurgencies, connectivity, Northeast India, resilient infrastructure*

### 1. Introduction

India’s Look East Policy, which was later rechristened the Act East Policy, emerged as a central foreign policy theme of India, due to a changed international context at the end of the Cold War and the balance of payment crisis faced by India. The rise of regional groupings across the world and

growing Chinese presence in South East Asia were other contributing factors behind the launch of India's Look East Policy. The Look East Policy was initially an attempt to embark on closer economic cooperation with the South East Asian countries, as they were neglected prior to 1991 owing to Cold War compulsions. The first initiatives under this policy included India becoming a "Full Dialogue Partner of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)" and participation "for the first time at the Post Ministerial Conference (PMQ) of ASEAN in Jakarta in July 1996. India also participated for the first time in the meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which deliberates on the security and political concerns of the Asia-Pacific region" (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 1996-1997).

The policy soon expanded to include not only economic cooperation but also cooperation against security threats with the countries of South East Asia and East Asia as well as Australasia. The latest version of the policy also includes India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region, including its aim to ensure shared ownership of the global commons, especially in the maritime domain which is important for India's economy, energy and arresting security threats.

Apart from these external dimensions, this policy also incorporated a domestic component, related to the ending of the "economic isolation" of the Northeast of India (Haokip, 2015: 158). India's Northeast region is connected to the rest of India only by a 21 km long stretch but shares a 5000 km long border with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Each of the provincial units/states of the Northeast – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim, shares a boundary with one or more foreign countries. The partition of India at the end of the British rule led to the creation of the entire region of the Northeast as a highly securitized frontier which was further entrenched after the takeover of Tibet by China, India's war with China in 1962 and with Pakistan in 1965, the closure of the border with Myanmar and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. It also led to the loss of inland water, road, and rail links for the Northeast of India through Bangladesh to the ports along the Bay of Bengal.

The role played by the Northeast as a facilitator of connectivity and its subsequent disruption is succinctly articulated by S. Jaishankar (2021) the External Affairs Minister of India in the following words:

For centuries, its natural arteries have facilitated the flow of people, of goods, of ideas, not just to South-East Asia but as far as Korea and Japan. The valleys of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin, the Irrawaddy were central to that process. But the advent of colonialism and the subsequent emergence of nation states effectively disrupted what was a very seamless connection between eastern India and Assam and the world to our East.

The backwardness of the Northeast compared to the rest of India despite its natural resources and advantageous position prior to 1947 is outlined in

a report titled *North Eastern Region: Vision 2020* prepared by the North Eastern Council of India’s Ministry of Development of the North East Region (DoNER), released in 2008 (Government of India, 2008). The aim under the Look/Act East Policy was to revive ancient trade routes to harness the resources of the region through regional cooperation with the countries around it by fomenting the end of its landlocked nature through an impetus on connectivity with the neighbouring nations to arrest such backwardness of the region. This vision underlies the main thrust of the Act East Policy in the Northeast. However, several problems plague the realization of the objectives of the Look/Act East Policy relating to the Northeast, one of which is the ‘China Question’. This paper discusses the ‘China factor’ in the Look/Act East policy pertaining to its Northeast component from three prisms: insurgency, sub-regionalism and infrastructure.

## **2. Insurgency**

One of the visions under the Act East Policy for the Northeast of India was to turn it into an economic powerhouse which attracts investments for its growth and development. However, insurgency that has marred almost all of the states in the region has prevented the realization of such economic aspirations. These insurgencies have had backing from other countries including China which adds an external dimension to the problem.

China has a history of lending support to insurgents from the Northeast. China’s direct support to them started when a few of the members of the Naga National Council (NNC) led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Thinohelie M Keyho reached Yunnan in southwestern China in 1966-67 (Pathak, 2021: 10-11). Moreover, the Federal Government of Nagaland sought help from “the People’s Republic of China for training and procurement of arms” (Thomas, 2016: 150). China provided military assistance to the Mizo National Front in the early 1970s and used the Kachin Independence Army in Myanmar to train the Manipur People’s Liberation Army in the 1980s (Pathak, 2021:10-11).

