

A Study on India-China Relations under the Act East Policy

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Abstract:

In response to the neighbouring country's aggressive expansionism, the Act East strategy aims to centre economic and political activities in the East. A win-win scenario for India, this expansion of the east's sphere of influence would also boost India's standing in the global economy. With the support of ASEAN and other allies, it is possible to handle China to the Northeast's benefit if it is included in national policy and international agendas. Despite China's decades-long "string of pearls" strategy against India, the tide has begun to turn. Southeast Asian states have a vibrant military-to-military alliance with India and a growing economic engagement with the country. To maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity, India has established military alliances with "Japan, Australia, and the United States (referred to as the 'Quad'). The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project" are two examples of connectivity projects India hopes to move forward quickly to boost regional economic advantages. This strategy follows international norms by not being hostile but increasing activities. As part of the "Act East Policy (AEP)", feasibility is seen as the most important aspect of the country's foreign policy. The move from a "Look East" policy to "Act East" is discussed in this article. China and the North-eastern States were significant areas of concentration

Keywords: Act East Policy, Expansionism, Free Commerce, Look East Policy.

Introduction:

There has been a long-standing relationship between India and Southeast Asia. For millennia, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal have served as a conduit for trade, religion, and

community between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. For most of its history, Southeast Asia's archipelago was heavily influenced by the Indian subcontinent. The British colonial system strengthened these networks by bringing them under the commercial dominion of the colonial state. First Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru saw Southeast Asia as an essential ally of India. A glimmer of the Look East strategy was seen during "the Bandung Conference of 1955, when 29 Asian and African republics" addressed their future international political agendas; nonetheless, when they became independent in the 1960s, the two main groupings of the Cold War had an inevitable influence on their political agenda^[1].

After signing the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) with the United States, South East Asian countries were influenced by capitalism^[2]. It was feared that China's geographic superiority over the other ASEAN countries necessitated the ASEAN nations' desire to establish an American presence in the South Asian Sea. As a means of fostering political and economic cohesion and regional peace, the ten nations of Southeast Asia came together in 1967 to create ASEAN. Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship of 1971, notwithstanding India's nonalignment statement, created friction among ASEAN members since they were apprehensive of Soviet intentions in their area. A closer relationship with the United States and Japan caused ASEAN to distance itself from India. During the Cold War, ASEAN nations saw Indians "as politically dubious, economically insignificant, and at times even militarily dangerous." When Rajiv Gandhi attempted to handle the Cambodian issue with an ASEAN member state, ties between India and ASEAN improved somewhat, but they remained ambiguous and inconsequential throughout the 1980s. The expression "look east" was coined in India in the 1990s when the country began recognizing its eastern neighbours' potential. In other words, the "look east" strategy focuses on the East. Gujral, a former prime minister, sparked the movement. The region was previously ignored for a variety of reasons, including the fact that Southeast Asia was a less desirable business partner than other regions, India's economy was isolated and protective, and third, political leaders at the time had a colonial mindset and thus paid little attention to regional linkages. However, as time passed, it became clear that this first impression was incorrect. During India's globalization, privatization, and liberalization agenda under Narasimha Rao in the 1990s, several good changes occurred in Southeast Asian nations^[3].

Rao conducted economic missions to "Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore" in 1993 and 1994. With the establishment of the "ASEAN Regional Forum in 1995 and the Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC)" in 1995, India took a huge stride forward in its engagement with ASEAN nations. The Look East method was used to build this mutually beneficial

connection. Anxiety was heightened for ASEAN countries around the Indian Ocean's periphery with the purchase of "aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and the opening of FORTAN (Fortress Andaman and Nicobar) joint services facility in Port Blair Islands. India's operations in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal in the 1980s" aggravated the situation on the security front. India's opening of its Port Blair facilities and allowing regional military attachés to begin independent naval drills with Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand eased the situation considerably^[4]. Due to the "trade routes that run through the centre of Southeast Asia also go across the Indian Ocean," nations like Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have a stake in the Indian Ocean because of their size and position. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao made it apparent in the 1990s that the economy, rather than soldiers and weapons, was the primary determinant of Indian security. As it turned out, commerce between India and the ASEAN nations was quite fruitful. More than 80% of India's imports from ASEAN countries and 60% of its exports to ASEAN countries came from this region. In 1995, it was elevated to a full conversation partner with China. "The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation" signed in 2003 by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Bajpayee strengthened the partnership. India-Singapore commerce increased by more than 60% throughout this timeframe. Several compelling reasons to build deeper connections with ASEAN nations throughout his rule. Islamist fundamentalism and extremist organizations first appeared in Southeast Asia^[5].

