



Concept Note

“Summit: Act East & Beyond”

7th, 8th & 9th November 2025

Guwahati, Assam.

The North-Eastern region (NER) of India, encompassing Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is endowed with unique resources and strategic advantages as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. This region has undergone significant developmental changes recently, which must now be consolidated into a cohesive regional vision and integrated into India's broader economic engagement strategy with South Asia and Southeast Asia. India's foreign policy shift towards an extended neighbourhood, epitomized by the 'Act East Policy,' has been a decisive step in this direction. This policy has focused on enhancing economic interactions between the North-Eastern states and neighbouring countries in South and Southeast Asia, fostering increased trade, investment, connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges. Nonetheless, despite significant progress in many areas, North-Eastern states still have untapped potential for deeper trade and investment with South and Southeast Asia. It indicates the need to broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation between the North-Eastern region and the Southeast Asian countries, moving beyond a narrow emphasis on export expansion to a more comprehensive framework that incorporates trade facilitation, investment promotion, multimodal connectivity, and the reinforcement of longstanding historical, cultural and civilizational linkages.

In recognition of these opportunities and challenges, the **Research and Information System from Developing Countries (RIS)**, the **Intellectual Forum of North East (IFNE)** and **Gauhati University** are jointly organising a three-day summit in Guwahati. The objective is to foster meaningful and informed debate as well as to generate relevant and actionable policy recommendations to guide future strategies. The inaugural session will be graced by the **Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar**, alongside other key dignitaries, including Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Governors & Chief Ministers of all North Eastern States, representatives of various embassies and distinguished faculty members from leading universities and stake holders from across the region.

Major Themes and Issues

A. Economic Relations

Strengthening Synergies in Trade and Investment Relations

Since the early 1990s, India's foreign policy has emphasized strengthening economic and strategic engagement with its eastern neighbours. The 'Look East Policy' of 1992, elevated to the 'Act East Policy' in 2014, marked a significant shift in India's outreach to Southeast and East Asia. Through these policies, several institutional frameworks have been established to deepen India's economic ties, resulting in notable growth in trade and investment with ASEAN, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. However, despite these gains, persistent challenges in connectivity, logistics, trade procedures, and infrastructure continue to limit the full realization of trade and investment potential.

India's NER region stands out as a strategically vital area, offering immense opportunities for trade with East and Southeast Asia. With its abundant natural resources—ranging from oil, natural gas, and coal to limestone and fertile agricultural land—the region holds vast untapped potential. Over the past two decades, the NER has witnessed impressive growth, averaging 8 per cent annually, with key sectors such as petrochemicals, renewable energy, and manufacturing showing robust promise. The region already exports products like cumin seeds, cotton yarn, and car components, while also importing essential goods from Southeast Asia, including betel nuts, dried ginger, and turmeric roots. Given the region's favourable climate, particularly for agricultural commodities, there is significant potential to scale up exports, especially in organic and fresh produce. Sectors like medical tourism and financial services further offer unexplored avenues for growth.

Despite these prospects, several obstacles persist. Only a small fraction of India's trade with East and Southeast Asia originates from the NER, whereas 95 per cent of trade comes from other parts of the country, according to NITI Aayog. The region's share of India's overall trade remains low, and a significant portion of its goods is routed through ports outside the NER, highlighting the critical need for improved infrastructure and more efficient cross-border trade processes. Low foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into the region, especially when compared to states like Delhi and Mumbai, further exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, there is a need for greater efforts to raise awareness about the NER's unique products and identify key markets in Southeast Asia for these goods. Against this backdrop, this session will explore the untapped trade potential of North-East India and its pivotal role in

enhancing India's economic ties with East and Southeast Asia. It will assess existing barriers to trade and investment in the region and outline actionable strategies to overcome these hurdles.

Building Resilient Value Chains: Navigating Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

To harness trade as a robust engine of growth, it is crucial to deepen integration with regional value chains (RVCs) and global value chains (GVCs), alongside boosting exports of finished goods. Effective integration into GVCs not only enhances export potential but also creates job opportunities, spurring economic growth and improving employment outcomes. It is essential to align the supply base of the region with the evolving patterns of global demand. For instance, while India is among the world's top producers of fruits and vegetables, its share in global fruit exports remains a modest 0.5 per cent. Leveraging India's organic production potential could position the country as a major global player in fresh fruit and vegetable exports. A significant initiative in this direction is the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER), launched in 2016 by the Government of India. The scheme aims to promote organic farming across the Northeast by transitioning traditional practices into sustainable organic enterprises. It also envisions developing organic parks for specific commodities and establishing agencies to oversee the entire value chain, fostering sustainable agriculture and raising farmers' incomes.

