



From 'Look East' to 'Act East' Policy: Revisiting India's Eastern Odyssey in the context of the Indo-pacific security landscape

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Abstract

India's strategic and economic engagement with the Indo-Pacific region has changed, and it is more assertive and strategic. This policy change was driven by geopolitics, particularly India's response to China's multifaceted influence in the Indo-Pacific and the need to protect its strategic interests. Through qualitative and interpretive analysis, the paper examines Indo-Pacific geopolitics and significant obstacles to re-orienting India's foreign policy in East Asia.

The article argues that the Act East Policy has amplified India's quest to play a more significant role in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The study also highlights India's geopolitical difficulties and prospects, highlighting the necessity for a more assertive and practical foreign policy approach.

Keywords: Look East, Act East, China, India, Indo-Pacific, foreign policy

Introduction

In 1991, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao initiated India's 'Look East' Policy (LEP) to foster stronger economic and cultural connections with Southeast Asian nations. The policy corresponded with its economic liberalization, which was launched in 1991. This correlation is not just a coincidence but a significant fact. It coincided with the downfall of the former Soviet Union, marking the conclusion of Cold War politics. The LEP was a deliberate foreign policy strategy to transition from a conventional security-focused approach to a more economically-oriented approach to international participation (Rubul & Bora, 2016)^[1]. The Rao government attempted to compensate for India's previous lack of involvement in the Southeast Asian region during the Cold War. India saw the need to address the neglect and believed the LEP would facilitate the necessary involvement with the regional countries and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

Critics have noted that despite its divine origins, the LEP has just achieved the envisioned objectives of the 1990s (EFSAS, 2020)^[1]. Several analysts have observed that India is in the process of enhancing its involvement with the region in order to assume a more prominent position. At the same time, China had already established a strong presence in the Southeast Asian region long before the twenty-first century. However, the need for essential modifications and a complete restructuring of the LEP arose in 2014. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi rebranded it as 'Act East' Policy (AEP) in response to critiques and to emphasize the need for prompt action. Since then, AEP has been a critical focus of India's foreign policy, and its determination to achieve desired objectives has been tested.

'Look East' Policy: Origin and Significance

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his book, *The Discovery of India*, in 1944:

"The Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic in the future as the nerve center of the world. Though not directly a Pacific state, India will inevitably exercise an important influence there. India will also develop as the center of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean,

Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Her position gives economic and strategic importance to a part of the world that will develop in the future" (IDSA, 2018)^[3].

India's Look East Policy demonstrated the astute evaluation of the nation's inaugural Prime Minister Pt. Nehru's prescient appraisal of future global geopolitical upheavals was both correct and precise (Haokip, 2010)^[4]. India made a prudent and well-timed decision, considering that engaging in bipolar politics would have had disastrous effects. The Cold War was a high-stakes geopolitical bet. Therefore, India made the deliberate choice to adopt a neutral stance. However, India's financial crisis, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of the United States as the lone superpower in the post-Cold War era prompted India to launch the 'Look East' Policy (LEP) to compensate for the lost opportunities in Southeast Asia (Kesavan, 2020)^[5].

Moreover, China's economic liberalization started much earlier in the late 1970s and began to bear fruit in the 1990s. China's economy grew, and its economic clout expanded, reaching the Southeast Asian region and experiencing a remarkable economic turnaround after the 1970s. Also, with the retreat of the former Soviet Union, a power vacuum was created in the region. With the backing of its robust economy, a more confident China began to grab the opportunity and start serious engagement with like-minded countries in the region. Many countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, had adopted communism during the Cold War and saw no reason to oppose the Chinese presence in their region. Besides, ASEAN had developed a mechanism wherein member states refrained from bringing ideological differences and other political issues into the forum (ASEAN, 2024)^[6]. Taking serious note of the development in the neighboring region, India had to strategically adopt LEP to regain trust and mark its presence in the region. Hence, in 1992, India became a "Sectoral Dialogue Partner" and subsequently a "Dialogue Partner" in 1996. In 2012, the status was elevated to "Strategic Partnership".

