

INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY AND REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

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Look East Policy to Act East Policy:

Indias Act East policy is diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia Pacific region at different levels. The country eastward drive since 1992 has underscored the importance of the region in its contemporary International Relation. After the end of Second World War the majority of the countries made changes to their economic and strategic policies. It was to align themselves to the changing geopolitical realities. India also realized the importance of southeast Asia in 1992, so it launched a "Look East Policy" The "Look East Policy" of India was initiated by the former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1991. The main focus of this policy was to shift the country's trading focus from the west and neighbors to the booming South East Asian Countries, and has continued to enjoy energetic support from the successive administrations of prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral (1997 – 1998), Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998 – 2004), Manmohan Singh (2004—2014) and this policy continued till the formation of NDA government in 2014 after which the newly formed government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded it to "**ACT EAST POLICY**". The Act East Policy was launched at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. The act east policy under Prime minister Modi includes within its ambit a wider geographical expanse. When in 2014, Prime Minister Modi launched the AEP India's economy was relatively robust and its global profile was higher than it was in the decades prior. The AEP has explained the operational scope of India's earlier look east policy beyond one that is merely focused on economics to one that integrates matter of security in the Indo –Pacific region geostrategies, resulting in a convergence of security aims and a subsequently emerging security cooperation. Security is an important dimension of India's Act East Policy. In the concept of growing Chinese assertiveness in the south china sea and the Indian ocean, **securing freedom of navigation and India's own role in the Indian ocean**, is a key feature of AEP. In pursuance of this, India has been engaged under

the narrative of Indo pacific and informal grouping called **Quad**.

Why Act East:

India and the countries of southeast Asia have significant strategic and economic interests in building closer relations with one another. This realization has triggered India's switch from a "Look East Policy" to an "Act East Policy" in order to deepen its engagement with southeast Asia to counter Chinese influence. India's act east policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic, and cultural relation with the vast Asia –Pacific region at different levels. The country's east ward drive since 1992 has underscored the importance of this region in its contemporary international relation. Act east and its early avatar "Look East" are not different, rather they are two sides of the same coin, representing two different but continuing phase in the evolution of India's policy towards the Asia –pacific region. When India launched LEP in 1991, its own economic strength, its global status and the external environment were not what they are at present. At the time of its launch, India was struggling to transition from a state controlled economic regime to a more liberalized one. It took many years for the country to get adjusted to the newly emerging economic environment, when in 2014, PM Naredra Modi launched the Act East Policy. Modi gave a new thrust to intensity, economic strategic, and diplomatic relation with countries that share common concerns with India on china's growing economics and military strength and its implications for the evolving regional order.

India's AEP is closely connected with its long term vision of developing its North Eastern region (NER) which is considered as a gateway to south east Asia. Since Japan's interests in the NER are deeply rooted in history there is a broad bilateral consensus cooperate for the development of the region. Under the AEP THE India, Japan strategic partnership has been lifted to an entirely new level, underscoring the importance of Indo –pacific that is free, open and inclusive, and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules based order. India has placed the "Indo – pacific" at the

heart of its engagement with the countries of south, southeast and East Asia. Further local insurgencies, disorder and even external interference considerably came in the way of the region's progress. The act east policy serves two purposes for the government, stronger trade and business ties with other South East Asian countries and development opportunities to the North –East states, and development is the best anecdote to insurgency, a senior home ministry official said requesting anonymity. It has been established by several experts that while “Look East” policy was primarily ASEAN specific. “Act East” policy was primarily ASEAN specific. “Act East” policy has covered abroad range of countries located eastward to India.

The act east policy, with a focus on an extended neighbourhood in the Asia – pacific region has been the cornerstone of India's diplomacy in the current decade while it was originally conceived as an economic initiative, in recent years, it has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions, including the establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and co-operation. India has upgraded its relations to a strategic partnership with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Republic Korea, Australia, Singapore, and has thus forged closed ties with all countries in the Asia – Pacific. The act east policy has laid emphasis on India – ASEAN co-operation for our domestic agenda on infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, skill India, urban renewal, Smart cities, Make in India and other initiatives.

