



INDIA'S LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST POLICY TRANSFORMATION UNDER MODI GOVERNMENT

Dr. Om Prakash Dahiya

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of Political Science,
Zakir Husain Delhi College (Eve.)
University of Delhi.
Email: opdjnu@gmail.com

In the 21st Century India shares overlapping interests with countries of Southeast Asia and South Pacific. Much of the new narrative has been shaped by the process of globalisation and the emergence of new regional complexities which compelled India to introspect and overhaul its foreign policy towards the countries to its east.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government of India has made its relations with East Asian and South Pacific neighbours, a foreign policy priority at a time when the United States has engaged in a "pivot to Asia" policy. From the very beginning the Modi government made it clear that India would focus more and more on improving relations with ASEAN and other East Asian countries as per India's Look East Policy. The Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj in her visit to Hanoi, Vietnam in 2014, proposed a new outlook calling it *Act East Policy*, replaced India's *Look East Policy*, introduced during the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1992 for better economic engagement with its eastern neighbours. It will emphasize a more proactive role and a tool for forging strategic partnership and security cooperation in the region.

The paradigm shift in India's policy was based on realism and pragmatism, leading to India's Look East Policy laying down the conceptual framework for engaging Southeast Asia and later South Pacific. Today, the shaping of Act East Policy, reiterates India's commitment towards the



East Asian region and India's roadmap of building closer ties with the countries of the region. Modi Government's foreign policy priorities towards the countries of Southeast Asia and South Pacific reflect and expected to lead a better understanding of the region.

India's Act East Policy focused on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. The policy which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions including establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. India has upgraded its relations to strategic partnership with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Singapore and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forged close ties with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Further, apart from ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS), India has also been actively engaged in regional fora such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Act East Policy has placed emphasis on India-ASEAN cooperation in our domestic agenda on infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, skills, urban renewal, smart cities, Make in India and other initiatives. Connectivity projects, cooperation in space, Science & Technology and people-to-people exchanges could become a springboard for regional integration and prosperity.

The Objective of "Act East Policy" is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the States of North Eastern Region including Arunachal Pradesh with other countries in our neighbourhood. The North East of India has been a priority in our Act East Policy (AEP). AEP provided an interface between North East India including the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the ASEAN region. Various plans at bilateral and regional levels include steady efforts to develop and strengthen connectivity of Northeast with the ASEAN region through trade, culture, people-to-people contacts and physical infrastructure (road,



airport, telecommunication, power, etc.). Some of the major projects include Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project, Rhi-Tiddim Road Project, Border Haats, etc.

The ASEAN-India Plan of Action for the period 2016-20 has been adopted in August 2015 which identifies concrete initiatives and areas of cooperation along the three pillars of political-security, economic and socio-cultural. India continued with stepped up efforts to forge closer partnership with concerned regional and Multilateral organisation such as ASEAN, ARF, EAS, BIMSTEC, ACD, MCG and IORA. On the Civilizational front, Buddhist and Hindu links could be energized to develop new contacts and connectivity between people.

On Connectivity, special efforts are being made to develop a coherent strategy, particularly for linking ASEAN with our North East. Measures, including building transport infrastructure, encouraging airlines to enhance connectivity in the region, contacts between academic and cultural institutions are underway. India's economic engagement with ASEAN has been stepped up – regional integration and implementation of projects are priorities. The ASEAN-India Agreement on Trade in Service and Investments has entered into force for India and seven ASEAN countries from 1 July 2015. The ASEAN-India Trade Negotiating Committee has been tasked to undertake a review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement. India has also invited ASEAN member states to participate in the International Solar Alliance which it has co-launched with France on 30 November 2015 at COP-21. On strategic issues, India has increasing convergence on security interests with key partners both in bilateral and multilateral format. Closer cooperation in combating terrorism, collaborating for peace and stability in the region and promotion of maritime security based on international norms and laws are being pursued.