As a second issue, India was worried that Pakistan would use Bangladesh as a conduit to transport terrorist organizations like "Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT)" and Bangladesh-based Jama'atul Mujahideen (JuM) into India's troublesome northeast, which was already plagued by a terrorism problem. It was vital for India to forge tight ties with regional powers, particularly ASEAN, in light of the shifting world and local political landscapes. The India-ASEAN Strategic Collaboration Agreement was signed in 2012 at the Summit level of partnership. Additional support for this came through "India's participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Ganga-Mekong Initiative (GMI), CSCAP, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus contacts." Within six months of taking office, India's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) administration unveiled its Act East Policy in November 2014. The move from a "Look East" policy to "Act East" is discussed in this article. China and the North-eastern States were significant areas of concentration^[6].

The Transition from “Look East” to “Act East”:

At “the India-ASEAN Summit in Naypyitaw in November 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi” specifically mentioned the conversion of LEP into AEP. Earlier usage of this phrase was made by Sushma Swaraj, the country’s external affairs minister. Analysts believe that Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State of the United States, recommended India shift from focusing on the east to emphasizing the west. This policy has been widely criticized by detractors, although another school of thought emphasizes the uniqueness and rigidity of AEP. According to the data, AEP is a purposeful upgrade of LEP ^[7]. As a result of the evolving circumstances in the area, this is a thoughtful response. Trade with our ASEAN neighbors has grown tremendously due to the separation of AEP from LEP. Focusing on ASEAN and economic integration was a key part of the 1990s Look East strategy of the United States government.

When the Free Commerce Agreement with ASEAN was signed in 2010, trade with ASEAN was \$2 billion; by 2017-18, it had grown to \$72 billion due to the agreement. There have been changes in India’s political ties to these nations. In 1996, India was just a conversation partner; in 2002, it was elevated to summit partner status; and in 2012, it achieved strategic partner status ^[8]. When India launched its Act East Policy in 2014, it emphasized economic integration and the 4Cs (Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, and Capacity Building) in addition to economic integration. For India, the reasons for converting to the AEP policy were as follows:

1. For the north-eastern Indian states to benefit economically from trade routes connecting them with ASEAN countries, which would help them combat insurgencies and terrorist attacks.
2. To deepen ties with its most important regional allies, such as Vietnam.
3. Strategic and economic cooperation with powerful nations such as “the United States, China, Japan, and Australia” is a priority.
4. To counteract regional domestic instability and China’s danger in the South Sea area, as well as its expansionist agenda, via the String of Pearls.
5. To design a marine strategy that addresses “India’s strategic objectives in the Indian Ocean” while keeping the Pacific in mind? India supports “an inclusive, balanced, transparent, and open regional security and cooperation framework”.

When it comes to land, the AEP is more expansive. In contrast to other countries, India adheres to ASEAN’s primacy in East Asian affairs. That ASEAN would see its own need for unity, solidarity, and integration is a goal worth hoping for. The issue of security has been a

top priority for the Indian government. Its stance on the South China Sea has been expressed often and unambiguously ^[9]. India will be satisfied if all nations in this region adhere to international law and standards and self-determination of sea lanes in “the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.” As a result of China’s strong stance, political observers believe that ASEAN’s significance is in jeopardy. For years, the Code of Conduct (COC) and a prior declaration on COC have put ASEAN members at ease with India. In addition to a Project Development Fund of Rs. 500 crores (about \$75 million), the Modi administration has also established a new Line of Credit of \$1 billion to support projects that would maintain the physical and digital connection between ASEAN nations and the Indian subcontinent. All the presidents of these nations believe that ASEAN and India are heading toward a functioning and revitalized partnership.