China’s direct support for rebels ended with Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power, but Indian insurgents continued to access arms originating in China (Bhaumik, 2005; Sibal, 2012). Continued Chinese armament inflow to India was confirmed in 2010 by the then Home Secretary G.K. Pillai of India (Ranjan, 2015). It has been noted that “The Indian suspicion, not without basis, is that impeding the progress of India’s Act East projects has assumed weight in China’s strategic thinking. The influx of Chinese weapons is, accordingly, in tune with such thinking” (Dutta, 2020). China maintains deniability by insisting that these are commercially sold in the world market and it has no control over the purchases through separate conduits. Beijing, of course, denies supporting the rebels of the Northeast.

China being a safe haven for rebels from the Northeast is yet another point of concern for India. An interview conducted in 2016 by a reporter Ms Chayamoni Bhuyan from Newslive TV – a news channel in Assam – of the United Liberation Frontiers of Assam (ULFA) leader Paresh Baruah in Ruili, Yunnan in China is a case in point (Newslive, 2016). Earlier in 2012, he was interviewed not in China but at a camp in Myanmar's Hukwang Valley bordering the conflict-ridden Kachin State by journalist Rajeev Bhattacharjee (2016).

There is also the issue of China providing training to rebels of the Northeast as was recently brought to the fore by a militant of the People's Liberation Army of Manipur – an insurgent group which was involved in the ambush of the contingent of the Assam Rifles in July 2020 which left three jawans dead and in 2015, when 20 jawans lost their lives. In 2009, a militant identified as Sergeant Ronny of this insurgent group told his interrogators that "China's People's Liberation Army remains in contact with Manipur's PLA. Sixteen platoons of militants have come back to India after getting trained in China" (Dutta, 2020). Such constant Chinese support to disruptive elements in India creates an environment which is not conducive to the plans of progress for the Northeast under the Act East Policy.

Cooperation with neighbouring nations is important for combating insurgency. Such cooperation between India and its neighbours has taken place with Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. For example, Myanmar and India in January 2006, conducted joint military operations inside Myanmar to flush out militants from the group – National Socialist Council of Nagalim – Khaplang (Singh, 2015). Even in the middle of the pandemic Myanmar handed over several insurgents to India (Lintner, 2020). With Bhutan, in December 2003, "Operation All Clear" was conducted against insurgent groups like the ULFA. With Bangladesh, in 2015, Anup Chetia – a leader of the ULFA was handed over to India by Dhaka (Habib and Singh, 2018). In the case of China, such cooperation is non-existent. Despite statements by the two countries where they promote cooperation on countering terrorism but as stated in 2016 by Dr. S. Jaishankar – there is no effective cooperation mechanism between India and China to deal with terrorism (*Business Standard*, 2016).

There are some very recent developments in the insurgency related processes in the Northeast of India which also have a China connection. Following the dilution of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 by the Indian Parliament, which ended the special status of the state and created two union territories in its place, several Naga rebel cadres of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (I-M) moved out of Nagaland into the Sagaing region of Myanmar and Yunnan in China as they were fearing the same fate in Nagaland (Malhotra, 2020). This brings the centrality of China back into focus as a safe and trusted lair for those working against India to

escape into. Moreover, though there had been some headway between New Delhi and the Naga rebels with the signing of the Framework Agreement in 2015, no lasting resolution seems to be in sight given the continued demand for a flag and Constitution and their recent demand to change the interlocutor (Pisharoty, 2020). Several cadres, it has been reported have been threatening to renege on the terms and revive their insurgent links which imply “a return to Chinese assistance” (Malhotra, 2020).