PM Modi emphasized his believe on 21st century being the Asian century and also asked whether it would be the Indian Century. China, Japan and India being the first, second and third



largest Asian economy respectively are among the most likely to lead the strategically important Asia in the later part of this century. But, China's increasingly assertive postures in the region in recent years have raised concerns in the respective quarters. It seems Modi's foreign policy is focused on improving bilateral relations to higher levels with strategically located Asian countries like Japan, Vietnam, and Australia without forging any formal security alliance in the Indo-Pacific region to avoid direct confrontation with China. India, due to its good relation with both Russia and United States, is often considered to be the swing state in the race for strategic dominance in Asia between the democratic alliance of Japan and US and China-Russia club on the other hand.

Partnership with East and Southeast Asia

Japan

Japan occupies a very important place in Modi's Asian strategy or LEP, as India is looking toward Japan, at a time when it is becoming 'normal state' amending decades old pacifist constitution, to forge a security alliance to balance an increasingly assertive China in the Indo-Pacific region. Maritime cooperation is most likely and bilateral naval exercises are on the cards. Significantly in 2014, Japan participated in the Malabar, a primarily bilateral naval exercise between India and US, held in Sea of Japan. Negotiations progressed recently for selling of US 2 amphibious aircraft to Indian Navy and the long pending civil nuclear agreements which would eventually help strengthen the strategic partnership.

Modi visited Japan on a five-day official Visit from 30 August to 3 September 2014, which was labelled as his first bilateral state visit outside the subcontinent. His visit further strengthened the ties between the two countries and resulted in several key agreements, including the elevating the already established strategic partnership to the "Special Strategic Global Partnership". Business ties are stronger than ever with a commitment of US\$33.5 billion Japanese investment in India in the next five year. India is in the process of importing Shinkansen technology form Japan as part of Modi's Diamond Quadrilateral project for introducing high-speed rail in India.



China

Prior to election, Modi had expressed reservation over alleged Chinese 'expansionism' into India's frontiers as India and China locked into bitter territorial disputes over last fifty years. During his Japan trip, Modi has said eighteenth century mind-set of *vistaar-vad* or expansionism won't work and *vikaash-vad* or peaceful development is needed for sustainable peace and tranquility in the world which was understood by media specially pointed towards China. But he is also in favour of enhanced economic partnership with China.

Economic activity defines relation with China as it is India's biggest trading partner in goods. Soon after taking office commerce, Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has already made two visits to China. The two countries have forged a mechanism called 'strategic and economic dialogue' (SED) to discuss the trade and other economic issues. Modi has publicly expressed his willingness to enhance trade and economic cooperation with China. Describing the newly found activism in bilateral relation, Modi said India China relation moving "INCH (India-China) towards MILES (Millennium of Enhanced Synergy)".

Republic of Korea

According to Modi, South Korea features prominently in India's Act East policy where it can play important role both in term of economic and strategic partnership. Modi visited South Korea as part of his East Asia tour on 18-19 May 2015 at the invitation of President Park Geun-hye. Modi's visit came after a series of high profile ministerial visits including Foreign Minister, Defense Minister and Commerce Minister from India to Seoul which demonstrates the depth of India-South Korea strategic relationship. During Modi's visit the two sides agreed to upgrade their relation to "special strategic relations" and also re-energized the comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) signed five years ago. Modi also stressed on the need of South Korean defense majors investing in India as per Make in India initiative where he particularly impressed by Korean shipbuilding capacity.



Australia

Prime Minister Tony Abbott of Australia was the first head of government to make a state visit to India in September 2014, which shows the importance both side attaches to their relations. The most significant event of his tour was the signing of a civil nuclear energy cooperation agreement for supplying uranium (Australia is believed to have one-third of world's total uranium reserve) to India. The nuclear deal is a further step toward India achieving international acceptability for its nuclear programme despite not signing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and follows similar agreements with the United States and France. The two sides also agreed to enhance Maritime security cooperation in the Indo-pacific region and future joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean. During the joint statement following the summit Australian PM Abbott referred India as a model citizen in terms of following International guidelines justifying the nuclear deal beyond the scope of NPT and called 'India the emerging democratic superpower'.

