



India's look east policy: An analytical review

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution, implementation, and impact of India's Look East Policy (LEP), which was later transformed into the Act East Policy (AEP). Through a comprehensive analysis of its strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, this research demonstrates how this policy has shaped India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region over the past three decades.

Keywords: Look east policy (LEP) act east policy (AEP) southeast asia indo-pacific strategic engagement

Introduction

In 1991, amid significant global geopolitical shifts following the Cold War's end, India initiated its Look East Policy under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. India's Look East policy was initiated under the Narasimha Rao Government in the early 1990s amid a worsening domestic economic and political situation. The geopolitical tensions leading up to the 1991 Gulf War deeply affected India's economy, bringing about economic recession and an acute balance-of-payments crisis by mid-1991. This strategic reorientation marked a decisive shift from India's previous foreign policy approaches, reflecting both domestic economic liberalization and changing international dynamics. The policy, which began primarily as an economic initiative, has since evolved into a comprehensive strategic framework that encompasses security, culture, and connectivity. Historical Context and Evolution The genesis of the Look East Policy can be traced to India's recognition of Southeast Asia's growing economic significance and the need to reposition itself in a post-Cold War world. According to research published in the *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, the Look East Policy's inauguration in 1991 reflected the progressive domestic economic transformation India was undertaking. The policy emerged during a critical period when India was struggling to transition from a state-controlled economic model to a more liberalized one.

The policy's evolution can be divided into distinct phases:

Phase I (1991-2002) The initial phase focused primarily on economic engagement with ASEAN countries. During this period, India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, marking the beginning of institutionalized cooperation. The emphasis was on trade liberalization and establishing basic connectivity infrastructure.

Phase II (2003-2014) The second phase saw a significant expansion in scope, encompassing security cooperation and strategic partnerships. The policy's reach extended beyond ASEAN, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, reflecting India's growing strategic ambitions in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Phase III (2014-Present) The transformation from the Look East to the Act East Policy under Prime Minister Modi marked the beginning of the third phase. This transition

represented not just a change in nomenclature but a fundamental shift toward more proactive engagement. The Act East Policy expanded the strategic scope, emphasizing the Indo-Pacific concept and deeper regional integration.

ASEAN: The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises of Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam. India's focus on a strengthened and multi-faceted relationship with ASEAN is an outcome of the significant changes in the world's political and economic scenario since the early 1990s and India's own march towards economic liberalisation. India's search for economic space resulted in the 'Look East Policy'. The Look East Policy has today matured into a dynamic and action oriented 'Act East Policy. PM at the 12th ASEAN India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in November, 2014, formally enunciated the Act East Policy. Apart from ASEAN, India has taken other policy initiatives in the region that involve some members of ASEAN like BIMSTEC, MGC etc. India is also an active participant in several regional forums like the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting + (ADMM+) and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). India's relationship with ASEAN is a key pillar of our foreign policy and the foundation of our Act East Policy. The up-gradation of the relationship into a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a natural progression to the ground covered since India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, Dialogue Partner in 1996 and Summit Level Partner in 2002. There are, in total, 30 Dialogue Mechanisms between India and ASEAN, cutting across various sectors. Mission to ASEAN: India has set up a separate Mission to ASEAN and the EAS in Jakarta in April 2015 with a dedicated Ambassador to strengthen engagement with ASEAN and ASEAN-centric processes. Destabilisation in the countries to India's west could also impact on India's pursuit of its interests in East Asia. As 68 per cent of India's imported oil and \$US30 billion of remittances come from millions of Indian workers in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East will continue to be of significance to India.

India's "Look East" policy, launched in the 1990s, aimed to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia, particularly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This policy has played a crucial role in India's foreign policy, with China being a significant factor in its development.

Key Aspects of Look East Policy

- **Economic Cooperation:** Enhance trade links, investment opportunities, and industrial collaboration in Southeast Asian economies.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Foster cooperation in defense, security, and counter-terrorism to promote regional stability.
- **Cultural Exchanges:** Promote people-to-people ties and cultural understanding through initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program.