Significance: Thus, India's Look East Policy was to bolster India's continued engagement with the region and ASEAN

through economic, strategic, and cultural ties so that India's standing as a significant power in the region and the international system remained intact. Besides its aim at counter-balancing 'Rising China's' (Glaser & Madeiros, 2007: 297) ^[7] strategic influence in the region, LEP also provided India's northeastern region with a direct role as a connectivity hub to augment the national efforts to address the menace of the region's insurgency (Bhatia, 2019) ^[8]. In fact, India's uncharted and underdeveloped region was made the *launch pad* for LEP in 1991 to incorporate the region into global connectivity highways and significant global supply chain networks crossing Southeast Asia up to Europe (Saikia, 2011) ^[9].

For example, the following three initiatives and multilateral engagements under India's LEP involve connectivity networks, the starting points of which are major cities and towns in India's northeastern states.

1. The *Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project* connects Myanmar by road to Mizoram's state capital, Aizawl.
2. The *India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT Highway)* connects the three countries, with the capital city of Imphal (Manipur, India) as the starting point.
3. *Imphal-Moreh Road Highway* has been developed to connect Southeast Asian countries via Myanmar. The project is a mini-part of the grand Trans-Asian Railway Network Project.

Here lies the significance of LEP, pursued by successive governments of former prime ministers A.B. Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh, respectively. It has also made the coastal states of eastern India a hub for land and maritime connectivity with the capitals of ASEAN countries.

From 'Look East' to 'Act East Policy: Strategic Shift

The journey from 'Look East' to 'Act East' policy took over two decades. Two dominant factors explain the re-orientation of the policy in the 21st century and the change in the nomenclature.

1. China factor: The Look East Policy (LEP) aimed to improve India's diplomatic ties with its Southeast Asian neighbors despite fluctuating China-India relations. China's influence in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, besides its overwhelming influence in Myanmar, has clashed with India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. These developments have hindered India's quest for a strategically balanced South Asia and required economic integration among SAARC countries for strategic convergence.

As LEP entered the current century, New Delhi faced the challenge of deeper Sino-Pakistan relations. Thus, China occupies a critical position in India's foreign policy formulation, especially in the critical geopolitical theatre of *the Indo-Pacific* region, which includes East and Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. According to scholar Rana Mitter, modern China's core characteristics of power include a combination of "authoritarianism, consumerism, global ambitions, and technology" (Mitter, 2020) ^[10]. In the 21st century, China's push to expand its value system of "consumerism" and "technology" goes side-by-side with "authoritarianism" and its "global ambitions." Western critics interpreted its global ambitions as 'expansionism' beyond its established territories and region (Byrnes, 2023) ^[11].

With this background, India's economic and strategic formulations in the Indo-Pacific do have the element of balancing activity against undesirable Chinese expansionist policies around India's vicinity. Besides enhanced economic integration with ASEAN countries, with a specific focus on enhancing economic links with CLMV countries which are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, (Malhotra, 2019) ^[12] the necessity to maintain robust relationships with Japan, South Korea, and Australia drove India to re-orienting its "look" to "act" policy. The LEP could be extended through ASEAN; the first step was achieved at the beginning of the 21st century. Japan invited India to be part of ASEAN+6, thus breaking the monopoly of ASEAN+3.

2. The connectivity issue: The LEP had lofty aspirations. Despite over twenty years of LEP, the goals of establishing a connection between India and Southeast Asian countries through its northeastern states have not been fully achieved. The *Trilateral Highway* was in an enhanced state. Nevertheless, it has yet to become operational. While the Imphal-Mandalay-Bangkok line has been in operation, the section in Myanmar, spanning several hundred kilometers, deteriorated (Khan, 2023) ^[13]. Several projects are underway to develop inter-state links within India's northeastern region. Therefore, the problem with connectivity presented a significant challenge while attempting to create a successful narrative for LEP.

