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**From Connectivity to Geopolitical Influence: India's Act East Policy,  
Smart Power, and the Indo-Pacific Rules-Based Order**

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**Abstract**

The shifting geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific has elevated India's North East Region (NER) to a critical nexus for the nation's strategic ambition. This paper analyzes the critical role of India's North East Region (NER) as a strategic conduit for the nation's "smart power" projection into Southeast Asia. Based on J. Samuel Barkin's (2003) framework of realist constructivism, the study contends that India's Act East Policy, which combines hard power instruments such as infrastructure development with soft power through cultural and economic diplomacy, serves as a multifaceted strategy for deepening its relations with ASEAN. This increased participation, which reinforces a shared normative vision of a "rules-based order" (RBO), provides an important counterweight to China's revisionist actions and "grey zone" aggressiveness in the South China Sea. The article investigates significant connectivity initiatives using a qualitative case study methodology, assesses the complicated India-ASEAN relationship, and evaluates the problems faced by the growing regional security architecture. The preliminary findings suggest that, while India's strategy is conceptually sound, its effectiveness is critical to overcoming significant internal and external vulnerabilities, particularly Myanmar's political instability and the growing strategic

divergence from ASEAN's "balancing" approach. The paper suggests that realism constructivism provides a valuable lens for understanding the interplay of material power and intersubjective norms, emphasizing the delicate balance necessary for India to effectively pursue its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords-** North East Region, Indo-Pacific, South China Sea, Act East Policy.

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## **1. Introduction: Framing the Geopolitical Question**

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal arena of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition, driven by the simultaneous rise of China, the strategic reorientation of the United States, and the growing importance of maritime trade routes and critical sea lines of communication. Consequently, the region has become the focal point of competing visions of regional order, security architecture, and economic connectivity. Within this evolving geopolitical environment, the concept of a Rules-Based Order (RBO) has become a central normative framework promoted by countries such as Australia, Japan, India and the United States to preserve stability, freedom of navigation and respect for international law (Strating, 2023). Although the concept of a Rules-Based Order lacks a universally accepted definition, it is generally understood as an international order grounded in international law, sovereign equality, peaceful dispute settlement, and freedom of navigation. Competing interpretations of these principles have increasingly become a defining feature of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Recent Indo-Pacific scholarship increasingly argues that the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographical construct but a strategic and normative space in which competing conceptions of regional order coexist and interact (Acharya, 2018; Strating, 2023). China has articulated an alternative understanding of the Rules-Based Order that emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and an international order incorporating "Chinese characteristics" (Ho, 2020). This evolving strategic environment raises important questions regarding how middle powers employ both material capabilities and normative instruments to shape regional order.

Existing scholarship on India's Indo-Pacific strategy overwhelmingly concentrates on naval diplomacy, the Quad, and maritime balancing, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the strategic role of India's North East Region as a land-based instrument of regional power projection. This omission is significant because contemporary Indo-Pacific competition is increasingly shaped not only by maritime power but also by cross-border connectivity, economic corridors, and continental linkages connecting South Asia with

Southeast Asia. The NER's transformation from a peripheral frontier to a core element of the Act East Policy (AEP) aims to deepen engagement with ASEAN.

Building upon this gap, this article argues that the transformation of India's North East Region (NER) under the Act East Policy constitutes a strategic smart power mechanism through which India simultaneously projects material capabilities and normative influence into Southeast Asia. Rather than viewing the NER merely as a geographical frontier, the article conceptualizes it as a strategic interface linking domestic development with India's broader Indo-Pacific objectives.

The article makes two principal theoretical contributions to realist constructivist scholarship. First, it demonstrates that persistent trade asymmetry with ASEAN constitutes a material-ideational nexus in which economic vulnerabilities undermine India's normative influence. Second, it argues that Myanmar's political instability reveals internal stability as a prerequisite for successful external power projection by weakening both infrastructure delivery and India's credibility as a regional partner:

1. The persistent trade deficit with ASEAN functions as a material-ideational nexus of strategic vulnerability, where hard economic data erodes the soft power assets of trust and perceived mutuality of partnership.
2. Myanmar's political instability reveals that internal stability is an ideational prerequisite for effective external power projection, as the hard-power failure to secure projects undermines India's soft-power image as a reliable and legitimate partner.

The subsequent sections will elaborate on this theoretical foundation, analyze the instruments of India's strategy, evaluate the dynamics of its relationship with ASEAN, and synthesize how this multi-faceted approach contributes to the broader objective of maintaining regional stability.

## **Research Question**

How does India's Act East Policy utilize the North East Region as an instrument of smart power to strengthen India's strategic influence in Southeast Asia and reinforce a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific? To answer this question, the article examines the interaction between material capabilities and ideational resources through two strategically significant connectivity projects under the Act East Policy.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design to examine how India's Act East Policy employs the North East Region (NER) as an instrument of smart power to advance its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to explain causal mechanisms rather than establish statistical relationships. Specifically, it investigates how infrastructure development, regional diplomacy, domestic political instability, and strategic narratives interact to shape India's regional influence. Such context-dependent processes require process-oriented analysis that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods.

