



India's Act East Policy

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Abstract: India's Look East Policy (LEP), which was first implemented in the early 1990s, has significantly evolved into the Act East Policy (AEP), which was started in 2014. With a focus on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), this strategy seeks to strengthen India's cultural, economic, and strategic relationships with the nations of the Asia-Pacific area. This also reflected India's broader aspirations to play a more prominent role in the Indo-Pacific region, aligning with its interests in countering Chinese influence, improving connectivity through initiatives like the trilateral highway, and enhancing maritime cooperation. Act East also underscored the importance of India's northeastern region as a bridge to Southeast Asia, highlighting regional connectivity and development. This article highlights the achievements and difficulties of India's AEP while examining its goals, tactics, and ramifications. The study also explores the geopolitical environment that made this reorientation necessary, highlighting India's place in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Economic cooperation, Geopolitical Engagement, Security Collaboration.

Introduction: In order to confront the changing geopolitical realities in Asia, India's foreign policy has strategically recalibrated with the transition from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP). The AEP was introduced by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 and is intended to be more action-oriented, with an emphasis on



increasing ties with Southeast Asian countries and other countries in terms of economics, security, and culture. The shift from LEP to AEP is indicative of India's increasing awareness of the Asia-Pacific region's strategic significance, both in terms of economic prospects and as a vital threat for regional security, particularly in view of China's expanding sway. This article examines the Act East Policy's many facets, including its strategic goals, major projects, historical background, and current difficulties.

Historical Context: From Look East to Act East

Look East Policy: The Look East Policy was started in the early 1990s by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. Geopolitical and economic events that followed the end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalization gave rise to the policy. Acknowledging the growing economic vitality of the area, the goal was to establish strategic and business relationships with the nations of Southeast and East Asia. Trade, investment, and economic cooperation were prioritized in the LEP, which had an overall economic orientation. India aimed to further its integration with other regional organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The program resulted in a notable increase in economic involvement with Southeast Asian countries by fostering bilateral trade and investment links.

Although India has long had ties to Southeast Asia, the current phase of relations started when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao introduced the Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s. In reaction to the conclusion of the Cold War and India's need to integrate into the world economy, the LEP was implemented. As a result of the policy's emphasis on forming strategic and commercial alliances with Southeast Asian nations, India joined ASEAN in 1992 as a conversation partner and became a full member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 (Kumar, 2017).

However, India realized that a more proactive approach was required as the geopolitical landscape of Asia started to change in the twenty-first century, especially with the growth of China and the growing significance of the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, the Act East Policy was presented to strengthen and broaden the Look East Policy by increasing India's involvement with Southeast Asia, East Asia, Oceania, and the larger Indo-Pacific area (Singh, 2019).



Strategic Objectives of the Act East Policy

The Act East Policy is based on a number of strategic pillars, such as cultural interchange, security cooperation, and economic cooperation.

Economic Cooperation: Increasing commercial and investment ties with Southeast Asia and other regions is one of the main goals of the AEP. Through infrastructure initiatives like the Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, India has attempted to improve connectivity with ASEAN (Das, 2018). Furthermore, India has been actively participating in regional trade agreements and efforts, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), despite its decision to withdraw from the accord in 2019 in order to safeguard its local industry.

Cultural Exchange: In order to improve people-to-people relations, the AEP also places a strong emphasis on cultural diplomacy. India has improved its soft power by utilizing its historical and cultural ties to Southeast Asia. Examples of India's cultural outreach under the AEP include the promotion of Buddhism as a shared cultural legacy and events like the International Day of Yoga, which is extensively observed across ASEAN nations (Thakur, 2016).

