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**A REPORT OF**  
**The Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS)**  
**Jindal School of International Affairs**  
**Panel Discussion**  
**on**  
**Act East Policy and the Importance**  
**of Myanmar and Northeast India**

**27 September 2018**



In recent times, 'Act East Policy' has become a defining feature of India's foreign policy. It is credited with portraying India's geo-political aspirations as well as countering the growing Chinese influence in the region. As part of its twin objective of security and development, Myanmar and Northeast India region become central to successfully realizing and implementing the policy. In order to contribute to the pool of growing discourse on the subject, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, organized a panel discussion on '**Act East Policy and the Importance of Myanmar and Northeast India**' on 27 September 2018. The main themes of the discussion centered around the issues of greater connectivity with ASEAN states, energy security, countering China's influence in the region, investment and trade, as well as the significance of soft power with specific reference to Buddhist diplomacy and cultural ties in bridging the gap between India and Southeast Asia. The panel comprised of Vikram Doraiswami, Joint Secretary (Ministry of External Affairs) for Myanmar and Bangladesh; Rajiv Bhatia, Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme at Gateway House and former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar (2002–2005); Dr. G. Vijayachandra Naidu, Professor, Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dr. Temjenmeren Ao, Research Fellow on Southeast Asia at the Indian Council of World Affairs; and Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar (2013-2016). The discussion was chaired by **Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen**, Associate Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs.



### Acting East: Myanmar and Northeast India

**Vikram Doraiswami**, Joint Secretary (Ministry of External Affairs) for Myanmar and Bangladesh

**Joint Secretary Doraiswami** introduced the theme of the panel discussion and acquainted the audience with the Northeast India region and its shared border areas with Myanmar. Through detailed and illustrative maps, the speaker gave the audience a clear idea of the opportunities and challenges in implementing the 'Act East Policy'. Tracing the trajectory of Indian foreign policy, the speaker indicated a clear shift in the country's priorities under the Modi government. Instead of looking toward Pakistan, China or the West, the speaker asserted the urgent need for India to develop stronger relations with its Eastern neighbors. He outlined the ongoing transport and connectivity projects, as well as the efforts to facilitate and simplify cross-border movement of people, and discussed the advantages of introducing frequent short-duration flights between specific states in the Northeast and countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Joint Secretary said better air connectivity through shorter and frequent flights will simplify doing business and leads to economic growth. The main beneficiaries will be small and medium businesses (SMEs), as well as consumers. However, the implementation of roadway-projects is facing difficulty due to terrain and insurgency-related problems in the region. Drugs, commercial smuggling and gun-running are the two other problems. The speaker emphasized the centrality of Myanmar in India's strategic interests, which is why New Delhi should remain concerned with landmark developments in Myanmar's political structure, in its economy and in its socio-cultural environment. The speaker also illustrated through a series of maps the proposed benefits of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the Kalewa-Yargyi road, the Tiddim-Falam road and other such projects, while attaching due significance to other regional initiatives, including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).



### From Look East to Act East Policy: Developments and Challenges

**Rajiv Bhatia**, Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme at Gateway House and former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar (2002–2005)

**Ambassador Bhatia** discussed the importance of the Northeast region and Myanmar in India's Act East Policy. He provided the audience a historical context, along with the evolution of policy from 'Look East' to 'Act East'. He listed out six phases in India's outreach to the East: from ancient times to the medieval period; colonial phase; Nehru era; post-Nehru years; Look East Policy (LEP) of Narasimha Rao (1992-94 onwards); and Act East Policy (AEP) of the Modi government (November 2014 onwards). Ambassador Bhatia observed that the main drivers behind Rao's LEP were the process of economic liberalization, challenges posed by insurgency, and the imperative to wean Myanmar away from exclusive dependence on China. Bhatia then said AEP marked a shift from a primarily economic policy to a strategic one, complemented by an expansion of the geographical area covered, that is, from ASEAN to the Indo-Pacific region. His main conclusion was that the LEP-AEP had performed reasonably well, but optimal results were still awaited.