The research design follows George and Bennett's (2005) process-tracing approach and Yin's (2018) framework for explanatory case studies. These approaches are particularly suitable for identifying the causal mechanisms linking material capabilities and ideational factors across multiple levels of analysis. Consistent with Barkin's realist constructivist framework, the study examines how physical infrastructure, diplomatic engagement, and normative legitimacy interact to influence India's strategic position in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific.

The qualitative design is especially appropriate given the political complexity of India's northeastern borderlands. The region's geopolitical significance is shaped not only by infrastructure development but also by ethnic conflicts, local political dynamics, insurgency, and cross-border instability in Myanmar. These factors influence both the implementation of connectivity projects and the credibility of India's regional strategy. A qualitative approach therefore provides the contextual depth necessary to analyse how domestic conditions affect external strategic outcomes.

The empirical analysis draws upon official government documents, parliamentary debates, policy papers, defence reports, publications from regional think tanks, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports of international organisations. These sources were triangulated to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings by corroborating evidence across multiple independent sources.

## **Case Selection and Focus**

Two interconnected case studies were selected to evaluate the interaction between material capabilities and ideational factors within India's Act East Policy.

**Case 1: Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP).** The KMMTTP was selected because it represents India's flagship connectivity initiative linking the North East Region with the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar. The project provides an appropriate case for examining how external political instability constrains infrastructure delivery and, in turn, affects India's credibility as a regional development partner.

**Case 2: India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway.**

The IMT Trilateral Highway was selected because it illustrates how domestic political legitimacy and local stakeholder engagement influence the implementation of strategic infrastructure. The case demonstrates how insufficient local political consent can generate security challenges that ultimately undermine broader geopolitical objectives.

Together, these cases capture two complementary dimensions of India's smart power strategy. While the Kaladan Project highlights the effects of external instability on strategic connectivity, the IMT Highway illustrates how local political dynamics shape the effectiveness of regional infrastructure diplomacy. The study relies primarily on secondary sources and official documents; consequently, its findings are explanatory rather than predictive. Future research incorporating interviews with policymakers and regional stakeholders could provide additional empirical validation.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: The Synergy of Realism and Constructivism**

### **2.1 Defining Realist Constructivism**

The theoretical foundation of this analysis rests on J. Samuel Barkin's (2003) framework of realist constructivism, which challenges the common assumption that realism and constructivism are mutually exclusive paradigms in international relations theory. Barkin argues that the core tenets of classical realism—the analytic centrality of states, their interest in survival, and the role of power—are fundamentally compatible with constructivism's emphasis on the social construction of interests and the influence of norms and ideas (Barkin, 2010). Rather than viewing the two as implacably opposed, this perspective posits a powerful synthesis where the material world (power) and the social world (norms) are mutually constitutive. Although realist constructivism has gained increasing attention in International Relations scholarship, relatively few empirical studies have operationalized the framework to examine how material capabilities and ideational factors interact simultaneously within India's Indo-Pacific strategy. This study addresses that gap by employing realist

constructivism not merely as a theoretical lens but as an explanatory framework linking infrastructure, diplomacy, legitimacy, and regional order.

A state's material capabilities, such as the size of its military or economy, do not operate in a vacuum; they are filtered through a social context. Material power grants a state the ability to shape international norms and discourses. For instance, as China's economic and military power has grown, it has been able to challenge the prevailing normative vision of the RBO and propose its own version with "Chinese characteristics" (Ho, 2020). Conversely, the dominant norms in the international system, such as state sovereignty or the prohibition on aggressive war, define and limit how a state's material power can be used. This dual causality is a central analytical tool for this study. Realism on its own cannot fully explain why states choose specific strategies, such as why China uses "grey zone" tactics instead of outright military conquest. Constructivism explains this by showing how shared norms against open conflict shape the use of power. Realist constructivism links the two, arguing that China's material rise allows it to challenge existing norms while India's strategy must use its own material and ideational resources to counter this revisionism.

## **2.2 Operationalizing Smart Power through a Realist-Constructivist Lens**

The concept of "smart power" provides a practical application of this theoretical synthesis. As defined by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and scholars like Joseph Nye and Chester A. Crocker, smart power is the combination of hard power and soft power strategies. It is not merely the sum of its parts but rather the strategic application of the right tool for a given situation, whether diplomatic, economic, military, or cultural (Nye, 2004, 2011). Hard power, such as military deterrence or economic sanctions, is a classic realist tool that relies on coercion and material capabilities. Soft power, conversely, is a constructivist tool that relies on attraction and persuasion, derived from a nation's culture, values, and diplomacy (Nye, 2023).

