

# Ideas to Reshape Northeast India's Economic Engagements with Southeast Asia

Prabir De

## Introduction

Northeast India is known for its rich reserves of critical minerals, clean water, pristine weather and agro-horticulture resources. Acting as a 'bridge' between South and Southeast Asia, Northeast is unique in terms of its international linkages. Aiming to bring it to the core of India's growing engagements with Southeast and East Asia, this article argues that Northeast can become a champion, provided the Northeastern states undertake drastic domestic reforms, invests in physical and social infrastructure, and restores peace within the ethnic groups, while pursuing India's Act East priorities.

Northeast India is unique in terms of its borders – in one hand it shares

international border with Myanmar in the east, while, on the other, the region has borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Northeast India's strategic location is central to various connectivity projects, particularly Trilateral Highway connecting India with the Southeast Asia. On top, a versatile cultural landscape of the Northeastern states makes the region a tourism powerhouse. This positioning makes Northeast crucial for regional connectivity with Southeast Asia and beyond.

Today, Northeastern states have everything that are needed to become a prosperous region, long term economic isolation coupled with perennial insurgency and ethnic

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conflicts, are something that had dented Northeast's prosperity in the past.<sup>1</sup> What goes without saying is that despite having vast economic potentials, Northeastern states remain invisible in India's economic stride and engagements with the growing Southeast and East Asia. The larger Asian geographic space is not yet explored by Northeastern states in the past in spite of the region's deep civilizational linkages with Southeast Asia.

In a time of deepening global uncertainty – from climate crisis to digital disruption to war – development is being redefined. Shifting power relations and emerging forms of global institutions are reshaping the world. What does it mean to reimagine development for Northeast India in light of contested futures and systemic challenges? In a changing global economic landscape, reshaping Northeast India's international engagement holds high promise. Can the region regain its past glory? Can it become a core to India's Act East? This article presents a set of policy recommendations for bringing the Northeastern states to the core in India's growing engagements with Southeast and East Asia.

## **One, proactive approach on building resilience and agility**

Landlocked frontier Northeast Indian states are hit hardest due to supply chain disruptions. What can Northeastern states do in such a situation? Well,

these issues have been taken care by the Union Government, Northeastern states still have a shared role in easing the burden of supply chain disruptions while building resilience and agility. For example, to ease the burden of supply chain disruptions, Northeastern states through stakeholders may like to implement strategies like diversifying suppliers and sourcing, building contingency plans, leveraging technology for visibility and analytics, using alternate trade routes, etc. These measures may enhance supply chain resilience and agility, allowing businesses to better respond to and recover from unforeseen events. Today, the demand is high for shorter and resilient supply chains. Northeastern states can meet the gap in the neighborhood, particularly in the Southeast Asian market, with its supply of rich agro-horticulture resources, handicrafts, garments, tourism, and health services. The renewed vision would be to establish reliable and resilient supply chains that ensure transparency, connectivity, sustainability, and competitiveness, with collaboration between Southeast Asia and India. Southeast Asia then becomes a hub of supply chain linkages with Japan, Korea and China. Northeastern states, if they are well-networked with Southeast Asia, are going to gain from this changing scenario.

## **Two, unlocking opportunities arising from the rising US tariff**

The USA's reciprocal tariffs indeed impacted several ASEAN member states (AMS). In particular, Cambodia,

<sup>1</sup> Refer, for example, Gaitung Newme and Suma Scaria (2025) "Issues and Challenges in the Development of Manipur Economy: An Overview", *Indian Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 18, No 3; Sharma H. I (2012) "Understanding underdevelopment in Manipur: A critical survey", *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 47(14), pp. 71–77.

