

From Look East to Act East: A New Way towards India's Regionalism

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Abstract

In 2014, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had announced that India would strengthen its regional diplomacy by focusing more on its neighbours. By changing 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy', this foreign policy initiative of India gave emphasis on commerce, connectivity and culture with South East Asia and Asia Pacific as a whole. While promoting India's Northeastern Region, this initiative has given chance to enhance its socio-cultural and historical ties with the South East Asian countries. This paper would examine the role of Act East Policy creating opportunities for regional diplomacy.

Keywords: *Act East Policy, South East Asia, Northeast, Regionalism*

India shares close geographical proximity to South East Asia which includes land as well as maritime boundary. The relationship between India and South East Asia can be traced back to ancient times. Religion, culture and civilization of these two regions has been influencing both the parts since ancient times. The pre-colonial era also witnessed the flourishing economic and cultural relations between these two regions. However, the common colonial past made these two regions to connect in such a way that it gave a new direction towards mutual cooperation of India and South East Asian countries.

The post-cold war period has led to various changes in the international relations across the globe including South Asia and South East Asia. The relationship between India and South East Asian countries saw many ups and downs due to reasons like protectionism, different ideology or priorities in the pre cold war period. However, the end of cold war opened up a new opportunity to recover their relationships. The first initiative began when P V Narashimha Rao gave a strategic push to India's association with the South East Asian countries in 1991, following the economic crisis in India. As India decided to adopt open economy, India initiated rehabilitating their ties with South East Asia by integrating the region through economic activities and cultural affinities. In this process, the Rao government officially launched the "Look East Policy" (LEP)

in 1994, trying to expand its economic relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

India's Look East policy undoubtedly marked a monumental shift in India's foreign policy. In the absence of the Soviet Union, it gave New Delhi a clear geopolitical direction to base almost its entire post- Cold War external relations upon. India could not, however, ignore the crippling state of the Indian economy in the early 1990s as entirely independent from creating a new approach to Indian foreign policy. In an effort to converge economic and strategic interests, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs created an Economic Division to give stronger consideration to India's economic interests during the conduct of its foreign affairs. It also aimed to form closer relationships with its Asian countries, as India's trading options had been limited progressively over the last four decades. During the Cold War, India's share in global trade had decreased from 2.5% during the 1950s to 0.5% by the start of the 1990s.²⁴ In short, even though Look East established a clear direction for Indian foreign policy and became quickly one of its most important dimensions, there was a strong economic rationale behind its implementation.

India's cultural relation with Southeast Asia is centuries old and serves as a living link between the two regions. Civilizational and cultural links date back thousands of years, since the prehistoric times. The region found mention in many Indian classical works as the Ramayana, while Indian merchants began bringing Hinduism and Buddhism across the sea by the 1st century AD, influencing the development of kingdoms and empires like Srivijaya in Sumatra and the Majapahit in Java, Bali and the Philippine archipelago. Hindu religious symbols are very popular in Indonesia. In the medieval periods, Indian kings had considerable influence in this region as the Hindu temples of Barabadur in Java, Indonesia and Angkor vat temple in Cambodia bear evidence to it. Similarly there was a flourishing trade relations between the two regions.

The initial idea of Look East Policy was to integrate with South Asia and South East Asia economically while attracting investments from these regions to facilitate the domestic economic growth and to shape the political and economic ties with ASEAN countries especially. And thus, India began to make its diplomatic presence in the region under Look East Policy. During the Vajpayee government, India's Look East Policy was enhanced by focusing more on security

relations. Further, under the leadership of Manmohan Singh, LEP has focused Northeast India's engagement with the region and India's role in the emerging global economy.