India's smart power strategy in the Indo-Pacific is inherently realist-constructivist. The use of hard power, in the form of massive infrastructure development and strategic partnerships like the Quad, is a clear realist action. However, this is combined with the constructivist element of soft power, where India leverages cultural ties, educational exchanges, and diplomatic dialogue to build a normative framework in which its actions are seen as legitimate and beneficial by its partners. This strategy aims to build "bridging social capital," which builds trust and cooperation among different actors to achieve a collective public good, such as a stable regional order (Putnam, 2000). The challenges India faces,

however, illustrate the inherent tension in this approach. For example, India's participation in a security grouping like the Quad, while a hard power move to counter China, can create a legitimacy problem for its soft power agenda in a region where many states prefer non-alignment and wish to avoid being drawn into a zero-sum competition between great powers (Raja Mohan, 2025). The effectiveness of a truly "smart" power strategy lies in its ability to manage these contradictions. The success of this approach is not measured by military victories but by diplomatic influence and the strengthening of shared norms, an outcome that can only be understood by examining the interplay of both material and ideational factors.

### **3. The Instrument of Power: India's Act East Policy and North East India's Strategic Role**

#### **3.1 From "Look" to "Act": A Strategic Reorientation**

India's engagement with Southeast Asia has evolved significantly since the launch of the Look East Policy in 1991. Initially conceived to strengthen economic integration with the rapidly growing economies of East and Southeast Asia, the policy primarily emphasized trade and commercial cooperation. The transition to the Act East Policy marked a broader strategic reorientation, expanding India's engagement beyond economics to encompass connectivity, defence cooperation, maritime security, and institutional diplomacy (Wadhwa, 2019). Consequently, the Act East Policy represents not merely a foreign policy initiative but an integrated geopolitical strategy linking domestic development with India's wider Indo-Pacific objectives.

#### **3.2 The Northeast as a Geopolitical Hub**

The Act East Policy is fundamentally tied to the reimagination of India's North East Region (NER). Historically, India's North East Region (NER) was viewed primarily as a security frontier characterised by insurgency, limited connectivity, and peripheral development. The Act East Policy fundamentally redefined the region as India's strategic gateway to Southeast Asia, transforming it into a land bridge linking South Asia with ASEAN. This reconceptualisation serves both domestic and external objectives: internally, it seeks to promote economic development and regional integration, while externally it positions the NER as a critical instrument for connectivity, strategic signalling, and India's long-term Indo-Pacific strategy (Wadhwa, 2019). This transformation serves a dual purpose. Domestically, it aims to accelerate economic development, create employment opportunities, and integrate the region's diverse population into the national mainstream. Externally, the



NER's enhanced connectivity is instrumentalized for foreign policy objectives, the strategic significance of the Northeast therefore extends beyond infrastructure development to encompass regional integration, strategic signalling, and India's long-term Indo-Pacific vision.

### **3.3 Smart Power in Action: Connectivity and Diplomacy**

#### **Physical Connectivity Projects**

From a realist-constructivist perspective, connectivity projects perform a dual strategic function. Materially, they enhance India's logistical capabilities, regional access, and economic integration. Ideationally, successful implementation signals India's credibility as a reliable development partner, thereby strengthening its normative influence across Southeast Asia.

Two flagship projects are central to this strategy: the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) and the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway. These projects therefore represent critical empirical cases through which India's smart power strategy can be evaluated. The KMMTTP is an ambitious US\$484 million project that aims to connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Mizoram state in the NER via a sea-river-road route through Myanmar. The project's components, including the Sittwe port and the river boat route to Paletwa, have been completed, with the final road section from Paletwa to Zorinpui still under construction. The IMT Trilateral Highway aims to enhance road connectivity from India's NER through Myanmar to Thailand, a critical step toward economic integration with ASEAN (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Rather than viewing the Kaladan Project solely as transport infrastructure, this study conceptualizes it as a strategic instrument through which India seeks simultaneously to enhance regional connectivity, reduce geopolitical vulnerability associated with the Siliguri Corridor, and reinforce its normative commitment to ASEAN integration. Other complementary projects, such as the commissioning of the Bairabi–Sairang rail line in Mizoram and the revival of Ro-Ro ferry services on the Brahmaputra, are also part of this effort to create multi-modal transport infrastructure that is resilient to the region's difficult terrain and reduces over-dependence on the Siliguri Corridor (Boruah, 2025). The strategic significance of these projects is immense, as they position the NER as a vital hub for trade and commerce, thereby enhancing India's maritime and economic reach in the eastern neighborhood.

A critical analysis of the current status of these projects, however, reveals significant challenges that compromise the effectiveness of this hard power projection.