Cross-border value chains offer significant potential for creating win-win scenarios for both the North-eastern region and neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh. Sharing borders with four North-eastern states, Bangladesh plays a pivotal role in the development of high-impact value chains that could mutually benefit both nations. Sectors such as fruits and vegetables, spices, bamboo and related products, and medical tourism have been identified as key areas for establishing new value chains and generating employment. For example, surplus fruit production in the North-east could support Bangladesh's burgeoning food processing industry and help meet the growing food demands of its population. Additionally, the service sector in the North-east holds immense potential to contribute to India's GDP. By enhancing linkages with upstream and downstream services within value chains, opportunities in logistics, transportation, post-production marketing, and other areas could be significantly boosted. By forging reciprocal arrangements and improving connectivity with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, both parties stand to benefit from expanded value chains and closer economic ties. This session will focus on identifying opportunities for value chain integration between India's North-east and its neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. It will highlight key sectors with high potential, such as agriculture, agro-processing, bamboo, and services, while also identifying the key constraints that limit the full

realization of these value chains. By addressing these challenges, the session aims to propose actionable solutions to foster stronger regional value chains and drive mutual economic benefits.

B. Connectivity

Strengthening Multi-Modal Connectivity in the North-Eastern Region

Multimodal connectivity involving physical, maritime, digital and energy connectivity in the form of roads & highways, airways, waterways, coastal shipping, etc are critical enabler of enhancing trade and investment flows between India and the neighbouring countries. Existing connectivity linkages between India and Southeast Asian countries need to be effectively harnessed to exploit this untapped potential, particularly by the North-eastern states. The 'Act East Policy' envisages improved connectivity between the North-eastern states and the ASEAN region. India's long international borders with Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal provide opportunities for strengthening cross-border connectivity and its potential to boost international trade linkages. Cross-border connectivity projects like the 1,400-km-long Trilateral Highways (TLH) involving India, Thailand and Myanmar link India with Southeast Asia, opening possibilities for greater social, economic and cultural ties between the two regions. Further, projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWT&T), etc are pivotal for improving connectivity of the North-eastern states with neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. The NER region's abundant inland waterways present opportunities for shipping cargo in a cost-effective manner. The plan to develop the Eastern Waterways Connectivity Transport Grid has been conceptualized by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways to promote regional integration and trade with South Asia. In view of these developments, this session will discuss the synergy in multimodal connectivity and the larger developmental gains accruing from improved connectivity.

Financing Models and Unlocking Private Sector Participation

Several connectivity projects have been identified as part of the Prime Minister GatiShakti National Master Plan, which, along with the National Logistics Policy, will boost multimodal connectivity across the country, in particular the NER region. Connectivity and infrastructure projects in NER have been largely funded by the union and the state governments. Funding by multilateral development banks (MDBs) like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, etc has provided great support to infrastructure development in the region. However, given the rising demand for infrastructure financing requirements, public funding would not be sufficient and effective. There is a need to attract private sector investments and institutional investments, possibly in the form of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP).

Several innovative PPP models like Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM), InVIT, Land Value Capture (LVC), etc. have been attempted by the Government of India. Those models could be leveraged for greater engagement of the private sector in connectivity projects in the North-eastern states. It is equally important to identify the funding models from the perspective of converting the connectivity projects to economic corridors, which might offer a higher business proposition and value creation. This session will deliberate upon the infrastructure financing opportunities, including innovative financing models that are feasible and suited to the NER priorities.

C. Cultural Interconnections: Shared Traditions, Language, and Heritage

The cultural and historical connections between the countries of Southeast Asia and the North-eastern region of India are profound, bringing together shared heritage and traditions. Despite being separated by national boundaries, the cultural practices in these regions exhibit remarkable similarities, highlighting a unique bond that transcends borders. Observing how the distinct traditions of one community are mirrored and celebrated by people in a different country underscores the deep-rooted connections that exist between these regions. Several initiatives have already been taken under the umbrella of the Act East Policy, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and BIMSTEC to nurture the civilisational heritage and cultural connect between North-east India and Southeast Asia.