Lao PDR, Myanmar, etc. are imposed with higher tariffs, compared to other AMS. India is no different. Exports of some of the AMS (e.g. Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam) are US dependent, and they have gained from the so-called China+1 strategy. In such an unfolding scenario, strengthening ASEAN's trade and supply chains with other Asian partners away from the US market in a gradual manner is also heavily debated as an acceptable counter measure. The ongoing Iran-Israel war, if it stays longer than expected, is also likely to promote business collaboration among Southeast and East Asian manufacturers with India. Given Northeast Indian states' proximity with the ASEAN market, this opportunity must be utilized by India. Global uncertainties have given birth to shorter supply chains. American high tariffs are opportunities for Northeastern states. For example, demand for NER products (e.g. processed foods, aromatic plants, garments, pharmaceuticals) and services

(e.g. tourism, education, health) in Southeast and East Asia is likely to go up, if properly marketed. In the backdrop of rising protection and anti-trade measures, ASEAN-India economic relations are surely having high salience much more than before. Therefore, Northeastern states must chalk out an appropriate strategy to strengthen regional trade and integration.

### Three, strengthening the trade and investment linkages

Northeast's export to the world does not stand anywhere in India in terms of volume (Table 1). Northeastern region has to reverse the 'negative' trend in export growth. It is also a well-known fact that informal export of Manipur and Mizoram to Southeast Asia could be higher than the formal export.

Northeastern states along with the Union government agencies such as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry,

**Table 1: Exports of NER States**

States	2013	2023	CAGR
	(US\$ million)		(%)
Arunachal Pradesh	0.08	0.29	14.42
Assam	40.17	44.23	0.97
Manipur	0.04	0.03	-3.33
Meghalaya	9.80	1.02	-20.24
Mizoram	0.01	0.01	-3.23
Nagaland	0.32	0.14	-7.91
Sikkim	0.24	1.72	21.85
Tripura	0.13	0.16	1.84
NER	50.78	47.60	-0.65
India's Total Exports	31441.57	43711.30	3.35
NER's share in India's total exports (%)	0.16	0.11	

Source: DGCIS

<sup>2</sup> Refer, <https://lpai.gov.in/en/icp-moreh>

DPIIT, NITI Aayog, Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Reserve Bank of India (RBI), etc. should come forward with a Northeast region export strategy blueprint.

India has signed and implemented FTAs/CECAs/CEPAs with several Southeast Asian countries at a bilateral level and with ASEAN as a regional level (AITIGA for example). With latest GST reforms, export from Northeast India becomes more competitive in Southeast Asia. NER-centric production networks may get a fillip in this changing scenario. For example, products and services of NER will have price advantage in relative terms due to the GST rationalization over and above the transportation time and price arbitrage. Today, investment across borders is also feasible, provided NER-centric production networks are facilitated within and across borders.

The Moreh-Tamu border is not yet fully operational. The LPAI reports that no trade has been conducted at the Moreh-Tamu border since 2021-22.<sup>2</sup> The full resumption of trade at the Moreh-Tamu border will be a significant step for not only India's but also NER's engagements with Southeast Asia.

Neighbouring Myanmar just had a general election. Restoring proper democracy in Myanmar is also vital for the success of NER's engagements with Southeast Asia.

The way forward is to complete the review process of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), making it more trade-friendly. While renegotiating the AITIGA, India's interests should be to strengthen the ASEAN-India GVC linkages, and gain comparative advantage in goods and services. This shift in trade and investment linkages is going to benefit the Northeastern states.

Services trade and investment between India and ASEAN also require overhauling side by side. Northeastern states enjoy trade competitiveness in tourism, health and education services. It would be wise to activate the ASEAN-India Services Trade and Investment Agreement. Low-hanging trade and transport facilitation opportunities are plenty, and Northeastern states shall aim to complete the key supply chain instruments such as the direct flights with Southeast and East Asia, partnership for digital cooperation and Fintech, among others.

Five short term actions are suggested: (i) design a strategic plan for Northeast India's exports and economic integration, (ii) activate the industry associations and their members, (iii) conduct global business summits in Northeastern region, and Southeast and East Asia, (iv) resume the border trade through Moreh and Tamu, and (v) complete the Trilateral Highway.