Myanmar

Despite sharing a long border with India Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) often left out of India's neighbourhood policy, but lately Myanmar was identified as India's gateway to the Southeast Asia and therefore the focus is on rebuilding the historic relations between the two countries. Modi visited the eastern neighbour to attend a couple of multilateral meetings including the East Asia Summit in 2014. He met President Thein Sein on 11 November 2014 and they identified three 'C's to strengthen their bilateral relations, those are connectivity, cultural links and people to people contacts. Among which connectivity is all set to get a big boost with projects like upcoming Imphal-Mandalaya Bus service, India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project and the two sides also focused on the need of direct air links. The two sides also discussed the possibility of Indian investment in Myanmar's special economic zones and ways to enhance bilateral trade which stands at US\$2 billion, well below the potential.



Singapore

Singapore is amongst the top source countries of foreign direct investment (FDI) coming to India. Economic cooperation dominates the India Singapore relations given Singapore's strategic importance in India's 'Look East' policy. External Affairs Minister Swaraj visited Singapore on 16 August 2014, where she held talks with her counterpart Shanmugam and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong regarding Singapore's investment in India and their potential role in Modi's government smart city project.

The former Singaporean Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, visited India on 10 September 2014, and held several high-level meetings with the Indian prime minister and other ministers; later in conversation with a selected members from the media he referred to the former Indian Prime Minister, Vajpeyee, as a scholar, but Modi is a "Man of Action", while reassuring once again his country's full cooperation on the smart city project.

Vietnam

Vietnam, strategically located in the South China Sea, plays a pivotal role in its "Look East policy". Defence and security cooperation in recent years define the strategic partnership with India. President Pranab Mukherjee Visit in Sept. 2014 called Vietnam, "a trusted friend and an important pillar of India's Look East Policy" which emphasized the depth of their strategic partnership. The leaders reiterated their desire and determination to work together to maintain peace, stability, growth and prosperity in Asia. And the two side vouched for 'freedom of navigation' in the South China Sea, which China claims as its exclusive economic zone, and called the parties concerned to exercise restraint, avoid threat or use of force and resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea-1982.

India-Vietnamese defence cooperation has multiplied in recent years with emphasize on maritime security which includes training of Vietnamese naval personnel with Indian naval ships making frequent port-call in Vietnam in past few years. Recently it extended a US\$100 m



Line of Credit for purchase of Fast attack craft for Vietnamese navy from India. Vietnam is also interested in acquiring Brahmos supersonic missiles, an Indo-Russian joint venture project, Vietnam has friendly relation with both Russia and India a precondition for exporting the missile system and talks regarding the deal is believed to be in the advanced level.

Agreements signed in oil exploration cooperation between India and Vietnam as it earlier offered India to explore strategically located oil blocks in South China Sea, which is disputed by Chinese claims. On the following day Chinese Foreign Ministry through an official media statement expressed its objection to India's activity in what it refers its exclusive economic zone. External Affairs Minister earlier during her Hanoi trip said the state-owned ONGC Videsh will exploit the opportunity provided in Vietnam, a development China sees as an aggression into its backyard. Economic ties are fast growing with US\$8 billion bilateral trade and the two sides emphasized the need of increasing people to people contact which is set to get a boost with upcoming launch of direct flight between Delhi and Ho Chi Minh City and using Bollywood to promote Vietnam to Indian audience.

ASEAN

During his third visit to the India-ASEAN Summit, PM Modi asserted that “ASEAN is central to India's 'Act East' Policy. ASEAN is not just about a solid base of shared civilizational heritage. It is also driven by common strategic priorities of securing societies and bringing peace, stability and prosperity to the region. And, our ties are a source of balance and harmony in the region”.

The substance of strategic partnership covers all three major segments of ASEAN activities- security, economic and socio-cultural. And, the ASEAN-India Plan of Action for the period 2016-2020 has served well in fulfilling different objectives. The Modi Govt. has implemented 54 out of 130 activities identified in the Plan of Action.

In face of growing traditional and non-traditional challenges, politico-security cooperation is a key emerging pillar of India-ASEAN relationship. Rising export of terror, growing



radicalization through ideology of hatred, and spread of extreme violence define the landscape of common security threats to societies. The threat is local, regional and transnational at the same time. India's partnership with ASEAN seeks to craft a response that relies on coordination, cooperation and sharing of experiences at multiple levels.