Security Collaboration: India realized it had to take a bigger part in maintaining regional peace and stability in light of China's emergence as a hegemonic and its assertive moves in the South China Sea. As a result, the AEP gave defense and security cooperation with ASEAN nations, Japan, Australia, and the US more importance. The AEP seeks to solve shared security issues such as cyber threats, terrorism, and maritime security. Under the AEP, India's strategic alliances with nations like Australia, Vietnam, Japan, and Vietnam have become stronger, with an emphasis on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific area. An important part of this security cooperation is the Malabar naval exercises, which involve the United States, Japan, Australia, and India (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

Broader Geopolitical Engagement: India's involvement in East and Southeast Asia was extended by the AEP to encompass the region. The aforementioned measures encompassed strengthening connections with Japan, South Korea, and Australia in addition to



increasing involvement in multilateral events like the East Asia Summit and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

Key Initiatives and Achievements

Since its establishment, the Act East Policy has led to several significant developments:

Strengthening Strategic Partnerships: Building strategic connections with important Southeast Asian countries is one of the Act East Policy's main goals. India has developed extensive strategic partnerships out of its relationships with nations like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan. Regular high-level meetings, combined military drills, and agreements on defense cooperation have all been a component of these alliances. To improve maritime security in the Indo-Pacific area, for example, India and Vietnam have carried out bilateral naval drills (Chaudhury, 2019). The AEP has strengthened India's ties with ASEAN, making it a vital collaborator in ASEAN-led initiatives like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). India and ASEAN trade has increased dramatically, with a projected value of USD 96.79 billion in 2022 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

Indo-Pacific Strategy: By advocating for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has established itself as a major participant in the region. The AEP is in line with the larger Indo-Pacific policy, which aims to offset China's expanding sway over the area. India's commitment to preserving the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific is demonstrated by its involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, Japan, and Australia (Mukherjee, 2021).

Connectivity Projects: The AEP has sparked a number of initiatives to improve the digital, physical, and interpersonal connections between India and Southeast Asia. One of the main initiatives to promote trade and economic integration between the three countries is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (Saran, 2017).

Cultural Diplomacy and Interpersonal Relations: India's Act East Policy has been significantly influenced by cultural diplomacy. The Indian government has launched a number of programs to rebuild historical and cultural relations with nations in Southeast Asia.



More people-to-people interaction has been promoted by initiatives like the International Conference on India-ASEAN Cultural Relations and the founding of cultural centres in ASEAN nations (Mukherjee, 2017). Furthermore, India's involvement in cultural events spearheaded by ASEAN has strengthened its soft power inside the region.

Achievements

Improved Multilateral and Bilateral ties: India's bilateral and multilateral relations with countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia have been greatly improved by the Act East Policy. India now has stronger security and commercial ties with Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan as a result of these strategic alliances. Moreover, India has cemented its position as a major actor in regional affairs by its strong involvement in forums led by ASEAN (Chansoria, 2021).

Increased Trade and Investment: The Act East Policy's economic component has had fruitful outcomes, as evidenced by the notable expansion of commerce between India and the ASEAN nations. Bilateral trade volumes have increased as a result of improved market access made possible by the India-ASEAN Free Trade Area. Trade and investment have also increased as a result of India's investments in infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which have improved regional connectivity (Sharma, 2020).

Enhanced Cultural Bonds: Cultural exchanges under the Act East Policy have strengthened India's soft power in Southeast Asia. The promotion of historical and cultural linkages has not only reinforced India's cultural diplomacy but has also fostered greater people-to-people connections. The successful organization of cultural events and the establishment of cultural centres have contributed to a better understanding of Indian culture in the region (Ray, 2019).

Enhanced Maritime Security: India's involvement in maintaining maritime security in the Indo-Pacific area has been strengthened by the Act East Policy. The region has remained peaceful and stable thanks in part to India's active engagement in regional security forums and naval cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. India's strategic position in the



Indo-Pacific has been further strengthened by the Quad's focus on maritime security (Ghosh, 2020).

Impact of the Act East Policy

India's position in the Asia-Pacific area has greatly expanded as a result of the Act East Policy. India's economic contribution to regional supply chains has increased, and the country's commerce with ASEAN neighbours has expanded significantly. Increased foreign direct investment (FDI) into India from East Asian nations is another benefit of the AEP.