## Four, setting up Border Economic Zone in Northeast India

To attract investments, particularly FDI in NER, developing the Border Economic Zone (BEZ) is a promising option. For example, setting up an ASEAN Investment Zone in Northeast India and Indian Investment Zone in Northeast will facilitate production networks and investments, further strengthening the supply chains between India and Southeast Asia. Investment in semiconductor, digital infrastructure, high-speed logistics, etc. in Northeast India by ASEAN member states such as Singapore will pave the way for higher trade and value chain.

The BEZ, cross-border or otherwise, is identified as a catalyst for economic growth in the border areas<sup>3</sup>. Complementary and differentiated economic resources between the countries sharing geographical borders help facilitate development of border industries, border trade and border tourism<sup>4</sup>. It is primarily an economic enclave, supported with special incentives and policies to facilitate economic activities and growth of the border areas and the hinterland. It offers a set of differential policies to enhance investment, flows of goods and services, and technology. The Cross-Border Economic Zone (CBEZ) is an extension of BEZ. An efficient CBEZ allows free flow of raw materials, goods, services and investments, boosting the supply and value chain and making it more competitive and attractive to

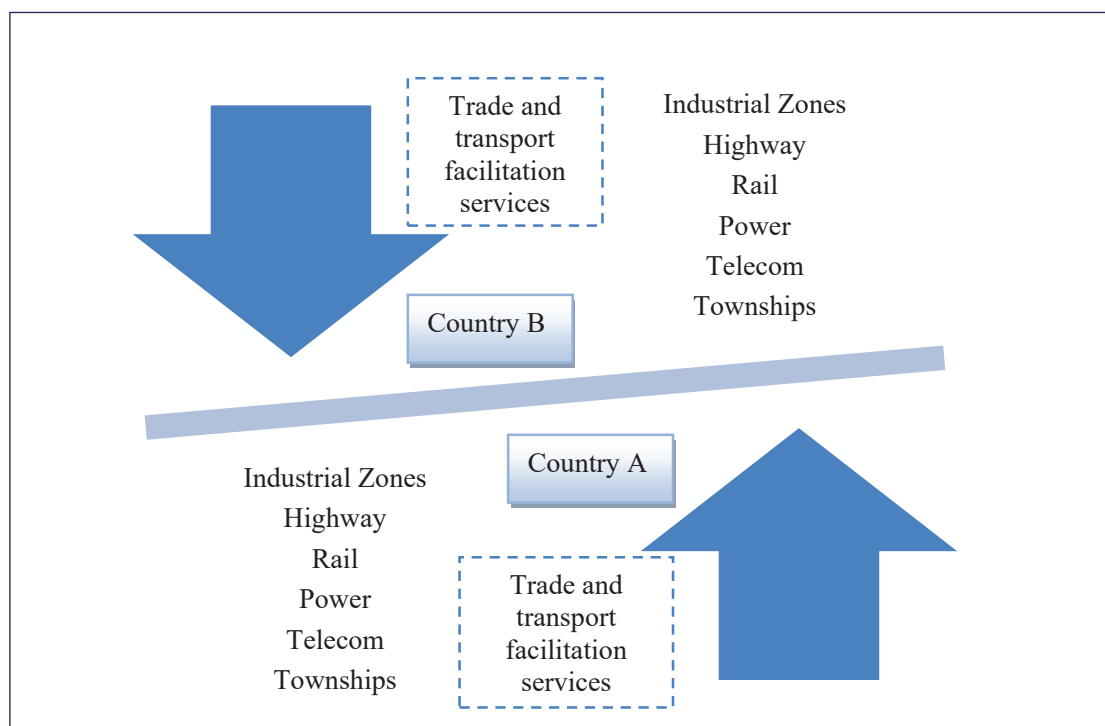
foreign investments (Kudo and Ishida, 2013). Several countries have developed BEZs and CBEZs, in which the best example is GMS (Tsuneishi, 2008). For example, the development of SEZs has generated economic gains in the Lancang-Mekong countries of Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam<sup>5</sup>. The BEZ has been found to be an effective tool for development of border areas through exploiting local and cross-border linkages. As noted in Wang (2016), a BEZ can strengthen industrial links between the economies on both sides of the border, and a CBEZ can generate spillover effects for the economic development of neighbouring areas. BEZ is a popular growth centre across many countries, which is also known as border industrial park, etc. Some of the BEZs are operating successfully at Vietnam – Lao PDR border, China – Vietnam border, Thailand – Lao PDR border, North Korea – South Korea border, Vietnam – Cambodia border, to mention a few. Some of the BEZs are Chaing Rai Border Economic Zone in Northern Thailand, Savan-Seno Economic Zone at Thai – Lao PDR border (development of Mukdahan/Savannakhet Border), Lao Bao Border Free Trade Zone at Lao PDR – Vietnam border along GMS economic corridor, Ruilli Border Economic Cooperation Zone between China and Myanmar, Moc Bai Cross Border Economic Area between Vietnam and Cambodia. Looking at the success of BEZs, China and Vietnam have planned two BEZs at border crossing points - Hekou–Lao Kai and Pingxiang–Dong Dang.