| <b>Project Name</b>                                           | <b>Key States/Countries Involved</b>                 | <b>Objective</b>                                                                                                  | <b>Current Status</b>                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Strategic Significance</b>                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP)</b> | India (Kolkata, Mizoram) & Myanmar (Sittwe, Paletwa) | To provide an alternative sea-river-road route to the landlocked NER, bypassing the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor. | Sittwe port and river route completed; the road section from Paletwa to Zorinpui is still under construction. The project has been paused due to political instability in Myanmar. | A key alternative trade and transit route that positions the NER as a gateway to the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. |
| <b>India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway</b>        | India (Moreh), Myanmar, & Thailand (Mae Sot)         | To enhance road connectivity, trade, and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia.                          | The project has faced significant delays and has been paused due to political and security risks in Myanmar.                                                                       | A backbone for India's Act East Policy, enabling a direct overland link for trade and movement of people.              |
| <b>Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link</b>                             | India (Agartala, Tripura) & Bangladesh (Akhaura)     | To strengthen cross-border rail connectivity and reduce travel time between Northeast India and Bangladesh.       | Under construction.                                                                                                                                                                | Provides a crucial connectivity corridor with a key neighbor, boosting regional trade and economic integration.        |
| <b>Bairabi-Sairang Rail Line</b>                              | India (Mizoram)                                      | To connect Mizoram with the national rail network, making it a potential transshipment hub.                       | The project received safety clearance in June 2025.                                                                                                                                | A key piece of domestic infrastructure that supports the long-term goal of linking the NER with Southeast Asia.        |

The table highlights that while the intent and design of these projects are robust, their on-the-ground reality is often fraught with significant delays and security challenges. For example, the KMMTTP has been impeded by the ongoing political instability and conflict in Myanmar, with violence escalating between the military junta and ethnic armed organizations

that control critical areas along the project's route (Yumlembam, 2024). The physical reality of conflict and instability directly undermines the hard power element of India's strategy.

### **Case Study 1: The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP)**

The KMMTTP is strategically vital, designed to provide an alternate, shorter route for the landlocked states of the NER (particularly Mizoram) to access the Bay of Bengal, reducing dependence on the narrow and vulnerable Siliguri Corridor.

#### **The Material Failure and Instability Variable**

From a realist perspective, these implementation delays weaken India's capacity to compete strategically with China. From a constructivist perspective, repeated delays undermine India's image as a dependable regional partner.

The project exemplifies the failure to translate strategic vision into physical reality. While components such as the Sittwe Port and Paletwa Jetty are complete, the critical Zorinpui-Paletwa road section remains under construction. Originally scheduled for completion in 2014, the operational deadline has been severely revised, with the entire project now anticipated to be functional only by 2027. This extreme delay is directly attributable to the escalating civil conflict in Myanmar's western region, specifically in the Rakhine and Chin states, exacerbated by technical hurdles such as power and network shortages. India's inability to secure or accelerate construction within this politically volatile area highlights a fundamental vulnerability in its hard power deployment.

#### **The Realist Rivalry Challenge: China's CMEC**

The material failure of the KMMTTP creates a strategic opening for India's primary regional rival. China views Rakhine State as a strategic priority, hosting critical investments central to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), including the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone, a deep-sea port, and oil/gas pipelines connecting Kyauk Phyu to Yunnan. These infrastructure projects are designed to secure direct access to the Bay of Bengal, thereby reducing China's strategic dependence on the Malacca Strait. China has demonstrated a proactive "dual-track approach," engaging both the military Junta and select Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The continued failure to advance the KMMTTP risks its strategic obsolescence as China aggressively advances parallel infrastructure. This competition poses a high geopolitical risk: should Beijing gain effective control over the Kyauk Phyu port, it could alter the regional strategic balance, threatening India's eastern

seaboard and its maritime access to Southeast Asia. The comparison therefore demonstrates that infrastructure competition in Myanmar is simultaneously a contest over material access and regional legitimacy.

### **Case Study 2: The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH)**

The IMT-TH is another cornerstone of land connectivity, envisioned as a land bridge from India (Moreh) through Myanmar to Thailand (Mae Sot), promising enhanced trade and regional cooperation.

### **Security and Ideational Impediments**

Unlike the Kaladan Project, where external instability primarily obstructs implementation, the IMT Highway demonstrates how inadequate engagement with local stakeholders can generate internal resistance that ultimately constrains strategic objectives. Key sections, including those India is financing (e.g., the 149.70 km Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road), run directly through active conflict zones in the Sagaing Region and Chin State. The operational deadline has also been revised, with recent discussions pointing toward a 2027 target.

Furthermore, the IMT-TH project reveals a failure to integrate hard power construction with local political consent, demonstrating a critical limitation of the top-down development model. This approach often marginalizes local populations, leading to ideational conflicts. For instance, the highway has inadvertently strengthened informal and illicit economies (such as black-market trade and illicit services) in border regions like Mae Sot, Thailand, leading to cultural degradation and social disruption. These disruptions, stemming from local ethnic insurgencies driven by identity and autonomy claims (Constructivist dynamics), directly obstruct the realization of India's hard power objectives (Realist constraints). The prolonged delays erode India's reputation for reliable project delivery, thereby damaging its soft power capital across the region. The IMT Highway therefore illustrates that successful infrastructure diplomacy depends upon political legitimacy as much as engineering capability.

