

## Report

### Interactive Panel Discussion on India's Neighborhood Policy with Special Reference to Act East Policy

**CHRIST (Deemed to be University) in Collaboration with Hanns Seidel Stiftung, India**



On 06 December 2021, the CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Delhi NCR, in collaboration with the Hanns Seidel Stiftung, India, hosted an in-person Interactive Panel Discussion on India's Neighborhood Policy with Special Reference to Act East Policy. The event occurred as part of a fifteen-month-long collaborative research project, titled "India's Neighborhood Policy towards the Southeast

Asian Region: A Study on Act East Policy (INPSAR)," by Hanns Seidel Stiftung, India and Christ (Deemed to be University). The project intends to generate a deep and sophisticated understanding of diverse aspects of India's relationship with the Southeast Asian region and examine India's policy approach towards the economically and strategically vital region. Dr. Sarish Sebastian (Principal Investigator) from the CHRIST Delhi NCR, Dr. Shalini B. (Co-Investigator) from CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Bangalore, and Dr. Philip Varghese (Co-Investigator) from CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Delhi NCR have been undertaking this ambitious project.

The event got officially launched by the inaugural session at 9:30 am. Mr. Volker Plän (Resident Representative, Hanns Seidel Stiftung, India), Dr Fr Viju P.D. (Dean & Director, CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Delhi NCR), Fr. Fr Sunny Joseph (Campus Administrator CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Delhi NCR), and Dr. Sarish Sebastian (Principal Investigator-INPSAR Project) honored the event with their presence.

The panel discussion took place as four sessions, covering four distinct areas vital to India-Southeast Asia relations. In this way, deliberations occurred with the participation of eminent experts from policymaking, academia, and military on the following topics.



## Panel 1- **India-Southeast Asia Economic and Security Relations**

Panel 1, titled "India-Southeast Asia Economic and Security Relations," was chaired by former Indian Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia (Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House, Mumbai). Other panelists were Ambassador Gurjit Singh (Chair of CII Task Force on Asia Africa Growth Corridor), Dr. Constantino Xavier (Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), New Delhi), Dr. Amitendu Palit (Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead, ISAS, NUS), and Dr. Rahul Mishra (Associate, Centre for ASEAN Regionalism, University of Malaya, Malaysia).

Economic and security cooperation are two vital aspects of India-Southeast Asia relations. While trade, economy, and security go hand in hand in case of India-Southeast Asian relations. Security cooperation has a crucial role in cementing India-Southeast Asia relations since security is the most vital service that India could offer to the region. While prospects of security cooperation continue to grow, the economic aspect of the relationship lags behind. Then the question arises whether the strategic convergences alone, without economic convergences, could take forward India-Southeast Asia relations.



## Panel 2- **Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Region**

Panel 2, titled "Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Region," was chaired by Dr. Jagannath Panda (Research Fellow and Coordinator, East Asia Centre, MP-IDS, New Delhi). Other panelists were Dr. Raviprasad Narayanan (Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU), Dr. Monish Tourangbam (Faculty, Amity Institute of International Studies, Amity University), Dr. Rupakjyoti Borah (Professor, Kaziranga University, Assam), and Dr. Premesha Saha (Associate Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, ORF, New Delhi).

The focal point of discussions was the evolution of Look and Act East Policies, strategic and economic imperatives behind launching the Look and Act East policies, how these policies have yielded, and how the Act East Policy works with the emergent Indo-Pacific framework. As the deliberation went ahead, it covered areas such as the rise and decline of major powers, particularly that of China, the emergence of new coalitions such as QUAD, the effectiveness of ASEAN in the changing and turbulent regional landscape, significance of India's North-East in the Act East Policy, need for decentralization of India's foreign policy, and opportunities for India in the Indo-Pacific.



### Panel 3- Act East Policy and ASEAN



Panel 3, titled "Act East Policy and ASEAN," was chaired by Prof. S.D. Muni (Emeritus Professor, JNU). Other panelists were Prof. Mohammed Badrul Alam (Professor (Retired), Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia), Captain (Dr.) Gurpreet S. Khurana (missile warfare specialist, Indian Navy), and Dr. Pravin Jadhav (Assistant Professor, Economics, Institute of Infrastructure, Technology, Research And Management, Gujarat).

The session identified the 'Act East Policy' as a continuation of the 'Look East Policy.' The economic and security relations assume significance while discussing India's Act East Policy approach towards the ASEAN. Considering the significance of maritime space for both India and

ASEAN member states and the maritime links between India and ASEAN, the maritime domain has a crucial role to play in the implementation of Act East Policy towards the ASEAN. Therefore, the issues of maritime trade, linkages, connectivity, and cooperation hold critical value in advancing India-ASEAN relations. Vision SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which New Delhi outlined in 2015, particularly emphasizing cooperation in the maritime domain, aligns with this. The capacity building at home would considerably enhance India's foreign policy and external relations.

#### **Panel 4- Act East Policy and Prospects of North-East India**



Panel 4, titled "Act East Policy and Prospects of North-East India," was chaired by Dr. Sudhir Kumar Suthar (Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, JNU). Other panelists were Dr. Sreeradha Datta (Centre Head, Neighborhood Studies and Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation), Ambassador Gautam Mukhopadhaya (Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi), and Dr. Rakhee Bhattacharjee (Associate Professor, Special Centre for the Study of North East India, JNU).

India's vision of Act East Policy identifies North-East India as an integral part of it. However, the predecessor Look East Policy's failure to positively impact the North-East region leaves the promises in the question mark. Even today, the region faces many shortcomings that handicap it from playing a meaningful role in the Act East Policy. The panel stressed on the dire need to enhance the region's connectivity and end isolation with the rest of India. Connectivity barriers prevent the region from realizing its true potential. Change in perceptions and attitudes is vital in

accommodating the North-East Act East Policy framework. For a long time, the decisions concerning the development of the North-East have been taken by the ruling elites in Delhi without consulting the local population. Indian leadership needs to view the North-Eastern states as actual stakeholders rather than mere transit points.

The event came to an end by 4:00 pm. The INPSAR Project team would like to express our sincere gratitude to HSS, India and all others who have contributed to the success of the event.