<sup>3</sup> Refer, for example, Kudo and Ishida (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Refer, for example, Mekong Institute (2018)

**Figure 1: Illustration of a CBEZ**



Source: Author's own

Figure 1 presents the illustration of CBEZ concept in context of India's Northeast. In India, Border Haats have been set up in India's Northeastern Region along India-Bangladesh border to foster border connectivity. India presently has four Border Haats in operation along India-Bangladesh border, of which two (Srinagar and Kamalagar) are located in Tripura state and other two (Kalaichar and Balat) in Meghalaya state. While Border Haat is a successful project, it cannot generate market-driven larger exchange of goods and services across borders due mainly to space limitation and lack of infrastructure. Elevating Border Haats into CBEZs may help the Northeastern states to benefit from economies of scale. Social and

economic benefits would be much larger in case of BEZ, subject to certain conditions. Not only BEZs may offer larger space for industries, it would also facilitate the 'Make-in-India' initiative in NER. Several cross-border connectivity projects in NER such as Trilateral Highway, India-Bangladesh border connectivity programmes, exchange of electricity between India and Myanmar and India and Bangladesh, etc. have gained momentum in recent years.

Figure 1 presents a schematic illustration of a CBEZ. Given its locational advantage, setting up BEZs may help NER to build the needed infrastructure and trade facilitation services, thereby facilitating economic linkages between the countries. In

particular, BEZ will promote energy trade in NER and strengthen economic links with Myanmar and rest of Southeast Asia.

Three BEZs have been suggested for development in the Northeast India: (i) Manipur (Moreh–Tamu border) with Myanmar Manipur and Myanmar border (Moreh – Tamu area), Meghalaya – Bangladesh (Shillong – Sylhet area), and Tripura – Bangladesh (Agartala – Chittagong area)<sup>6</sup>. Development of border areas through BEZs will help us realise a balanced development and bring the NER from periphery to the core of today’s development process. The BEZs of the Mekong subregion offer many important lessons to enhance border connectivity in India and also between India and Southeast Asia and Bangladesh as well as energy sector integration opportunities.

Repositioning the NER to utilise its rich and unharnessed renewable sources effectively is required. BEZs will also provide opportunities to MSMEs. While cross-border value chains may also pick up pace through BEZs when quality energy supply is ensured, participating countries may consider comprehensive incentives for investments in the energy sector.

Participatory countries in BEZs development have to work together to harmonize regulations and technical standards in the energy sector. At the same time, the Indian Power Ministry, for example, may consider regional best practices and meet with the global peers in the energy sector.

