

## India's Northeast and its Connectivity with Southeast Asia

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### Summary

*Following its decision not to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative, India is now busy working on its own connectivity initiatives in the region, especially those involving Southeast Asia. For a long time, the infrastructure sector in Northeast India received little attention. However, in the wake of India's 'Act-East' policy, this region has seen a rapid transformation in recent times. One of the major reasons for this is that Northeast India is critical to New Delhi's connectivity efforts with Southeast Asia.*

In February this year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for a new six-lane bridge which will connect Guwahati and North Guwahati in Assam. Prior to that, the inauguration of the 4.94 kilometre-long Bogibeel Bridge by Modi in December last year is another example of the increased emphasis by the Indian government on infrastructure development in Northeast India. The Bogibeel Bridge is [strong enough](#) to withstand the weight of 60-tonne battle tanks and allows fighter aircrafts to land and take off in case of an emergency.

For long, the north-eastern part of India has lagged behind many other parts of the country in most economic development indicators. While a number of reasons accounted for the backwardness of the region, one key factor was it suddenly became landlocked in 1947, with the formation of East Pakistan, which later on became Bangladesh.

Things, however, seem to be changing now. After the Modi government took office in May 2014, the erstwhile 'Look-East' policy was renamed the 'Act-East' policy. In May 2017, India's [longest bridge](#), the 9.15 kilometre-Bhupen Hazarika Setu (Bridge) over the Lohit river in Assam was inaugurated by Modi. A number of other infrastructure projects have also been inaugurated in the Northeast, including [efforts](#) to turn the Guwahati airport in Assam into an aviation hub. The Assam government will provide subsidy to foreign carriers to fly into Guwahati and the central government has already sanctioned money for the [expansion](#) of the Guwahati airport. The Guwahati airport will be critical for the expansion of aerial connectivity into the region, including with countries in Southeast Asia. So, what are the main reasons behind New Delhi placing increased emphasis on infrastructure growth in Northeast India?

The first is New Delhi's 'Act-East' policy, through which India is reaching out to the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Northeast India is the bridge between India and the Association of Southeast Asian states, given the fact that some of the Northeastern states share an almost 1,600 kilometre-long border with Myanmar. There are many communities in the Northeast region which share filial links with their brethren in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar.

Second, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its regional allies have been able to make electoral inroads into the Northeast, given their infrastructure development promises and the fact remains that the region has not seen much development in the period after India's independence. Now that the 2019 general elections are underway in India, it remains to be seen if this infrastructure push has helped the BJP and its partners make deeper inroads into the Northeast.

Third, from a security perspective, Northeast India is critical for New Delhi since it shares borders with countries like Nepal, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. As the Doklam crisis in 2017 showed clearly, it would be foolish to underestimate the threat from China, especially now, given the fact that India has not joined the BRI which has ruffled quite a few feathers in Beijing.

## Challenges

However, the fact remains that it took 16 years for the Bogibeel Bridge to be completed, since the construction work was inaugurated by former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee way back in 2002. The foundation stone of this bridge was laid even earlier in 1997 by then-Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda. This, once again, proves that many critical projects have been [left languishing](#) in the Northeastern part of the country such as the Imphal-Moreh highway section and a Japan International Cooperation Agency-funded project in Mizoram, among others.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs. For one, Northeast India does not have much clout in New Delhi since there are only 25 members of parliament from Northeast, including those from Sikkim. The region is also one of the least industrialised in the country. The terrain in this part of India is also difficult with tall mountains and wide rivers cutting through the region.

## Conclusion

Having said that, the Northeastern states of India are also breathtakingly beautiful. Mawlynnong village in Meghalaya has been listed as the cleanest village in Asia by BBC Travel, among others. Tourism can be a big draw in the region, especially given the Buddhist heritage in some parts of Northeast India.

Northeast India is critically important for India's connectivity with Southeast Asia. As New Delhi's connectivity with Southeast Asia increases in the years to come, the importance of Northeast India in its 'Act-East' policy will also grow.

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