Table 2: Realist-Constructivist Analysis of Act East Policy Vulnerabilities (KMMTTP & IMT-TH)

| <b>Project<br/>(Hard<br/>Power<br/>Asset)</b>                             | <b>Strategic<br/>Rationale</b>                                                                                   | <b>Primary<br/>Material<br/>Constraint</b>                                                                                                              | <b>Ideational<br/>Impact/Risk<br/>(Soft Power)</b>                                                                                       | <b>RC<br/>Nexus/Causal<br/>Mechanism</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kaladan<br>Multi-<br>Modal<br>Transit<br>Transport<br>Project<br>(KMMTTP) | Alternate<br>route to<br>Bay of<br>Bengal for<br>NER,<br>bypassing<br>the<br>vulnerable<br>Siliguri<br>Corridor. | Severe Delays;<br>Functional<br>target 2027.<br>Driven by<br>Myanmar Civil<br>Conflict<br>(Rakhine/Chin<br>states)                                      | Undermines<br>India's image as a<br>reliable<br>infrastructure<br>partner. Erosion<br>of trust in India's<br>regional<br>presence.       | Internal Stability<br>as Ideational Pre-<br>requisite:<br>External material<br>instability<br>prevents hard<br>power delivery,<br>damaging<br>reputational soft<br>power and<br>enabling rival<br><i>material</i><br>projection<br>(China's CMEC) |
| India-<br>Myanmar-<br>Thailand<br>(IMT)<br>Trilateral<br>Highway          | Land<br>bridge for<br>trade and<br>cultural ties<br>between<br>India and<br>Southeast<br>Asia.                   | Severe Delays;<br>2027 deadline<br>cited. Active<br>conflict zones<br>(Sagaing, Chin).<br>Security risks<br>and rise of illicit<br>border<br>economies. | Erodes trust<br>among local<br>borderland<br>populations.<br>Perception of<br>top-down<br>development<br>failure and<br>marginalization. | Failure to<br>Integrate Soft<br>Power:<br>Neglecting local<br>political consent<br>(ideational<br>failure) leads to<br>resistance and<br>security threats<br>(material<br>constraints),<br>thereby<br>obstructing the<br>hard power<br>objective. |

### Soft Power Projections

Within India's smart power framework, soft power should not be understood as an alternative to material capability but as the mechanism through which material investments acquire political legitimacy and long-term strategic value. Alongside hard power, India's strategy invests heavily in soft power, a constructivist approach that focuses on building legitimacy and goodwill. This is achieved through enhanced cultural and people-to-people links with neighboring countries. The Act East Policy has a strong commitment to strengthening social and cultural ties, recognizing the long-standing historical connections

between India's NER and Southeast Asia. Initiatives such as cultural festivals, academic exchanges, and enhanced tourism serve a dual purpose: they showcase the rich cultural heritage of Northeast India and advance cultural diplomacy, which generates attraction and cooperation beyond material incentives.

The success of India's smart power strategy is contingent on its ability to overcome the challenges that compromise its core instruments. The political instability in Myanmar is not just an infrastructural problem, as seen in the delays to the KMMTTP and IMT Highway. It is a fundamental security and legitimacy challenge. The heightened influx of refugees into India's NER and the use of Myanmar as a staging ground for insurgent attacks directly undermine the domestic stability and development goals of the Act East Policy, which is a core element of its soft power projection (Yumlembam, 2024). This demonstrates how the material reality of a conflict can severely impede both the hard power (infrastructure) and soft power (domestic stability and legitimacy) components of a strategic policy, creating a significant vulnerability in the causal chain that links NER connectivity to regional influence.

#### **4. The Arena of Influence: India-ASEAN Relations Amidst Great Power Competition**

##### **Economic Engagement: Promise and Disparity**

The economic dimension of the India-ASEAN relationship is a critical component of India's smart power strategy. India's trade with ASEAN has surged, reaching over US\$122 billion in 2023-24, making ASEAN India's fourth-largest trading partner. This growth, however, is not without its complexities. A persistent and widening trade deficit plagues the relationship, with India's imports from ASEAN increasing at a much faster rate than its exports to the bloc. Between FY 2009 and FY 2023, India's imports from ASEAN surged by 234.4%, while its exports increased by only 130.4%, leading to a deficit that widened from US\$7.5 billion in 2011 to approximately US\$44 billion in 2023 (Singh, 2025).

This economic friction is not merely a trade issue; it is a strategic liability. The widening deficit reflects a fundamental imbalance: ASEAN countries have capitalized on India's large consumer base in sectors like electronics and machinery, while Indian exports, such as pharmaceuticals and automobiles, face numerous non-tariff barriers, including stringent standards and regulatory hurdles in ASEAN markets. This economic imbalance has created discontent within India and compromised the perceived mutuality of the partnership. It also informed India's decision to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019, citing similar concerns over trade imbalances with China

(Singh, 2025). This is a clear example of a hard power/material issue (the trade data) creating a soft power/normative problem (erosion of trust and partnership). An unaddressed trade deficit functions as a material-ideational nexus of strategic vulnerability where economy erodes the soft power assets of trust and perceived mutuality of partnership that India seeks to generate through other initiatives.