Despite various initiatives, there are challenges such as a lack of awareness and comprehensive educational programmes, fragmented cultural exchanges, inadequate language learning and language research opportunities, a lack of infrastructure to promote niche tourism, underutilisation of the potential of cultural industry and traditional tourism, limited collaboration on preservation of shared heritage, digital divide, and so on. Addressing these challenges would help promote greater people-to-people connectivity between North-east India and Southeast Asia.

Commonalities in Traditions and Texts & Role of Languages

The strategic location of North-east India has historically connected South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, with Buddhism playing a significant role. The Ramayana, central to Hindu tradition, also unites these regions through local adaptations like the Khamti Ramayana in Arunachal Pradesh, Indonesia's Wayang Kulit, and Thailand's Khon dance. Languages have long connected Northeast India and Southeast Asia, shaped by migrations over centuries. Austro-Asiatic speakers were likely the first settlers, followed by Tibeto-Burman speakers. The Kamarupa kingdom's capital,

Pragjyotishpura, was a hub of learning, spreading religious texts. Tai languages in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam share roots with those in Thailand and Lao PDR, belonging to the Tai-Kadai family. The Ahom rulers, Tai descendants from Yunnan, migrated via Myanmar in the 13th century. In view of the rich historical and civilisational linkages, this session will highlight the role of tradition and languages in promoting relations among the people of the North-eastern region and the Southeast Asian countries.

Linkages between Culture, Heritage and Economy

The link between culture, heritage, and the economy is deep and complex. Cultural and heritage assets have a significant impact on economic development, with tourism being a prime example. Historical sites, monuments, and cultural festivals attract visitors, generating revenue and supporting local businesses. This boost in tourism often creates job opportunities in fields such as conservation, guiding, and craft production. Furthermore, cultural heritage propels various industries, including fashion and media, where traditional techniques and motifs inspire contemporary designs and content. Local economies benefit from heritage-related activities as traditional markets and local artisans gain exposure and income from cultural events. Investing in cultural heritage can also promote sustainable practices through the use of traditional methods. The interplay between culture, heritage, and the economy highlights how preserving and celebrating historical and cultural assets can foster economic growth and development. This session will delve into the crucial linkages between culture, heritage and economy, and explore the possibility of strengthening such inter-linkages.

Outcome of the Summit

The summit is envisaged not merely as a platform for dialogue, but also as a source of enduring knowledge and reference. To ensure that the insights, recommendations, and deliberations are meaningfully preserved and disseminated, a series of carefully curated outcome documents will be produced.

1. **Proceedings Volume:** A comprehensive record of the summit will be published in the form of proceedings. This will document the sessions, deliberations, and presentations in detail, providing a structured reference for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. It will ensure that the intellectual depth of the discussions is preserved and can inform future research and policymaking.

2. **Journal Publication:** A journal will be brought out to feature select scholarly papers and analytical essays presented at the summit. By placing these contributions within an academic framework, the journal will allow the debates and findings of the summit to reach a wider scholarly community and strengthen the body of research on North-East India's regional integration.
3. **Coffee Table Book:** A coffee table book will be prepared to showcase the highlights of the summit in a visually engaging style. Featuring photographs, infographics, and concise narratives, this book will serve as both a commemorative volume and a communication tool for policymakers, institutions and the public.
4. **Digital Archive:** A digital repository of the summit will be created to house presentations, recordings, key recommendations, and reports. This format will make the content widely accessible, interactive, and easily shareable, thereby extending the summit's impact well beyond its immediate audience.

Advisory Board



Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma
Hon'ble CM of Assam
Chief Patron



Pijush Hazarika
Minister of Water Resources of Assam



Dr. Vijay Chauthaiwale
Scientist, nationalist and a friend.
In-Charge, Foreign Affairs Dept,
BJP, India



Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi
Economist and policy researcher.
Vice Chancellor, Nalanda
University and DG, RIS New Delhi.



Prof. Nanigopal Mahanta
VC Gauhati University



Rajarshi Neog
IFNE Trustee Member



Swapnil Kashyap
IFNE, Organizing Secretary



Prof. Amarjiva Lochan
Dept. of History University of Delhi, Vice
President of International Association
for the History of Religions.