A number of successful international experiences clearly suggest that investments in cross-border energy trade, complemented by policy and regulatory arrangements can help not only address energy security but also positive thrust to the local economy. International experiences further strengthen the argument and in the long run support a regional framework to promote investments in developing cross border clean energy projects and developing a competitive power market.

## Five, opening the Trilateral Highway (TH)

The Trilateral Highway (TH) and its possible extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam is envisaged as an important connectivity project that would facilitate trade and promote production networks across the borders. Manipur is the entry/exit point of the TH. With a total length of 1,360 km, TH’s route has been identified as Moreh (India) – Tamu (Myanmar) – Kalewa – Yagyi – Monywa – Mandalay – Meiktila – Nay Pyi Taw – Payagyi – Theinzayat – Thaton – Hpa’an – Kawkareik – Myawaddy (Myanmar) – Mae Sot (Thailand).

In respect of India’s involvement with the project, India has undertaken to upgrade the Kalewa-Yagyi road section of the TH (approximately 122 kms) to highway standard and construction of 71 bridges in the Tamu – Kalewa section (2 bridges already completed). Myanmar has already reconstructed the Yargi–Monywa portion of the TH. NHAI is the PMC and the work

<sup>6</sup> Refer, for example, De, Prabir and Venkatachalam Anbumozhi (2023) “Cross-Border Energy Trade and Development of Border Economic Zones (BEZs) in Northeast India: Toward an Integrated Regional Program”, available at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003433163-3/cross-border-energy-trade-development-border-economic-zones-bezs-northeast-india-prabir-de-venkatachalam-anbumozhi>

is being executed by a SPV called the IMT Expressway. The contractors are Punj Llyod and Varaha Infra (a JV company). The connecting road from Imphal to Moreh has already been completed through an assistance of ADB. Thailand has already completed the Hpa-An–Mae Sot portion of the TH. The construction of 69 bridges and approach roads has been initiated. The process for Kalewa-Yargi road has also been speeded up, and is expected to be completed by 2026. India has announced extension of the Trilateral Highway to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The primary objective of the TH project is also to facilitate Indian investments and broaden the manufacturing base in ASEAN countries through the improvement of connectivity. The TH extension project would serve as a major step towards the greater integration between India (NER states) and Southeast Asia. At the same time, some of the ongoing connectivity projects such as the Kaladan multimodal transit transport project require a new direction. Besides, a better coordination mechanism between Southeast Asia and India would be helpful in building cross-border connectivity.

## **Six, promoting cross-border energy linkages**

Northeast India is an energy powerhouse and is endowed with abundant renewable energy resources. India has started supplying a small amount of electricity (3 MW) to Myanmar across the Moreh-Tamu border since

April 2016. Unlike Moreh-Tamu, Agartala and Chittagong or Shillong and Sylhet do not have formal energy exchange nor grids are interconnected, and in some cases grids do not have needed capacity for energy exchange on sustainable basis. However, if the regional electricity market comes into effect, cross-border electricity exchange will be smooth and would help BEZs to grow fast. At the same time, it will generate investment opportunities for the private sector in power generation and transmission infrastructure in the region. Successful bilateral energy trading agreements that are in place between Bhutan and India, India and Nepal, and India and Bangladesh offer insights for developing market based approaches and necessary commercial frameworks. Northeast India has high potential given its rich natural resources and strategic location to harness the potential cross-border energy trade with Southeast Asian countries. Northeast Indian states may augment their efforts to achieve more integrated markets and renewable energy integration.

ASEAN and India face common SDG targets and challenges in renewable energy. Therefore, regional cooperation makes sense to generate wider benefits, particularly through exchange of know-how, conduct of training and capacity building while dealing the common challenges together. Development of sustainable energy solutions is imperative for enhancing cross-border energy trade. Amongst the various energy sources, solar energy can be considered as a preferred option since the region is endowed with the highest

band of average annual solar energy globally. To conclude, forging ties in the energy sector assumes a critical importance in ASEAN-India relations.