This year, India is celebrating 25 years of Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN countries. It was on 28 January 1992 at the 4th ASEAN Summit in Singapore that a decision to establish a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership between ASEAN and India was made. Since then, the relationship has progressed from strength to strength, with the two sides becoming full dialogue partners in 1996, Summit partners in 2002 and Strategic Partners in 2012. In his message to President Duterte of Philippines, (current Chair of ASEAN) the Prime Minister Modi observed that the "Act East Policy" is a reflection of the importance we attach to our strategic partnership with ASEAN. He reaffirmed India's desire to deepen its engagement with ASEAN, "so that it may scale new heights and constitute a defining partnership of our times." A series of events have been planned through the year to reflect the commemorative year's theme of "Shared Values, Common Destiny," which aptly reflects the close cultural and civilizational links that India and South East Asia have enjoyed over two millennia. Elucidating the same, EAM in her message stated that the celebrations would span the political, economic, cultural and people-to-people domains and would include a special Commemorative Summit and a Commemorative Foreign Ministers' Meeting in India. In addition, a Youth Summit, a Business Summit, CEOs Forum, Regional Indian Diaspora Meet, car rally, sailing expedition, conferences, public competitions and cultural festivals are also planned in India as well as ASEAN countries.

It may be recalled that there are today 30 dialogue mechanisms between India and ASEAN, including a Summit and 7 Ministerial meetings in a wide range of sectors such as Foreign Affairs, Commerce, Tourism, Agriculture, Environment, Renewable Energy and Telecommunications. India and ASEAN shared deep economic ties. ASEAN is India's 4th largest trading partner, accounting for 10.2% of India's total trade. India is ASEAN's 7th largest



trading partner. Investment flows are also robust both ways, with Singapore being the principal hub for both inward and outward investment. PM Modi in his message urged ASEAN for its support for reaping the full benefits of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area in Goods, Services and Investment, which has been in place since July 2015.

President Duterte of Philippines, in his congratulatory message praised the ground- breaking initiatives taken by India across the political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars of the ASEAN-India strategic partnership for mutual benefit. He noted that ASEAN-India relations have contributed to the maintenance of peace, stability and prosperity in the region, and that ASEAN looked forward to further invigorating trade and investment relations with India. He expressed special appreciation for India's commitment of a USD 1 billion line of credit for connectivity with ASEAN as well as for undertaking initiatives for narrowing the development gap within ASEAN.

This view of the future contours of the partnership was also echoed by the ASEAN Secretary General who in his message stated that ASEAN remained committed to working closely with India with a view to bringing the ASEAN- India Strategic Partnership to new heights. He looked forward to India's continued support for ASEAN's Community building efforts, including the implementation of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.

Table 1: Indian Leadership Visits to Southeast Asia and South Pacific

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| <u>Vice President visit to China (June 26-30, 2014)</u> | <u>Prime Minister to China (May 14-16, 2015)</u> |
| <u>External Affairs Minister to Singapore (August 15-17, 2014)</u> | <u>External Affairs Minister to Thailand (June 27- 29, 2015)</u> |
| <u>External Affairs Minister to Vietnam August 25, 2014</u> | <u>Vice President to Lao PDR (September 17-18, 2015)</u> |
| <u>PM's Japan Visit 30 August-03 September 2014</u> | <u>Vice President to Cambodia(September 15-17, 2015)</u> |
| <u>President to Vietnam (September 14-17, 2014)</u> | <u>Vice President to Indonesia (November 1-4, 2015)</u> |
| <u>Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar (November 11-13, 2014)</u> | <u>Prime Minister to Singapore (November 23-24, 2015)</u> |
| <u>Prime Minister's visit to Australia (November 14-18,</u> | <u>Prime Minister to Malaysia (November 21- 23, 2015)</u> |
| | <u>Vice President to Thailand (February 03-05, 2016)</u> |