Under the AEP, New Delhi has purposefully intensified its engagement in the Asia – Pacific region. India and countries in the region have come together on a number of issues, ranging from joint military exercise to high level visits, which illustrate the increasing strength of political and military ties. Having secured support from the US and some countries in the region, India is now looking to expand its presence in the South China Sea. The Asia Pacific region has come to have more strategic importance for international society, in part because of China's rise and US rebalance to Asia. The India's AEP is relying on the 4C's that is **Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, Capacity building** to develop better relations with ASEAN nations. The AEP along with several initiatives launched by New Delhi for rapid economic development of the country “**Digital India**”, “**Make in India**”, **promoting energy security, creating infrastructure**, can be considered with the increasing confidence in the region. As

described by prime minister Modi India's vision for the region is **SAGAR- Security for All and Growth for All**.

North East in India's AEP has emphasised infrastructure development in the NER, including rail and road network with timeline for completion of connectivity projects: Trilateral Highway, collaboration of ASEAN, Japan and other players are being obtained for infrastructure development. The objective of Act East Policy is

Objective of “Act East Policy”

- The objective of act east policy is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia – Pacific region.
- The North East of India has been a priority in the Act East Policy.
- Closer cooperation in combating terrorism, collaborating for peace and stability in the region.
- AEP provides an interface between North East and ASEAN region.

Evaluation of Act East Policy:

- **AEP has imparted greater vigor to India's ties with ASEAN.**
- **India's partnership** with Japan, Australia, Pacific Island nations, South Korea, and Mongolia.
- By aligning India's AEP with the U.S. pivot to Asia, India seeks to expand its geo-strategic space to contend with china's growing assertiveness and foster balanced relations.
- India's AEP has also impacted relations with the United States.

Road Connectivity and Trade:

- India helped Myanmar in completing 160 km of the Tamu- Kalewa- Kalemmyo sector of the proposed Trilateral Highway that seeks to link India, Myanmar, and Thailand.
- Access to sea port in Bangladesh that would link the North East to South East Asian countries, and also to mainland India.
- By pursuing the Mekong- India Economic Corridor project, India seeks to get access to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Concerns and Challenges:

- Better connectivity can promote not only legal trade, but also prop up illegal trade in drugs, small arms, and human trafficking.

- Trade and business not connected to the lives and to the day- to –day needs of the people, may prove to be counterproductive.
- One of the few mega biodiversity regions in the world might be impacted by pollution and fragmentation of habitat.
- All countries of the region, except China are dependent on external funding or are required to allocate significant proportion of their budgets for these projects, which is a tough task. * Defence cooperation has increased with East Asian countries. In 2014 India and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that opened up a line of credit for Vietnam to purchase defence equipment from India. * Similarly the first summit of QUAD grouping took place in 2021 * Recently India has reached out to far east economies especially Russia. India has announced to extend a \$1 billion line of credit towards development of Russian for east. This is important as it is an energy- rich region and would help India's economic growth.

Conclusion:

India has embarked on a period of radical change in its foreign and economics policies. The changes in the international affairs have been perhaps less dramatic but in numerous cases little less sweeping. The causes are also influenced by China's BRI. In today's multi-polar world, countries have to be imaginative in building new constituencies and seeking new partnership.

India's AEP must continue to focus on strengthening collaboration with the ASEAN, Partnership must aim at promoting economic revival through implementation of India- ASEAN FTA in services and investment, strategic cooperation to fight terrorism, freedom of navigation, maritime security and defense cooperation. India has embarked on a period of radical changes in its foreign and economic policies. The changes in the international affairs has been perhaps less dramatic but in numerous cases little less sweeping. As China is expanding its trade and soft power with the help of initiatives such as One Belt One Road it is imperative for India to seek a global alliance to mitigate the Chinese risk. The global world order and trade environment have been changing dramatically specially after the spread of COVID 19 pandemic a long term outlook is required which will be mandatory for ensuring global peace stability and fostering trade.

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