India’s relations with China has been further strained since mid-2020, when the Chinese side “undertook several attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in western sector” especially in Galwan, Ladakh which according to India’s Ministry of External Affairs *Annual Report* “seriously disturbed the peace and tranquility along the LAC in the western sector and impacted the development of the relationship” (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2020-2021: 12). During this Galwan crisis in Ladakh which led to further increase in the tensed India-China relations, Beijing’s support to rebels in the Northeast seemed to have grown. According to media reports, New Delhi complained to Beijing for lending support to Paresh Baruah, the leader of the ULFA who is known to have been residing in China for several years now (Paliwal, 2020). This accusation by India was made after an attack in Chandel district of Manipur on July 29, 2020 by three rebel groups – Manipur Naga People’s Front (MNPF), the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF), and the ULFA, which killed four men of the Assam Rifles and injured several others (The Hindu, 2020). In a retort to Indian Prime Minister Modi’s statement that “the era of expansionism is over” which was clearly aimed at China, without naming it; the rebels issued a joint statement after the attack, saying “as the entire world has made up its mind against expansionism, the people of [West Southeast Asia] are also countering the expansionism of India” (Bhattacharjee, 2020). Such statements and availability of Chinese-made arms in the Northeast, make the China factor evident in these assertions and actions by rebel groups. The China angle is neatly summed up by Governor of Nagaland and interlocutor of the Naga peace talks, N. Ravi on 24 July 2020 in the following words:

China looks upon the North-East as a vulnerable periphery...if the objective is to prevent, pre-empt the rise of India, one weak spot is the North-East... Next is to keep India embroiled in itself. If it remains occupied in the major issue of internal stability, it consumes an enormous amount of national wealth...So China engaged in a proxy war with what it calls as ‘bleeding through a million cuts’...aiding and abetting insurgencies in the North-East. It also has territorial ambitions, like Arunachal Pradesh, which it claims as its territory (Malhotra, 2020).

Such persistent violence in the Northeast understandably has adverse impacts on plans for progress mulled under the Act East Policy such as sub-regional

initiatives like the Bangladesh China-India Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and also deters investors.

### **3. Sub-Regionalism**

The development of physical connectivity and trade to boost the development of the Northeast of India has been a central theme in India's Act East Policy. This has been envisaged to save the Northeast from the landlocked nature that it was reduced to after the partition of India in 1947 which made the region suffer from a "developmental deficit" due to its distance from the advanced regions of India and severance of its routes to the countries to the east and Bangladesh (Barua, 2020). Due to a China threat, "periodical review of military preparedness against China rather than trade underscored the development of transport and communication in the Northeast" (ibid). Under the Look East and Act East Policy, there have been attempts to renew trade and connectivity ties with the neighbours of the Northeast through participation in sub-regional initiatives but a 'China' factor continues to dampen much of these efforts.

The region spanning southwest China, Northeast India, parts of Bangladesh and parts of Myanmar) are geographically contiguous but politically fragmented. The countries of India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China view their sections of this region mainly in terms of security which has severed economic connections and foiled the upgrading of infrastructure and regional growth. The region has been geopolitically marginalized as it is considered a difficult periphery marked by local fighting, ethnic clashes, drugs, which have made the exploitation of resources as difficult as state control. In the recent past, however, there have been attempts to foreground these spaces in policy making; and planning and engineering feats have started to transform this region. Sub-regional initiatives, which stress on improving connectivity along this region, are a part of such attempts.

One sub-regional initiative which includes both India's Northeast and China's Yunnan is the BCIM-EC which has often been seen as a part of the gamut of such sub-regional initiatives under the Act East Policy of India. Rana and Uberoi (2012) note that the "BCIM is uniquely sub-regional and trans-regional, attempting to harness proximate regions of two large states with two other countries." The BCIM-EC was conceptualized to enhance cooperation in transport, resilient infrastructure, economy, and trade within a certain zone. The proposed corridor starts in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan and covers Myanmar, northeastern India and Bangladesh and ends in Kolkata located in West Bengal, India. Construction of an economic corridor was aimed to accelerate sub-regional economic development and such transformation it was felt would help resolve political problems.