India's engagement with the region has deepened further through the introduction of the 'Act East Policy' (AEP) that has come into effect when Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi at his maiden visit to ASEAN-India Summit in 2014 emphasized on practicing more action-oriented policy towards ASEAN and the wider East Asia. AEP can be termed as continuation and further deepening of the LEP launched in the past decade. However, the significance of this initiative with renewed focus on the region comes from two aspects. First, while in nineties, India merely looked at the 'East' as a lucrative market, the urge to link up with the international production networks prevalent in East and Southeast Asia is far stronger in the recent period, particularly for sourcing quality raw materials, parts and components. In addition, investment expectations from the region, particularly from Australia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore have also played a key role in formulation of AEP. Second, while India's engagement with Southeast Asia continue to focus on deepening trade-investment interrelationship, under the present NDA government, the country has emerged as the net security provider of the region. In 2015, the Prime Minister visited five East Asian countries at various occasions and the discussions covered both economic and security dimensions. There have been other high level diplomatic visits to the 'East', subsequently followed by the appropriate diplomatic channels. Therefore, AEP has brought a great sense of speed and priority in engaging with the East Asian countries in general and Southeast Asia in particular.

India is today a member of several trans-regional, regional and sub-regional groupings. As India rises, there is recognition that for its own interests it needs to consider the wider regional as well as global interests. On one hand, India today sees global and regional multilateral mechanisms as platforms to engage with the outside world to meet the expectations from a rising power. On the other hand, India needs global and regional multilateral organisations to meet its own rising aspirations. As India's strategic interests are widening in the South Asia, South East Asia, Asia Pacific and beyond, maintaining its geopolitical balance in these regions has seem to be significant.

During the post-independence period, India's approach towards regionalism was prominently dominated by the bipolar politics. The idea of regionalism was much broader which covered the entire Asian continent. During 1940s and 1950s, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru initiated and participated different political events such as, Colombo Conference in 1954, Asian Relations Conference, 1947 in New Delhi, and Bandung Conference in 1955. However, objecting to form any collective groupings made India to restrict it from materializing any regional institutions. The evolution of regionalism happened, when India finally pushed itself to integrate with South Asian countries by forming South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Apart from that, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is another sub regional initiative involving South Asia and South East Asia, giving importance to commerce, human resource development, technology, tourism, transport and communication, agriculture. Mekong Ganga Cooperation is another sub regional set up that has pushed India to integrate with the mainland Southeast Asia in the field of tourism, culture, education and transport. However, India's regional approach towards Southeast Asia began when India launched LEP in the 1990s.

The Look East policy was first intended as an economic strategy to boost India's trade and investment relations with the Southeast Asian region. Over the years, it not only expanded its geographical reach to include Japan, South Korea and Australia, but it has also assumed significant strategic and political dimensions. With Modi's adoption of the Act East policy, the strategic factor has assumed greater significant. India has adopted strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea and Australia. In addition, it has also established close links with countries of the BIMSTEC group to ensure infrastructure development in the Northeastern region of India and most significantly bridging the South Asian region with the South Asian region.

As a country dependent on sea-borne trade for its sustenance, it recognises the integral rights of all countries to freedom of navigation, overflight, and unhindered commerce in open seas. Maritime security is an important aspect of India's Act East policy. India's Act East policy supports connectivity programmes for promoting regional cooperation and integration. Unlike

the Look East Policy, the present Act East lays great emphasis on the connectivity programmes that link India's Northeast region with ASEAN countries. It recognises the centrality of the ASEAN region and their economic and strategic interests converge in the Indo-Pacific and provide a great opportunity for mutual cooperation.

After coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a new start to the efforts towards an integrated neighbourhood by launching the 'Neighbourhood first policy' towards South Asia. Moreover, it gives emphasis more on the emerging security and economic dynamics through Act East Policy. While India's regional grouping SAARC is making little progress, India could push to shape its regional integration through sub- regionalism. The idea of Act East Policy could be seen as a classic example of India's move towards regionalism. AEP can be described as a search for economic and political connection with the Southeast Asia by achieving new opportunities with a pragmatic approach towards regional integration. The changes or shifting in foreign policy of any country balances with the international order that inevitably affects the domestic and foreign factors of the country. For example; the rise and fall of Soviet Union or rise of China had a huge influence over South and South East Asia. India formed the Look East Policy in the backdrop of end of Cold War but after two decades when the world has different scenario to deal with, the policy was also required to deal in different way in the region. Domestic developments in the nation also persuaded the policy makers to change the course of it. The domestic factors like growing demand for energy, economic developments for a huge population in a unipolar world after the End of Cold War demands closer relations with eastern bordering states also. India reformed its economy in 1991 and opened it for investment to boost its foreign policy.