### **Strategic Divergence: The Balancing Act vs. Alignment**

The most critical challenge to India's smart power strategy lies in the growing strategic divergence between India and ASEAN. The intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and China has created new tensions, and the two sides have adopted different approaches. ASEAN's preference is to avoid being drawn into a zero-sum competition, maintaining its agency and autonomy by navigating its complex economic and security ties with both great powers.

In contrast, India's foreign policy has been complicated by its deepening conflict with China, particularly along their northern border, which has pushed it closer to the United States. This is evidenced by India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia. While India and the Quad affirm the centrality of ASEAN for regional security, India's increasing alignment with a US-led security grouping is viewed with concern by some ASEAN members, who perceive it as a move to align with American interests rather than a strategy that respects ASEAN's desire for autonomy (Raja Mohan, 2025). This creates a fundamental divergence in regional security perspectives. This strategic divergence is a classic realist-constructivist problem. India's hard power military/strategic alignment with the Quad is a realist action that is creating a normative legitimacy problem with its key diplomatic partners in ASEAN. This "trust deficit" compromises India's ability to exert soft power and leadership in the region (Palit, 2025). For India to succeed, it must manage this divergence and display greater sensitivity to ASEAN's challenges and its desire to maintain its autonomy. The effectiveness of India's smart power strategy in this theater hinges on its ability to build a genuine partnership with ASEAN, one that addresses both material concerns like trade deficits and ideational issues like strategic autonomy, and not simply align with an external power.

## **5. Maintaining a Rules-Based Order in the Indo-Pacific**

### **The Normative Contest: India's RBO, ASEAN Centrality, and China's Revisionism**

India's strategic ambition is not purely material; it is deeply entrenched in an ideational contest over the future character of the Indo-Pacific order. Utilizing the

constructivist component of its smart power, India seeks to embed its strategic objectives within a shared regional normative vision—the Rules-Based Order (RBO)—specifically structured to promote the autonomy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and provide an ideational counterweight to perceived Chinese revisionism.

### **India's Normative Articulation of the RBO**

India's vision for the Indo-Pacific, formally articulated by Prime Minister Modi in 2018, positions the region as "free, open, and inclusive," with governance rooted in respect for sovereignty, international law (particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, UNCLOS), and freedom of navigation (Singh, 2025; United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982). This articulation deliberately differs from the posture adopted by other major powers. While the United States and Japan often frame their Indo-Pacific strategies through the lens of containment aimed at China, India emphasizes multipolarity, inclusivity, and regional resilience.

This emphasis reflects India's policy of "strategic autonomy," defined as the ability to make relatively independent decisions on matters of vital interest, which allows it to maintain flexibility in its policy-making. India engages in a form of hedging or "evasive balancing," aligning with democratic coalitions like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) for security imperatives while simultaneously refusing to be seen as exclusionary or overtly aligned against any single power. India's commitment to promoting a liberal order, while aligning with the Quad, is carefully moderated by its desire to maintain a distinctive and strategically autonomous vision of security provision in the region (Palit, 2025).

### **Convergence with ASEAN Centrality**

The cornerstone of India's normative strategy is its unwavering and explicit support for ASEAN Centrality. New Delhi consistently maintains that ASEAN must be in the "driver's seat," responsible for defining and implementing the regional vision. This commitment is demonstrated by the harmonization effort between India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Larus & Rice James, 2024). Both frameworks share essential principles—openness, transparency, and upholding international law indicating a close congruence in normative goals.

The strategic significance of this convergence cannot be overstated. India's RBO narrative is precisely structured to promote ASEAN autonomy and unity. By reinforcing ASEAN's internal mechanisms and legitimacy, India strengthens the region's ability to act as



a unified buffer against external coercive pressures. This approach transforms a realist objective (maintaining regional equilibrium and security) into a constructivist imperative (bolstering shared normative identity). Investing in ASEAN's institutional and ideational strength is thus a calculated move to secure India's own regional architecture, ensuring that the multilateral platforms necessary for leveraging its normative influence remain active and authoritative. Managing the Strategic Autonomy Dilemma Despite the rhetorical alignment on RBO principles, a critical challenge remains in managing the perception of India's "evasive balancing" strategy. India's deepening engagement with the Quad, while vital for its hard security imperatives vis-à-vis China, is often viewed by certain ASEAN members through a realist lens of military alignment, compromising the ideational goal of mutual strategic autonomy. To counter this, India consistently frames its participation in the Quad not as a containment strategy but as a mechanism for generating collective goods (e.g., humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, vaccine supply, and upholding UNCLOS), which directly reinforces the RBO principles that ASEAN itself champions. This strategic communication attempts to recast the hard power tool (Quad) into a constructivist mechanism that provides a shared, non-exclusionary public benefit, thereby seeking to reconcile the perceived tension between its strategic alignment and ASEAN's desire for neutrality.

### **China's Coercive Revisionism and the Ideational Counterweight**

India's strategic posture is fundamentally shaped by its perception of China as a revisionist power whose actions threaten the status quo in both the land and maritime domains. In the maritime sphere, China employs "coercive gradualism" and "grey zone" aggressiveness in the South China Sea (SCS), using incremental steps—such as harassment, standoffs, and administrative control declarations—to assert its territorial claims without triggering traditional military conflict. These actions directly contravene international law and violate the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of claimant states like the Philippines and Vietnam.