Consequently, the Indian government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, changed the name of the 'Look East' policy to the 'Act East' policy in November 2014 in response to two significant developments which are geostrategically linked. The aim was to provide an innovative yet "dynamic" and "action-oriented approach" (Malhotra, 2019) ^[14] that align with India's position in the global hierarchy of the 21st century.

Ripple Effects of the 'Act East' Policy (AEP): Achievements and Challenges

Prime Minister Modi brought in AEP to give fresh impetus to intensify the country's economic, strategic, and diplomatic relations with countries that have shared concerns about China's muscular stretching that could impact regional geopolitical order. By 2014, India's economy and leadership clout had expanded compared to the previous decade. India's economic relations with ASEAN countries have grown unprecedentedly (Kesavan, 2020) ^[15]. From around \$2 billion in trade, India-ASEAN trade volume crossed \$130 billion in 2022-23 (PIB, 2023) ^[16]. India-Japan trade relations grew and touched a record figure of about \$21.96 billion in 2022-23 FY. The volume of Japanese private investments has been steadily increasing since 2014 (MEA, 2023) ^[17]. Prime Minister Modi believed Japanese technical help would benefit India's infrastructural connectivity targets.

A key objective of AEP is to revolutionize the economic capacity of India's northeastern region. Japan is heavily engaged in the development initiatives of India's northeast region. Japanese investors are keen on developing infrastructure in India's northeastern states. On the strategic side, India has more clarity about its vision and role in the Indo-Pacific (Bhatia, 2019) ^[18].

Challenges: One of the central themes of the Look/Act East (L/A East) Policy is the connection that has been made

between India's northeast region and the Southeast Asian countries in terms of cultural and historical ties. Herein lies the central message of connectivity projects that link the two physical territories. However, as mentioned above, the connectivity targets still need to be met. Deadlines have been extended. Many projects have been stalled due to protests and opposition by civil society organizations in the northeast region.

Many "social groups" viewed AEP as a model of development that makes the NE region a mere transport and logical hub. Taz Barua, in his article "*The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-driven Development Model in Northeast India*," argued that AEP's focus on "infrastructural constructions" had chosen a developmental path that "prioritizes" the creation and development of "physical infrastructures over "social development" (Barua, 2020: 108) ^[19].

The AEP, aimed at transforming the LEP's objective of economic integration with ASEAN countries, has been accelerated by the AEP. However, a critical look at the target figures indicates they are far below expectations. In this connection, they saw the policy as an "imposed" one on people for compromising on the "social development" aspect.

Conclusion

The LEP was a significant foreign policy initiative, considering India's circumstances in the early 1990s. Both domestic and international factors influenced it. The ramifications of LEP were experienced throughout the ASEAN region. AEP augmented and extended the objectives to broaden India's diplomatic reach beyond Southeast Asia. The influence of China is the primary external element that can determine the outcome of LEP and AEP in the current century. However, India's commitment to the infrastructural connections-driven economic development model will be scrutinized in the following decades. The AEP confronts two simultaneous problems, domestic and external, regarding expectations.

In the current context, the potential of AEP, in its renewed form, to bolster India's foreign policy objectives in the evolving Indo-Pacific security landscape demands meticulous examination and analysis. For instance, China's strategic presence in ASEAN countries is a source of concern for India, Japan, and others. In light of this, a comprehensive analysis of the implications of slow progress or failure to achieve crucial AEP objectives, such as bridging the connectivity gap, is imperative for India's geostrategic approach in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Given the formidable challenges AEP faces in the wake of China's strategic expansion through its *Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI)* globally, including the ASEAN region, the question of whether New Delhi's foreign policy approach, guided by 'multi-alignment' under the current regime, can deliver the desired results remains a pressing concern.

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