However, progress has been very slow on the objectives of this sub-regional initiative. The very slow movement towards BCIM sub-regional development led Patricia Uberoi to note that it has “remained more or less as it was conceived...a reluctantly acknowledged stepchild of the Government of India, neither a ‘bottom-up’ nor a ‘top-down’ political process caught somewhere in limbo between ‘Track II’ and ‘Track I’, and destined thereby to practical inefficacy” (Uberoi, 2016). During Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Delhi in May 2013 it was noted that India and China had agreed to consult Bangladesh and Myanmar on “establishing a Joint Study Group on strengthening connectivity in the BCIM region for closer economic, trade and people-to-people linkages and initiating the development of a BCIM Economic Corridor” (Krishnan, 2013). This raised the expectation that India had finally decided to increase its involvement from Track II to Track I and would now propel the concept enthusiastically onwards but this has not happened. Rajen Singh Laishram of Manipur University wrote in 2017 that the reason behind the slow progress on the BCIM-EC is based on multiple factors which can be traced to the interactions and ties between member countries. The reasons which hinder the development of the sub-regional grouping are “rooted in distrust, despite the countries’ rhetoric about good neighbourliness, different political traditions and systems, trade deficits, unbalanced security situations, unsettled boundary questions, cross-border migration and competing strategies for advancing political ambition are all contrary to the spirit of the Kunming Initiative – precursor to the BCIM-EC” (Laishram, 2017). There is also the apprehension that given the economic weaknesses of the Northeast, it may become a dumping ground for Chinese goods. Binod Kumar Mishra (2016) addresses this point by noting that with respect to Northeast’s tourism, handicrafts, horticulture and floriculture there is a surplus for which China presents the best market. Mishra argues that the danger of China overwhelming the northeast economically can be averted by opening trade in a calibrated and incremental manner. He notes that developing economic infrastructure of the Northeast should be prioritized “before operationalising BCIM, otherwise Kunming – which is economically developed – will become the core and NER will remain a periphery” (Mishra, 2016). Laishram argues that experimenting with “participatory regionalism” as in Southeast Asia may strengthen the Kunming process. He notes that Northeast India has a large market potential, a population of nearly 50 million which makes it a potential trade partner for neighbouring countries. He argues that “information technology, computer hardware and housing materials are increasingly sourced from China, all through grey areas of trade. The huge market potential of the region is yet to be explored, as it opens up and links to the market for the first time in half a century. Formalizing these trades will open up many other avenues of opportunity” (Laishram, 2017).

There are scholars from China, who have provided their understanding of the reasons behind the apparent disinterest shown by India with regard to the BCIM-EC. Liu Zongyi of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies stresses that in fact, various states in northeastern India and West Bengal are very active in promoting the BCIM-EC. He notes that:

However, since the border issue between China and India has yet to be solved and separatism still exists in northeastern India, India cannot ignore the strategic and significance of the security threats of the BCIM Economic Corridor.... New Delhi calculates that the BRI and the BCIM Economic Corridor are moves by China to gain spheres of influence and they would greatly enhance China's influence on neighboring countries' economics, politics and security, and would diminish India's advantages in the region (Zongyi, 2017).

India's concerns were also raised when a Chinese statement was released that the BCIM-EC now is a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which India has refused to join or accept due to the plans for a China Pakistan Economic Corridor which will run across territory that India claims as its own sovereign space. It has also been argued that the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor also poses security threats and concerns for India, as Yunnan province is sought to be linked with the Northeast of India under it, which it is presumed by India would heighten the influence of China in the region (Kumar, 2019: 32).