## **Seven, treating border as a connector and economy building asset**

The border is seen as a connector and economy building asset rather than a deterrent. In recent months, India's trade with Bangladesh and Myanmar witnessed drastic fall in growth, which indirectly suggests the existence of a large trade potential. However, supply-side constraints, among others, inhibit the two-way trade across the borders with India's two neighbours. Enhancing the Northeast's existing level of trade and economic linkages between Bangladesh and Myanmar would need infrastructure and institutional support, which would facilitate growth and remove the region's economic isolation<sup>7</sup>. Northeastern states are likely to gain more from the Trilateral Highway, compared to many other Indian states (De et al. 2019). Removing the status quo, therefore, means the Northeast India has to invest in building physical and institutional infrastructures, which in return would lead to a higher production, both within and across borders, and enhance the economic linkages with the neighbouring countries.

Trade has special significance for the economies of the Northeast Indian states. Growth potential is considerably high in Northeast when one considers its geographical proximity to growing Southeast and East Asian markets.

However, such potentials remain unlocked due mainly to barriers at the border and behind the border. Besides, absence of proper institutional support and connectivity had pulled back the region's integration across borders for a long time. Today, given its geographical location, an enhanced engagement with ASEAN under the AEP is found to be a new hope.

What follows is that the border infrastructure and trade facilitation have been regarded as essential to strengthen the country's global competitiveness. Strengthening the Moreh border (and also at Tamu on the other side) may generate a strong catalytic force not only for facilitating trade between ASEAN and India but also for improving the country's competitiveness.

## **Eight, passionate driving of India's Act East**

In the past, the Northeast was a thriving region of India for over two centuries. With the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the Northeast Indian region became economically isolated from the rest of India. However, with the growth of Northeastern states coupled with improvement of infrastructure sustained over decades, the region is yet to come back to the forefront of India's development.

India's AEP with major thrust on connectivity in the Northeast India presents an opportunity to unlock the region's vast trade potential. However, to better engage Northeastern states in the AEP in this changing time,

<sup>7</sup> Refer, for example, De and Majumdar (2014), Kathuria and Mathur (2020).

connectivity projects are required from the states driving the renewed agenda. For example, Manipur may like to organise the first *ASEAN-India Aromatic Plants Festival* to raise awareness about Northeast India's rich reserves of aromatic plants among ASEAN member states. Similarly, Northeastern states can deliver much more in the areas of green economy, mountain economy, traditional medicine, energy and health, among others.

With its international border, Manipur serves as a crucial link in trade and development pathways between India and countries like Myanmar. Projects like the broad-gauge railway line from Jiribam (on the Assam border) to Imphal are vital for connecting Manipur, and by extension the Northeast, to the rest of India. The railway is going to reach Imphal in 2026-27. Completion of the railway line and extending it to the India-Myanmar border are going to be game changer, thereby speeding up the economic integration pace with Southeast Asia.

Northeastern states should regularly hold annual business summit and trade fairs with the Southeast Asian countries. Frequent visit of business delegations, exchange of media persons, etc. are equally important to drive the AEP. Northeastern states have several restrictions on the entry of foreign nationals, which may be exempted in order to strengthen people-to-people contacts.

## **Nine, building institutions for integration**

Northeastern states have to build institutions that are needed for reshaping the region's engagements with Southeast and East Asia. As on date, no such institution exists in the region. Institutions are needed to facilitate economic integration, by providing structures for dialogue, negotiation, and implementation of regional policies. Institutions create a framework for managing trade, investment, and economic activity, leading to economic gains that are difficult to achieve otherwise. Besides, regional institutions play a key role in developing infrastructure programmes, such as transportation, that are essential for supporting economic growth and enhancing regional connectivity. Bringing back Northeast from periphery to core means the state needs a think-tank working for the NER states. To address this option, the Government of India may consider setting up a branch of the NITI Aayog or invite the RIS to open a branch in close coordination with the Northeast Indian states.