“The President of the United States emphasized the phrase “Indo-Pacific” during the East Asia summit in 2017 to counter China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Indo-pacific is being used instead of Asia-Pacific to give India greater importance. According to the agreement reached during the summit, India, Japan, and the United States will conduct joint military exercises” ^[10]. “The United States, Japan, India, and Australia” have joined the Quad to keep an eye on China’s expansionist policies (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). This conference will focus on strengthening security relations between India and “Australia in the Indo-Pacific region.” The long-delayed Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) is finally in place.

The AEP isn’t as easygoing as you may think. It has a lot of difficulties. According to observers, a lack of cooperation among ASEAN countries might diminish India’s influence in the area, giving China an even greater edge in setting the regional plan. Secondly, the lack of a rapid military indigenization program is a problem. The problem is that India’s trade imbalance is over \$180 billion, a considerable obstacle. As a result of “the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” (CPEC) construction, tensions between India and Pakistan have been elevated. Beijing has been steadily eroding Indian influence inside Nepal and Bhutan buffer nations ^[11]. However, Southeast Asian states see India as a benevolent force. They appreciate New Delhi’s attempts to counterbalance Beijing, whose presence in South Asia is questionable due to suspicions about Beijing’s intentions.

OBOR, the South China Sea, and China’s String of Pearls are causing a stir in the political arena:

OBOR (also known as “the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI”), China’s partnership with the ASEAN countries, has reduced ASEAN’s significance. By 2025, Beijing hoped to have spent \$110 billion on the project. The “South China Sea, one of the busiest shipping waterways in the world”, is China’s second most sought-after location. Despite its distance of more than 2,000 kilometres from China’s mainland, the Kuomintang government released a geographical marker in 1947, claiming it as their own. According to “the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), any country may use an exclusive economic zone of up to 200 nautical miles”^[12]. Since it’s a vital trade link linking Asia with Europe and Africa, China has resisted giving up its claim to this vast expanse of ocean, which is rich in resources like oil and gas and contains ten percent of the world’s fisheries. Approximately one-third of the world’s shipping, or \$3.37 trillion worth of international commerce, flows via this route annually, and 80 percent of China’s oil imports are transported along this path. Other countries than China claim islands in “the South China Sea” based on diverse explanations of history and geography. The Parcel Islands and the Spratly Islands are only two of the many tiny islands that Vietnam claims as its own. There is a territorial dispute between the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and China over a portion of the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal, a shoal “located in the South China Sea.” Chinese drilling rigs in the Parcel Islands in 2014 caused several incidents between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels, resulting in an outcry in Vietnam ^[13]. Beijing initiated land reclamation works for military outposts on several archipelago islands in the same year.

On the objection of certain ASEAN members, an international tribunal in Hague issued a notice in July 2016 stating that China had no historic rights “in the South China Sea.” Still, Beijing rejected the verdict and maintained its expansionist strategy “in the South China Sea.” The issue arises as to why China is claiming these little islands and freshly created artificial islands surrounding seven reefs as their own. China would gain control of the South China Sea if it claimed sovereignty over these islands. According to many commentators, if it did so, it would immediately gain authority within 200 nautical miles of each island. With the String of Pearls, China dominated the Indian Ocean. Increased maritime influence over sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean area has been a significant benefit for China due to the development of a blue-water fleet and a large number of naval ports^[14]. Developing a string of ports that the country’s navy can reach has been dubbed the “geopolitical theory of pearls” by experts in Western security circles. “In addition to the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Malacca, and the Strait of Lombok, the

sea lines pass via significant marine hubs in Pakistan (Gawadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Bangladesh (Chittagong), the Maldives (Feydhoo), and Djibouti (Feydhoo) (Doraleh)”^[15].

A Series of Measures to Oppose China’s Expansionism:

The dynamic military-to-military connection between “India and Southeast Asian countries” is the foundation of India’s regional ties. Significant military and strategic agreements have been reached with “Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore.” For over a decade, China has pursued a “string of pearls” campaign against India, but things are shifting. This reverse string of pearls approach is being followed by the Modi administration, which aims to take one pearl at a time and leave China with little more than a string ^[16].

As a result of the influence of China, the Indian Ocean, the insurgency and growth in India’s northeast, and the country’s abundant energy resources, Myanmar is a vital geostrategic ally for India. Because it is the only ASEAN country with whom India has land and marine borders, Myanmar is an essential tactical ally. Myanmar’s role as a nascent economic hub for India’s north-eastern region is enhanced by its proximity to South East Asia (NER). India and Myanmar’s commercial ties evolved from barter to regular in 2015. An essential step in cementing bilateral ties was India’s agreement to build a port in Myanmar’s Sittwe region.