India's coolness towards the BCIM-EC has promoted some changes in China's policies as well. For instance, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a 1,700-km corridor has been planned under the BRI that will provide China yet another node to access the Indian Ocean. The CMEC will run from Yunnan Province to Mandalay in Central Myanmar and from there it will head to Yangon, ending at Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the Bay of Bengal. Long Xingchun, Associate Professor of China's West Normal University, had stressed that, "The CMEC was proposed during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Myanmar in November 2017, because India has not been acting on the BCIM sub regional cooperation proposal. So, it is better for China to go for bilateral cooperation with Myanmar and simultaneously wait for India's participation" (Aneja, 2019). Mr. Wang who served as the China's state councilor and foreign minister, was emphatic that ties between India and China were insulated from their differences on the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and had also stressed that China-India ties had a "bright future" (ibid).

#### **4. Infrastructure**

Another important aspect related to the 'China factor' in the Act East Policy and Northeast of India is with regard to the building of infrastructure in its



Northeast by India and infrastructure build-up by China in the proximity of the Northeast. Under the Look/Act East Policy, there have been several plans for the creation of infrastructure in the Northeast and its transboundary regions to promote connectivity. One of the major investors to have emerged in this sector over the past few years in Northeast India has been Japan. Such an interest by Japan has led to acerbic reactions from China. Japan has cooperated on a variety of development projects in the Northeast, including connectivity infrastructure such as building roads, providing electricity infrastructure, water supply provisions and sewage management, forest resource management and biodiversity protection (IANS, 2017). Such resilient infrastructure is necessary for an ecologically diverse and political tempestuous region such as the Northeast. Japan is looking to build a cultural link with the region as well. The Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, led a contingent of representatives of 38 Japanese companies based in Delhi to Imphal in Manipur in May 2017 to promote investments in the state. The visit was organized to commemorate the 73rd Anniversary of the Battle of Imphal, that occurred in 1944 as a part of the Second World War between the Japanese Army and the Allied Forces. The Ambassador pledged investment in Manipur for the development of the region (Chaudhury, 2017).

A memorandum of understanding to set up the 'India Japan Act East Forum' with an aim to marry India's Act East Policy with Japan's Free and Open Asia-Pacific strategy in the backdrop of China's BRI was among the major agreements signed during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India for the 12th Indo-Japan annual summit in 2017 (ibid). The forum is planned to facilitate Japanese investments in India's Northeast region. A day after the event in which Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe had spelled out plans to set up the India-Japan Act East Forum to facilitate Tokyo's investment in the Northeast, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said Beijing was opposed to any foreign investment in "disputed areas", including that by Japan. Which was remarkably similar to India's objection on China's CPEC plans. It was noted by the Chinese spokesperson that: "You must be clear that the boundary of India and China border area has not been totally delimited...we have disputes on the eastern section of the boundary" (Scroll Staff, 2017). The reference was to India's Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed by China as its own sovereign space. It was also outlined that India and China were now trying to seek a solution through negotiations, and so third parties must respect this and not get involved in the "efforts to resolve the disputes" (ibid). The parallels of this objection raised by China based on grounds of disputed territory to resist Japanese investment in the Northeast to India's own objection to the CPEC are stark. Earlier, China had "even gone one step further by advising India to exercise 'restraint' on the Bhupen Hazarika Bridge in Arunachal Pradesh" (Kumar, 2019: 35). China

has always rejected India's border claims which are based on the cartography of the era of British India and consequently, the border remains unsettled between the two countries which has led to flare-ups between the two as seen in the recent ones in Doklam and Galwan Valley (Yu, 2021: 4). This unsettled border continues to plague over all India-China ties and has a bearing on the plans to invest in Arunachal Pradesh for its development.