## **Ten, engaging with Japan and Korea as development partners**

India's connectivity with the Southeast and East Asia is a key building block of realizing the vision of a prosperous and vibrant Indo-Pacific region. Given the Northeast's strategic location, it can be utilized for creating synergies and escalating economic development in the

region. Japan, the most trusted common development partner of India and many Southeast Asian countries, is working to promote cross-border infrastructure, trade integration, financial links, and other regional public goods. Japan is the leading country serving as the pillar of “connectivity” in the “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI),” which is advocated by India. Japan has also supported development of the Northeast through the “Japan-India Act East Forum”. Japan’s economic engagements with India have immensely contributed to the industrial development of the region, which is likely to witness a stronger industrial value chain. Japan aims to create an industrial value chain that can also benefit the industrial world in Japan after infrastructure development. Korean companies, on the other, have been investing in the Northeast. Korean and Japanese think-tanks have been engaged in outreach activities across the Northeast India.



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The word “DAKSHIN” (दक्षिण) is of Sanskrit origin, meaning “South.” The Hon’ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated DAKSHIN – Global South Centre of Excellence in November 2023. The initiative was inspired by the deliberations of Global South leaders during the Voice of the Global South Summits. DAKSHIN stands for Development and Knowledge Sharing Initiative. Hosted at the RIS, DAKSHIN has established linkages with leading think tanks and universities across the Global South and is building a dynamic network of scholars working on Global South issues.



AIC at RIS has been working to strengthen India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN in its realisation of the ASEAN Community. AIC at RIS undertakes research, policy advocacy and regular networking activities with relevant organisations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN countries, with the aim of providing policy inputs, up-to-date information, data resources and sustained interaction, for strengthening ASEAN-India partnership.



CMEC has been established at RIS under the aegis of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPS&W), Government of India. CMEC is a collaboration between RIS and Indian Ports Association (IPA). It has been mandated to act as an advisory/technological arm of MoPSW to provide the analytical support on policies and their implementation.



FITM is a joint initiative by the Ministry of Ayush and RIS. It has been established with the objective of undertaking policy research on economy, intellectual property rights (IPRs) trade, sustainability and international cooperation in traditional medicines. FITM provides analytical support to the Ministry of Ayush on policy and strategy responses on emerging national and global developments.



BEF aims to serve as a dedicated platform for fostering dialogue on promoting the concept in the Indian Ocean and other regions. The forum focuses on conducting studies on the potential, prospects and challenges of blue economy; providing regular inputs to practitioners in the government and the private sectors; and promoting advocacy for its smooth adoption in national economic policies.



FIDC, has been engaged in exploring nuances of India’s development cooperation programme, keeping in view the wider perspective of South-South Cooperation in the backdrop of international development cooperation scenario. It is a tripartite initiative of the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, academia and civil society organisations.



FIRD aims to harness the full potential and synergy between science and technology, diplomacy, foreign policy and development cooperation in order to meet India’s development and security needs. It is also engaged in strengthening India’s engagement with the international system and on key global issues involving science and technology.



As part of its work programme, RIS has been deeply involved in strengthening economic integration in the South Asia region. In this context, the role of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) is very important. SACEPS is a network organisation engaged in addressing regional issues of common concerns in South Asia.



Knowledge generated endogenously among the Southern partners can help in consolidation of stronger common issues at different global policy fora. The purpose of NeST is to provide a global platform for Southern Think-Tanks for collaboratively generating, systematising, consolidating and sharing knowledge on South South Cooperation approaches for international development.



DST-Satellite Centre for Policy Research on STI Diplomacy at RIS aims to advance policy research at the intersection of science, technology, innovation (STI) and diplomacy, in alignment with India’s developmental priorities and foreign policy objectives.

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