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| <u>2014)</u> <u>Prime Minister to Fiji (November 19, 2014)</u> <u>External Affairs Minister to Republic of Korea (December 28-30, 2014)</u> <u>External Affairs Minister to China (February 01-03, 2015)</u> <u>External Affairs Minister to Indonesia (April 21-24, 2015)</u> <u>Prime Minister to Republic of Korea (May 18-19, 2015)</u> | <u>Vice President to Brunei (February 01-03, 2016)</u> <u>President to Papua New Guinea (April 28-29, 2016)</u> <u>President to New Zealand (April 30-02 May 2016)</u> <u>External Affairs Minister to Myanmar (August 22, 2016)</u> <u>Prime Minister to Vietnam (September 02-03, 2016)</u> <u>Prime Minister to China (September 03-05, 2016)</u> <u>Prime Minister to Lao PDR (September 07-08, 2016)</u> |
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Conclusion

Almost completing half of its first term, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in India, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, can feel satisfied with the progress on its Act East Policy (AEP), which was launched at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. Some analysts seek to dismiss the transformation from the Look East Policy (LEP), initiated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992, to AEP arguing that it merely represents a change in nomenclature. A closer look would reveal that while there is continuity, there are several significant areas where AEP has gone far beyond what LEP achieved in 20-plus years.

Under rapidly changing geopolitical realities, defined by the assertive rise of China, AEP has imparted greater vigor to India's ties with ASEAN and East Asia. This is reflected in travel by India's top leadership — president, vice president, and prime minister — to 9 out of 10 ASEAN states and East Asian nations as well as South Pacific nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and PNG over less than 3 years of its term. Accordingly, relations with ASEAN and East Asia have become multi-faceted to encompass security, strategic, political, counterterrorism, and defense collaboration in addition to economic ties. Cooperation to curb terrorism, especially in face of rising influence of Islamic State has assumed priority. Technology transfer, civilian nuclear cooperation, defence, and innovation are important sectors that need to be targeted. Continuous engagement with China too is necessary to expand cooperation, particularly on the



economic front. With India being the second largest shareholder of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and an equal partner in the National Development Bank (NDB), the forthcoming decades must ensure that areas of conflict are minimised and economic integration for the benefit of both nations are fully leveraged.

Modi has also sought to rejuvenate ties with countries that have been neglected in recent years, including Australia, which saw the first visit by an Indian prime minister in 28 years; Fiji (the first visit in 33 years) and Mongolia, which hosted the Indian prime minister for the first time ever. At the same time, Modi sought to develop normal ties with China by hosting President Xi Jinping in September 2014 and paying a reciprocal visit in May 2015.

China looks discomfort on India's 'Act East' Policy implementation because China believes that South East Asia and the Western Pacific littoral is China's strategic backyard and India has no business in interloping into the region. China can therefore be expected to indulge in some deft manoeuvring in limiting India's growing influence especially enlisting countries like Indonesia, Laos and Cambodia and possibly Thailand also. Comparatively, India under Prime Minister Modi has been successful in establishing a Special Strategic Partnership with Japan and strategic partnerships with South Korea and the Philippines. India also has a strong and traditional Strategic Partnership with Vietnam where defence and security relationships are being substantially being reinforced.

Notably, India's 'Act East' Policy strengthening of defence and security relationships coincides and rests on Indo Pacific countries which constitute the Outer Perimeter of United States security ring of defence of Continental United States. It may just be coincidental arising from these countries similar strategic concerns on China's not so peaceful rise endangering regional security.

Strategically fortuitous is the emerging strategic reality that portends well for the future stability and security of Indo Pacific Asia is the growing strategic congruencies of India with the United



States, Japan, Vietnam and Australia. While this does not portend the emergence of a military alliance of these strategically like-minded nations but it is a strong pointer that despite the absence of a formal military alliance structure there exists strategic space for a loose military cooperative framework. This itself puts in place an existential strategic counterweight of balancing a China bent on crafting a China-centric order in Indo Pacific Asia.

These are early days for Act East Policy. In the coming years India must continue to focus on further strengthening collaboration with ASEAN nations and others. Partners must work to promote economic revival, seek strategic cooperation to fight terrorism, and enhance maritime security and defense cooperation. In addition, Modi's use of soft power such as Buddhism, tourism, people-to-people contacts, and cultural ties with the region must continue to be harnessed.

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