### Act East Policy and Southeast Asia

**G. Vijayachandra Naidu**, Professor, Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Professor Naidu** elaborated the significance of Myanmar in spreading Indian culture, trade, commerce, philosophy and other religious practices to the other Southeast Asian countries. He discussed the aspect of soft power between Northeast India and Myanmar, that is, the strong people-to-people relations since ancient times. The cultural ties between India and Myanmar can be traced to their close association through the dynastic impact of historical kingdoms and through Buddhism. The cultural similarities in both these countries have significantly contributed to the development of economic cooperation apart from cultural relations. He spoke about the need to develop closer institutional linkages with ASEAN member states. Dr. Naidu highlighted the role of non-state actors in advancing better relations with Myanmar with an emphasis on Track II diplomacy.



### The Importance of Northeast Region in Act East Policy

**Temjenmeren Ao**, Research Fellow on Southeast Asia at the Indian Council of World Affairs

**Dr. Ao** began by discussing the 'Look East' policy which was first enunciated by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao during a lecture he delivered on September 8, 1994, in Singapore titled "India and the Asia-Pacific: Forging a New Relationship." The Look East policy was based on the premise that in building India's relations with its Eastern neighbors it would help push the development and growth of the Northeastern states of India. The Act East policy further builds on the vision laid out by Look East policy as it has recognized that the region is India's gateway to Southeast Asia and beyond. Dr. Ao said that the Northeast region, given its geographical proximity along with the shared and deep-rooted cultural linkages, is strategically significant for India's Act East Policy, which in turn would also help in the development and growth of the region. He highlighted Act East policy as complementing the 'NER Vision Document, 2020', announced by the Indian government in 2008, and reiterated the importance of connectivity in the region, as well as the persisting challenges of underdevelopment in Northeast India. Underdevelopment is on account of poor connectivity, due to the difficult topography of the region, and the issue of land ownership that causes the prevailing poor coverage of surface roads, railway lines, and air connectivity in the region. The second factor is the underdeveloped economy. He said there is a need to acknowledge Northeast's vast potential of it becoming an export hub and providing employment opportunities in manufacturing, agro-based, and services related industries. Therefore, to look at the Northeast region as a mere transit route to ASEAN nations would grossly undermine its potential. He concluded by saying that development can charter the way forward for peace, stability, and growth in the region as India continues with its outreach into Southeast Asia and beyond.



### Future Prospects of Act East Policy: Policy Recommendations

**Gautam Mukhopadhyaya**, Former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar (2013-2016)

**Ambassador Mukhopadhyaya** offered select recommendations covering the scope of the panel discussion. On the Northeast, he highlighted the challenges posed by geography, colonial history and the partition of India that deprived the Northeast of access to sea and the rivers of East Bengal, and the post-Independence politics of Myanmar and the Indian subcontinent, and underlined the need to balance the current emphasis on connectivity with an equal emphasis on 'productivity' of the Northeast, particularly the agriculture and allied sectors on which 70-80% of the population of the NER depends, so that the NER becomes a net contributor to the economy. On Myanmar, he emphasized the need to protect and find solutions to the pulses and beans trade that was of great importance to Myanmar all the way down to the farmer, and constituted the basis of India-Myanmar relations that survived military coups and international sanctions. He also advocated the reopening of the old Tiddim road from Churachandpur to Tiddim for trade as a parallel route to the Moreh route. On the Greater Mekong Sub-region and especially the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), he strongly advocated Indian investments in the agriculture and allied sector taking the entire region between the NER and Vietnam as one region taking advantage of existing and planned connectivity and regional trade arrangements, and cognizance of the development deficit between India and the CLMV countries. He concluded by suggesting that such investments extending from the NER to Vietnam in partnership with countries of the region and India's strategic partners in Asia could conceivably be the only way India could respond to the Chinese challenge in infrastructure, manufacturing, exports, financial power and real estate development and thus have geopolitical significance.



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