India's response is to mount a sophisticated ideational and material counterweight. Ideationally, India reinforces the RBO by explicitly supporting international law and sovereignty principles, often aligning with ASEAN claimant states in the SCS disputes. Simultaneously, China mounts an ideational challenge to the RBO itself. It portrays the concept as a Western-centric, hypocritical framework designed to preserve American primacy while artificially constraining China's rise. Beijing points to instances of US actions, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq or its non-ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS), to argue that hegemons are privileged with hypocrisy. This narrative seeks to delegitimize the existing order and create a space for a revised one that better suits its interests. The rejection of the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling on its claims in the South China Sea is a key example of this ideational resistance (Strating, 2023; The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China), 2016) .

| <b>Tactic/Event</b>                                            | <b>Timeframe</b> | <b>Location</b>                                                  | <b>Description of the Aggression</b>                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ramming and water cannon attack on humanitarian mission</b> | Late August      | Near Sabina Shoal (within Philippines' exclusive economic zone). | A China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel rammed and fired a water cannon at a Philippine ship delivering supplies, damaging the vessel and preventing its mission.          |
| <b>Chasing of civilian boats by missile vessels</b>            | September 27     | Near the First Thomas Shoal in the West Philippine Sea.          | Two Chinese missile vessels chased Philippine civilian boats, marking the first recorded instance of such ships targeting civilian vessels during maritime patrols. |
| <b>Blocking and intimidation of naval ships</b>                | June             | Ayungin Reef (Second Thomas Shoal)                               | CCG personnel used axes, long knives, tear gas, and batons to attack Philippine sailors and damage/disable Philippine naval vessels during a resupply mission.      |
| <b>Deployment of anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles</b>     | Earlier 2018     | Three man-made outposts in the South China Sea                   | China installed advanced missile systems on its artificial island bases, significantly increasing its military capability and power projection in the area.         |
| <b>Dangerous close approach to a US Navy ship</b>              | Recent years     | Near a Chinese-occupied reef in the South China Sea              | A Chinese destroyer came dangerously close to an American Navy ship during a "Freedom of Navigation" patrol, escalating tensions and risking conflict.              |

Materially, India utilizes defense cooperation and multilateral frameworks like the Quad to counterbalance China's expanding regional influence and strategic encirclement. The ongoing competition between India and China is evident in the connectivity domain, where China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is used to capture both the material (infrastructure) and ideational (development narrative) dimensions of hegemony. India's AEP connectivity projects must therefore succeed not only in providing physical access but also in countering the prevailing narrative that China is the sole reliable provider of regional development. A

successful, timely AEP validates India's normative standing, whereas delays in hard power delivery undermine its persuasive force in this ideological contest.

The best antidote to China's grey zone challenges is multilateral norm building. India's commitment to UNCLOS and the RBO provides the necessary ideational platform. However, the efficacy of this strategy is challenged by the deep fault lines within ASEAN itself.

### **Connecting the Dots: India's Role in Reinforcing the RBO**

The final step of this analysis is to connect India's smart power projection with its stated goal of reinforcing the RBO. The enhanced influence in ASEAN, built on the physical and normative links established via the NER nexus, strengthens India's diplomatic standing and credibility in advocating for a stable and predictable regional order (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). This is not a strategy of direct military confrontation in the South China Sea, which would be a high-risk, high-cost endeavor. Instead, it is a more subtle, long-term strategy of building a coalition of states that are willing to collectively advocate for the principles of the RBO.

The causal chain is as follows: improved connectivity from the NER to ASEAN (hard power) facilitates greater economic integration and cultural exchange (soft power). This increased interdependence and trust enable India to act as a more credible partner and a co-advocate for norms like freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes, thereby countering China's narrative and actions (Raja Mohan, 2025). The success of this approach is not measured in naval victories but in diplomatic influence and the strengthening of shared norms. This is a classic example of "bridging social capital," where cooperation is built among diverse actors to achieve a collective public good.

## **6. Proposed Findings and Implications**

### **6.1 The Causal Chain Re-affirmed and Qualified**

While India's AEP is conceptually well-structured under the Smart Power/Realist-Constructivist framework, material failures in project implementation—driven by intractable external and internal political instability—severely constrain its ability to translate favorable normative ideas into measurable strategic gains. This complex interplay of power and norms is best understood through the theoretical framework of realist-constructivism.

The study reaffirms the central argument that the North East Region is a critical vector for India's smart power projection. The development of physical infrastructure and the

cultivation of cultural ties in the NER are indeed foundational to India's strategy to deepen its engagement with ASEAN. However, the analysis also finds that the causal chain is neither linear nor guaranteed. The effectiveness of this strategy is highly contingent on overcoming significant vulnerabilities. The political instability in Myanmar, the widening trade deficit with ASEAN, constitutes a material-ideational nexus of strategic vulnerability, demonstrating how hard power (economic imbalance) directly compromise soft power opportunities (legitimacy and trust). Second, the ongoing political instability in Myanmar, which creates security challenges and refugee crises in the NER, reveals that internal stability is an ideational pre-requisite for effective external power projection. The fundamental divergence in strategic outlooks between India and its Southeast Asian partners all represent significant friction points that compromise the full realization of India's strategic goals.