Japan has been interested in shoring its investments in the state of Assam and this has been reciprocated by Assam as was manifest in the 'Advantage Assam' Summit of 2018. The 'Advantage Assam' – the Assam Global Investors' Summit held on 03-04 February 2018, was the "largest ever investment promotion and facilitation initiative by the Government of Assam" which highlighted "the state's geostrategic advantages offered to investors by Assam" (Government of Assam, 2018). Japan was the only other country apart from Bangladesh to have a country session in the summit to showcase areas of complementary economic cooperation. Apart from economic cooperation, other aspects of cooperation with Japan are on the rise, especially in the education sector between institutes in Assam and Japan. For example, in September 2021, the Assam Women's University (AWU) Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ajanta Borgohain announced in her speech during the 8th foundation day of the institute, that the university had initiated bilateral discussions with Japan Women's Forum (JWF) to explore possibilities of developing collaborations between AWU and JWF (*Assam Tribune*, 2021: 8). She mentioned that JWF was keen to harness the potential of students pursuing skill-based subjects which were encouraged in the university which are becoming the need of the hour in the 21st century and have been underscored as being important in the New National Education Policy of 2020 of India. It is seen that educational and cultural collaborations with Japan, which can accrue immense benefits for the Northeast, are not met with any consternation by China unlike those of investment and construction projects, which bear strategic undertones. Infrastructure in the border areas built by either India or China continues to be problematic due to problems of trust regarding the intentions underlying such construction. While India under the Act East Policy envisages infrastructure projects in its neighbouring regions and the Northeast of India, it is wary of China's build-up of such resilient infrastructure along the borders of the Northeast of India and those in Myanmar and Bangladesh, which will provide China a strategic foothold in these countries.

China has completed several important communication marvels along the disputed border with India near Arunachal Pradesh and also across Tibet. According to a White Paper on Tibet released by China in 2021 in Tibet,

Since 1951...highways with a total length of 118,800 km have been built, providing access to all administrative villages in the region.... Some 700 km

of expressways and grade-one highways are in service. The Qinghai-Tibet Railway and the Lhasa-Xigaze Railway have been completed and opened to traffic. The construction of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway has begun. A number of feeder airports have been built, including Bamda Airport in Qamdo, Mainling Airport in Nyingchi, Peace Airport in Xigaze, and Gunsu Airport in Ngari. Tibet now has 140 domestic and international air routes in operation, reaching 66 cities (White Paper Government of China, 2021).

The Chinese government has recently completed the construction of a highway through the deepest canyon in the world in Tibet which lies along the Brahmaputra River and this has enabled it greater access to isolated areas along its border with India which straddles Arunachal Pradesh. This passageway bordering Arunachal Pradesh directly connects the Pad township in Nyingchi to Baibung in Medog county (Krishnan, 2021). China is also building a railway line that will connect Sichuan province with Nyingchi. While underscoring the economic fruits of this railway line, Zhu Weiqun, a senior Party official formerly in charge of Tibet policy, also noted that if there was a crisis at the border then the railway track could fast track the transportation of strategic materials as well (ibid).

India is also concerned with the construction by China of new civilian settlements along the borders which are on disputed regions. Entire villages have been built by China in areas which India considers as Arunachal Pradesh (ibid). In recent times, China has built roads to consolidate its hold along the border areas, which are disputed by constructing several national highways, trunk highways, and plenty of feeder roads (Das, 2009: 106). China has also built frontier defense patrol roads of more than 15,000 kilometers (ibid). China has laid a railway line in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, in 2006, a daily train service runs between Beijing and Lhasa since then. No comparable lines of communication have been achieved by India in its territory along the borders with China.

Not only has China expanded its communication and transportation lines along the Arunachal Pradesh border but it has also expanded transportation links to countries bordering the Northeast of India such as Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal. It plans to open access to the Bay of Bengal through the Irrawady Corridor by constructing roads linking Kunming to Mandalay to Ruili (ibid). It is also building the railway line from Dali to Ruili and intends to construct roads in areas such as Putao, Bhamo, and Pangsai apart from gaining access to the Chittagong port in Bangladesh by building a road connecting Kunming to Mandalay to Chittagong (Das, 2009: 107). India is not able to keep up with China’s infrastructure building activities which also acts as a deterrent to its ambitions under the Act East Policy as with an increase in China’s infrastructure build-up, there has been an increase in China’s influence in these countries as well which has not been commensurate

to India's influence. The gap between India and China in the construction of such routes in the neighbouring regions is increasing, which does not bode well for the connectivity and trade links envisaged under the Act East Policy to facilitate trade and development for the Northeast of India.