Role of China

Growing Influence: China's expanding economic and strategic presence in Southeast Asia has been a significant consideration for India's Look East policy.

- **Competition and Cooperation:** While India and China have competing interests in the region, they also cooperate on economic and regional issues.
- **Concerns and Challenges:** China's growing influence has raised concerns among ASEAN member states, and India's Look East policy aims to counterbalance this influence through strategic partnerships and military cooperation.
- **India-China competition** is further complicated by their historical territorial dispute, periodic flare-ups along the disputed border, and China's military partnership with Pakistan. Inspired by the so-called Malacca Dilemma, China has sought to amplify its influence in the Indian Ocean region – India's backyard and primary area of strategic interest. China's take-over of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, establishment of Gwadar port in Pakistan, and efforts to undercut Indian influence in the region have only led to greater mistrust between the two giant neighbours. Similarly, India's growing economic connections with SEA and expanding naval presence in the region are a source of concern for Beijing.

Evolution to Act East Policy

- **Deeper Ties:** India's Act East policy aims to nurture deeper ties with border nations like Myanmar and Bangladesh, which were previously neglected.
- **Countering China's Influence:** The Act East policy seeks to rectify the shortcomings of the earlier Look East Policy, which allowed China to strengthen its foothold in these nations.
- **Regional Integration:** The policy promotes regional integration and cooperation, enhancing India's economic footprint in Southeast Asia.

Economic Dimensions

The economic impact of the Look East Policy has been

substantial. Trade between India and ASEAN grew from \$2.9 billion in 1993 to \$82.5 billion, demonstrating the policy's success in fostering economic ties. Key economic initiatives include

1. Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN and bilateral agreements with specific countries
2. Investment promotion and facilitation
3. Infrastructure development, particularly in India's northeastern states
4. Enhanced connectivity through land, sea, and air links

Strategic Implications The strategic dimension of the Look East Policy has become increasingly prominent, particularly in response to changing regional dynamics. Several key strategic objectives have emerged:

1. **Maritime Security:** The policy has emphasized securing vital sea lanes and enhancing naval cooperation with regional partners.
2. **Regional Balance:** It serves as a strategic tool for countering China's growing regional influence while maintaining regional stability.
3. **Defense Cooperation:** Enhanced military exercises, defense dialogues, and strategic partnerships with key regional players have become central components.

Challenges and Limitations Despite its achievements, the Look East Policy faces several challenges:

1. **Infrastructure Gaps:** The physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia remains inadequate, particularly through the north-eastern states.
2. **Implementation Issues:** The policy's effectiveness has been hampered by slow implementation of various initiatives and projects.
3. **Regional Competition:** China's significant economic and strategic presence in Southeast Asia poses a challenge to India's influence.
4. **Economic Integration:** Despite growing trade volumes, economic integration remains below potential, particularly in terms of supply chain integration.

Future Prospects and Recommendations As India marks ten years of the Act East Policy, several opportunities and recommendations emerge:

1. **Enhanced Digital Connectivity:** Leveraging technology partnerships to strengthen regional integration.
2. **Supply Chain Resilience:** Developing alternative supply chains in partnership with ASEAN countries.
3. **Strategic Convergence:** Deepening security partnerships while maintaining ASEAN centrality.
4. **Infrastructure Development:** Accelerating connectivity projects, particularly in the northeastern region.

Conclusion

India's Look East Policy, and its evolution into the Act East Policy, represents a significant transformation in India's foreign policy orientation. The policy has successfully established India as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, though challenges remain. The policy's future success will depend on India's ability to balance economic interests with strategic imperatives while maintaining the momentum of engagement with its eastern neighbours. In the past, India has neglected to articulate a clear vision for its strategic ambitions in East and Southeast Asia. Historically it has suffered from strategic timidity and poor defence planning

that has impeded its ability to integrate itself into the Asia-Pacific.

The policy's transformation from a primarily economic initiative to a comprehensive strategic framework demonstrates India's growing confidence and capabilities in international affairs. As global power dynamics continue to evolve, the Look East Policy's principles and objectives remain relevant for India's foreign policy goals and regional aspirations.

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