India has improved its defense and security cooperation with a number of important regional players on a strategic front. The frequency of defense agreements, strategic conversations, and joint military exercises has increased, demonstrating India's dedication to preserving regional security.

Furthermore, India now participates more deeply in regional multilateral organizations. As a major factor in the changing regional security architecture, India has established itself by its vigorous involvement in ASEAN-led initiatives.

China's counter in Indo-Pacific Region: India's Act East Policy, initiated in 2014, plays a significant role in shaping the country's strategy to counter-balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific, encompassing the vast maritime space from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, has become a focal point of geopolitical competition, particularly with China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its growing military presence. India's Act East Policy serves as a multifaceted approach to counteract this influence through economic, strategic, and diplomatic initiatives.

Developing Relationships with Other Regional Powers and ASEAN: Building stronger ties with ASEAN countries and other important regional actors like Japan, Australia, and South Korea is at the heart of India's Act East Policy. Through fostering diplomatic ties, cooperative maritime security measures, and economic alliances with these nations, India contributes to the establishment of a regional equilibrium that lessens China's capacity for unilateral dominance. India's participation in ASEAN-led forums, including as the ASEAN



Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), improves its strategic stance in the area and opens up a channel for joint action against coercive behaviour.

Promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific: One of the central elements of India's Act East Policy is its alignment with the vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), championed by the United States and other regional powers. This vision emphasizes the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and respect for international norms, particularly in response to China's claims and militarization of disputed territories in the South China Sea. By endorsing FOIP, India strengthens its position in promoting an inclusive and rule-based maritime order, countering China's attempts to expand its sphere of influence.

Balancing Chinese Economic Influence: While the Act East Policy has an essential security dimension, it also seeks to reduce China's economic dominance in the region by increasing India's trade, investment, and economic ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia. Through free trade agreements with ASEAN, economic cooperation with Japan and South Korea, and investments in key sectors like technology, manufacturing, and defense, India presents itself as an alternative economic partner to China's overwhelming presence.

Building Capacity and Maritime Diplomacy: Another essential element of India's Act East Policy, which aims to increase its naval influence and presence in the Indo-Pacific, is its maritime diplomacy. India has increased naval cooperation with nations in the South China Sea that contest Chinese territory, including Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. India offers smaller states in the region an option to relying solely on China by enhancing their maritime security capabilities through combined naval exercises, military equipment, and training.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its successes, the Act East Policy faces several challenges:

China's Dominance: China's tremendous economic and geopolitical sway over Southeast Asia poses a serious threat to India's AEP. India's attempts to establish its influence



in the region are seriously hampered by China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Mishra, 2020).

Infrastructure and Connectivity: Although a number of connectivity projects have been started, bureaucratic obstacles, a lack of money, and regional instability—particularly in Myanmar—have made it difficult to implement them quickly (Chaudhury, 2021).

Economic Integration: India's decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has been deemed a negative step towards its economic integration with Southeast Asia. According to critics, this action may reduce India's sway in regional economic matters and give China greater leverage (Basu, 2020).

Conclusion

In order to strengthen its position in the Asia-Pacific area, India has strategically reoriented its foreign policy with the Act East Policy. Although the policy has been successful in fortifying India's relations with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific area, there are still many obstacles to overcome, especially given China's increasing sway. The Act East Policy's future viability will hinge on India's capacity to carry out its connectivity initiatives successfully, strengthen its economic ties with Southeast Asia, and preserve a geopolitical equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific area.

India's increased involvement in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region can be attributed in large part to its Act East Policy. By strengthening regional partnerships, enhancing maritime security cooperation, promoting infrastructure development, and aligning with initiatives like FOIP and the Quad, India positions itself as a key player in maintaining regional stability and protecting its strategic interests against China's assertive actions. Through this policy, India seeks to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains a region characterized by multipolarity, respect for international laws, and balanced power dynamics. The Act East Policy's accomplishments demonstrate India's dedication to promoting economic expansion, cultural fusion, and stability in the region.



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