Additionally, “India has strengthened its ties with Myanmar” by supporting and training its navy, which has given India an increased impression in the region and allowed India to keep a watch on any country’s expansionist agenda. ASEAN member Vietnam struck a deal with India in 2016 to deepen their Strategic Partnership. The two countries had previously released a joint vision statement for India-Vietnam defence relations for the years 2015-2020 the year before. “India’s AEP relies heavily on the help of Vietnam, according to Prime Minister Modi. Vietnam supports UNSC membership. India and Vietnam can work together on a wide range of issues” ^[17].

It is feared that “China’s expansion in the South China Sea” may lead to tensions between India and Vietnam, which is why both countries wanted to conduct different Indian Ocean-related activities in 2018. India, under Chinese pressure, opted not to withdraw from the Vietnamese oil block “in the South China Sea” and continues to acknowledge the shady island as part of Vietnam’s territorial claims. “The ASEAN, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), Mekong Ganga Cooperation, and the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) were only a few regional forums where the two nations engaged” ^[18]. Due to the unfavourable trade conditions, India has withdrawn from the RCEP, or Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership, to strengthen its economy via “makeup India” and “stand up India.”

Australia, Indonesia, and Gulf Cooperation Council nations are only a few of the Indian Ocean region’s most important military allies. The Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) nations of Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles have forged strong relationships with India and are working to strengthen them further. India has sent numerous warships and helicopters to the Maldives government. Talks are underway between India and Seychelles to set up an Indian military facility on one of their islands. The Mozambique Channel may be seen from India’s military post in Madagascar. The United States is allied with numerous nations bordering the South China Sea, including the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, as part of a broad security commitment in East Asia. In addition, American enterprises that manufacture products in the area utilize “the South China Sea” as an important trading route in the worldwide supply chain. U.S. officials have not formally joined with any of the claimants. Still, they have performed operations to contest Washington’s exorbitant claims and allow free passage of commercial boats on their seas, even though they do not officially affiliate with any claimant. Similar operations were carried out in the disputed seas by British and French soldiers in the summer of 2018^[19]. With “Japan, Australia, and the United States, India” has signed tactical contracts for military cooperation in the area. In the IOR area, the four nations collectively known as QUAD conduct joint military exercises. Due to their proximity to China, India has established diplomatic ties with many Central Asian nations, including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia.

As part of “the Act East Policy,” there is an initiative dubbed Mawam, which aims to strengthen and revitalize cultural linkages of the past.” Connectivity projects in India’s North East are critical to the success of the country’s Act East policy^[20]. Therefore, “India should hasten the projects such as India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project to link India to Myanmar and Thailand.” If India wants to succeed, it must focus on its cultural and civilization advantages. These inks, which stretch back to the earliest days of civilization, are culturally and historically significant (spread of Buddhism and Hinduism). Many Indian freedom fighters have ties to Southeast and East Asian nations throughout the country’s war for independence. The Indian Diasporas will help strengthen India’s cultural and civilization ties with the ASEAN countries, which will benefit the Indian Diasporas.

Conclusion:

Economic and political activity and presence in the region are to be shifted to the East to fight the expansionist neighbour. This is a win-win scenario for the east and India's worldwide economic position. For India, this is a win-win scenario. With the support of ASEAN and other partners, China may be managed to its benefit by putting the Northeast on the national and international policy agendas. Because it is non-aggressive, this approach will assist in establishing credibility abroad. According to the Act East Policy (AEP), the most important aspect of U.S. foreign policy is its viability. As a foundation for India's international relations, it has been characterized as a pillar. Every part of the encounter is covered. It ranges from "Myanmar to China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Pacific Islands, Russia, and the United States," to name a few. Connections. India's national interests will be better protected and promoted by this strategy. The growth of a stable and economically strong India, with close links to the United States, Russia, and many other nations, has allowed India to have confidence in its dealings with China, which in turn has provided stability in the area. The emergence of China and India will reshape Southeast Asia. This strategic triangle connection will define the destiny of the Asia-Pacific region.

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