Such infrastructure development at a fast-pace on the "Chinese side of the border in recent years and the fact that this is increasingly visible or that news of this has trickled down to the many ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh for the Indian central government to begin a process of fast-tracking infrastructure development projects in the state in the mid-2000s" (Jacob, 2020: 153). However, there remain differing views on the pay-offs to be accrued from the revival of some infrastructure in the Northeast. For instance, the Stilwell Road, originally known as the Ledo Road, built by the United States of America, during World War II to shore up its defenses against an advancing Japanese army in the North East Frontier Agency, which is present day Arunachal Pradesh, is one such route. It links Arunachal Pradesh to Yunnan in China through Myanmar. The Ledo Road, spans 1,726 km, "from Ledo in Assam (India) and goes across Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh (India) and Shindbwiyang, Bhamo and Myitkyina in Kachin (Myanmar) and further links Ledo–Burma roads junction to the city of Kunming in China. The road covers 61 km in India, 1033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China" (Pattnaik, 2016). This road has since fallen into disuse and the part of it that lies in India is in disrepair. Since the India-China war of 1962, there was the "blinkered policy" of keeping Arunachal Pradesh "deliberately underdeveloped in terms of roads and other physical infrastructure for fear of a repeat of the Chinese intrusion of 1962 or at the very least to slow it down" (Jacob, 2020: 153). There was hardly any movement into India though these routes in the present times and the part of the Stilwell Road lying in India remains in disrepair while the parts in China and Myanmar are said to be in good condition. There is also continued demand from Arunachal Pradesh for the reopening of the Stilwell Road. In January 2020, deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Chowna Mein urged the Centre to consider reopening the Stilwell Road up to Kunming in China stating that the people living across the international boundaries of India and Myanmar have common cultural ties, and it would act as a catalyst for cross border trade (Arunachal 24.in, 2020). However, not much has transpired on this front.

## 5. Conclusion

In 2017, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju who hails from the Northeast said "India can be a superpower, why not? Unless Northeast India gets into that mode of working towards making India a superpower, it will never happen" (*India Today* Web Desk, 2017). The

vision to develop the Northeast of India under the Look/Act East Policy could help in this regard but many factors hinder this possibility. This article showed how the ‘China’ question restricts the realization of the objectives under the Act East Policy for the Northeast. Security factors such as China’s links to rebels in the area and its claim over Arunachal Pradesh impacts the development plans envisaged under the policy for the region and hinders greater emphasis of New Delhi on opening routes such as the Stilwell Road. Security threats emanating from China (including recent aggressions along the border) continue to trump commercial justifications for its revival. China’s possible strategic gains from an activated BCIM-EC also account for India’s reluctance to pursue this sub-regional grouping which could, if opened, benefit the Northeast of India. India’s constituent units in the Northeast have attempted to prod the Centre to open the Stilwell Road and pursue the BCIM-EC as these could deliver much needed access to new markets for this region, despite the Centre’s visible reluctance to do so. Post-the Galwan episode, chances of cooperation with China on sub-regionalism have further diminished on matters pertaining to the Northeast or elsewhere. China also reacts to India’s actions and inactions on the Act East Policy in the Northeast such as its decision to pursue the CMEC as India was not showing an interest in the BCIM-EC and China’s reaction to Japanese investment plans in the Northeast, a region it calls “disputed territory.” The stress on building infrastructure in the Northeast of India can also be seen as related to the massive infrastructure build-up by China along the Arunachal border and in the countries surrounding India, which can augment the connectivity routes envisaged as essential to realize the trade and investment ambitions under the Act East Policy. However, other factors related to China hampers the same infrastructure augmentation plans.

## Notes

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