The Act East Policy has been a beginning for greater geographic coordination and collaboration in comparison to Look East Policy. In similar view of Modi government to attain a global and regional influence on a greater level, the policy is also aimed at placing India as important player in the regional affairs. Though the clear vision about the policy would be known in due course of time, the shift in Indian engagement with regional leaders has shown the picture of its enhanced involvement in the region. India's strategic interests in the sub-regions have been growing over the recent years as a result of both India's own domestic interests as well as because of enhanced

Chinese influence and presence in the geo-strategic sub- regions. Moreover the China factor has emerged as a major area of geopolitical concern in India's engagements with the nations in these sub-regions as China has been trying to dominate the Southeast Asia, South Asia and Indo-Pacific through initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative.

India's engagement with the Southeast Asian region can be assessed mainly through two ways: bilateral and multilateral. On the bilateral level, India has signed Free Trade Area (FTA) Agreement with Thailand in 2003. With the ASEAN countries, India has been trying to build a cordial relationship. For instance, India has extended various projects with financial assistance to Myanmar for construction of roads and communication. Moreover, India has entered into multiple numbers of bilateral treaties, MoUs with Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. India is also committed to build an amiable relationship with Philippines and Brunei along with other ASEAN countries. Driven by economic, cultural and most importantly strategic considerations, Act East Policy has been playing an important role in India's policy towards Southeast Asia.

Again, on the multilateral level, India has been actively participating in different multilateral initiatives to enhance its relation with Southeast Asia. Indo- ASEAN annual summit, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Mekong Ganga Cooperation, and BIMSTEC are some of the initiatives, where India has continuously been playing a significant role. These initiatives has given India a platform in trade and investment, connectivity, political and security cooperation, and tourism among other measures to strengthen its regional cooperation with Southeast Asia. Since India became a member of ARF, there has been growing cooperation on security issues between India and ASEAN countries. As India's primary security concern has been maritime security in the region, India shows inclination towards capacity building in the area of maritime security. These groupings aim at promoting cooperation between India and ASEAN countries in key areas to foster their regional integration. The Act East Policy further aims at promoting India's North East. India's North East is rich in biodiversity and natural resources. This region has been suffering from poor access to domestic and international markets because of connectivity since long. This region lacks good rail and road connectivity and other infrastructural facilities as compared to other parts of India. In this regard, Act East Policy ushers new hope for India's North East as this policy initiative aims at giving importance to the development of North East

India. As India's North East shares special cultural values with Southeast Asian countries, it is easier for India to maintain inter racial bonds and tribal connections across the international border. Moreover, through North Eastern States, the connectivity seems easier as it shares international border with Myanmar, an ASEAN country. The geography of North East India as a gateway to the Southeast Asia, could be seen as a bridge between Indian economy and fastest growing region in the world. In short, India's Act East Policy could help to transform a geographically isolated region to a potential economic hub or corridor between South East Asia and India.

Though there are various internal and external challenges are linked with the implementation of Act East Policy, however, it is clear that India has begun to take active role in shaping and building regionalism in Southeast Asia and beyond. India's regionalism and sub-regionalism efforts have paid off mainly because of its focus on bilateral relations with the neighbouring countries. Today, India is actively contributing to shape the regional order and there is a continuity in the country's foreign policy since the early 1990s and India's self-interest is a major component in its regional initiatives. Moreover, North East India can play a key role in bridging the gap between India and Southeast Asia due to its geographical proximity, ethnic and cultural linkages in the context of regional integration. In this regard, closer political and economic ties between India and Southeast Asia could bring development further paving the way for regional integration.

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