## **6.2 The Power of Realist Constructivism**

The findings demonstrate that India's smart power strategy remains highly contingent upon the interaction of material capabilities and ideational legitimacy. Infrastructure delays, trade asymmetries, and regional political instability collectively constrain India's ability to translate strategic intent into sustained regional influence.

## **6.3 Policy Recommendations**

Based on the analysis, several policy directions are proposed for India to overcome the identified challenges and enhance the effectiveness of its smart power strategy:

- **A More Sensitive Diplomatic Approach:** India must acknowledge and display greater sensitivity to ASEAN's "balancing" concerns. Intensive consultations are needed to manage the strategic divergence and build a partnership that respects ASEAN's desire for autonomy rather than forcing it into an alignment with American interests (Raja Mohan, 2025).
- **Resolve Economic Frictions:** To strengthen the foundation of the relationship, India should prioritize the resolution of the persistent trade deficit. This requires a renewed focus on addressing non-tariff barriers, seeking reciprocal market access, and highlighting complementarities in emerging sectors like digital trade and clean energy.
- **Re-evaluating Myanmar Engagement through the RC Lens:** The political and security crisis in Myanmar poses the single greatest threat to the physical and reputational success of the Act East Policy confirming that internal stability is an

ideational pre-requisite for effective external power projection. India's approach must evolve from prioritizing regime engagement to safeguarding project delivery and regional reputation. **This requires a two-track strategy: (1) Conditionality:** making any future infrastructure aid or political engagement conditional on the Junta's commitment to securing work sites and maintaining a timeline. **(2) Stakeholder Diversification:** Proactively engaging non-state actors, civil society, and regional ethnic organizations near the NER borderlands (particularly in Rakhine and Chin States) to cultivate local consent and secure projects from the ground up. This shift from a purely realist, state-centric approach to one that integrates constructivist elements of local legitimacy is essential to mitigating the core vulnerability identified by the case studies. A failure to do so risks compromising India's standing in the wider international community and exacerbating security challenges within its own Northeast Region.

## 7. Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

This study has argued that India's Act East Policy represents more than a regional connectivity initiative; it constitutes a strategic smart power framework through which domestic development is translated into regional geopolitical influence. By conceptualising the North East Region (NER) as a strategic interface rather than a peripheral frontier, the article demonstrates how infrastructure development, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement collectively enhance India's capacity to shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of India's regional strategy depends not only on expanding material capabilities but also on sustaining the normative legitimacy and political credibility necessary to influence regional perceptions and partnerships.

Drawing upon a realist constructivist framework, the study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that domestic infrastructure can function simultaneously as a material capability and an ideational resource. While realism explains the strategic importance of connectivity, logistics, and economic access, constructivism highlights how successful implementation influences trust, legitimacy, and regional acceptance. The empirical analysis therefore illustrates that India's smart power strategy cannot be understood solely through military balancing or economic statecraft; rather, it emerges through the continuous interaction between material capabilities and ideational factors that together shape India's regional influence. In this respect, the article contributes to realist constructivist

scholarship by identifying domestic connectivity as an important mechanism through which states project external strategic influence.

The analysis further demonstrates that the success of the Act East Policy remains contingent upon several structural constraints. Persistent trade asymmetries with ASEAN reduce India's economic leverage and weaken perceptions of reciprocal partnership, while political instability in Myanmar has delayed critical connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of India's smart power strategy depends not only on strategic vision but also on implementation capacity, regional political stability, and sustained policy coordination. Consequently, the article argues that domestic governance, project execution, and regional credibility are integral components of India's external strategic posture rather than separate policy domains.

Beyond the Indian case, the study offers broader implications for understanding contemporary geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. As regional order is increasingly shaped through infrastructure, connectivity, institutional engagement, and normative leadership rather than military power alone, middle powers must demonstrate both strategic capability and political credibility to sustain long-term regional influence. India's experience suggests that successful statecraft in the Indo-Pacific requires the ability to convert domestic development into external strategic leverage while simultaneously reinforcing international law, ASEAN Centrality, and a Rules-Based Order grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Finally, this study opens several avenues for future research. Comparative analyses of connectivity initiatives undertaken by other Indo-Pacific middle powers, as well as longitudinal assessments of India's infrastructure diplomacy following the completion of key regional projects, would further enhance understanding of how material capabilities and normative legitimacy interact in shaping regional order. Ultimately, the study suggests that the durability of India's Indo-Pacific strategy will depend not merely on the scale of its investments, but on its ability to implement them effectively, sustain regional confidence, and translate domestic transformation into enduring geopolitical influence.

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