



INDIA'S SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLICY: FROM LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST

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Abstract:

In the changed international relations, India became increasingly aware of the growing trend towards regionalism and emergence of South East Asian region as a potent economic bloc. With India losing a long time economic and military partner with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and growing trend of regionalism made India to rethink its foreign policy. Having lost the economic and political support of erstwhile USSR after its collapse, India started looking for new partners for its economic and political aspirations. Accordingly, India was quick to put emphasis on building meaningful cooperative relations with ASEAN region. Consequently, in 1991 India launched Look East Policy under the Prime Ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao to establish closer cooperative ties with the South East Asian and East Asian region based on shared historical connections.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Look East Policy, Act East Policy, ASEAN, Engagement.

INTRODUCTION:

The initiation of Look East Policy now known as 'Act East Policy', in the early 1990s by India is a turning point in India's foreign policy vis-a-vis South East Asia and East Asia. The launch of the Look East Policy was driven by several important factors in the backdrop of changed international environment. The early 1990s brought dramatic changes in international politics which transformed the nature of world politics. The end of Cold War and disintegration of erstwhile USSR brought far-reaching changes in international relations. "First, there has been a growing interdependence between countries and second, economic and trade issues are gaining vital precedence over the political and military ones."ⁱ In the changed international relations nations are found to have actively involved in economic blocs. Thus, "the world, previously polarised by an ideological struggle, rapidly changed into economic blocs."ⁱⁱ In the backdrop of these fast changing international events, India's Look



East Policy has emerged as an important foreign policy initiative in the post-Cold War period. The Look East Policy was launched in 1991 by the P.V Narasimha Rao government with an objective of developing political contacts, reviving people to people interaction, increasing economic integration and forging security cooperation with countries of South East Asia. The policy aims at marking a major shift in India's foreign policy with the economic and strategic importance of South East Asia to India's national interests being recognised.

End of Cold War and the subsequent changes in international relations had led to the emergence of regional blocs. The end of Cold War has brought about a fundamental change in the international system, which focuses on the economic content of relations and has led to the growth of regional economic blocs. According to Hans van Ginkel, "regional integration is the process by which states within a particular region increase their level of integration with regard to economic, security, political and also socio-cultural issues."ⁱⁱⁱ As a result many states became increasingly aware of the importance of engaging with these regional blocs because of its importance in realising the economic objectives of states. As such in the post-Cold War period "regional integration came to be considered as an effective means to serve the economic and commercial objectives of these states."^{iv}

The change in the international system, the rise of the ASEAN and the radical shift in India's economic and strategic circumstances caused India "to pay more attention to the rapidly growing ASEAN economies."^v India in its search for reliable economic partner started to look for developing closer cooperative ties with the South East Asian region. The emergence of ASEAN as a promising economic bloc made New Delhi to turn to Southeast Asian region as one of the major economic and strategic partners. Accordingly, "as a part of the post-Cold War foreign policy reconstruction the Look East Policy recognized the regional actors of trade instead of the super-powers."^{vi} Thus, the end of the Cold War and subsequent changes in the international politics has led India to follow a more pragmatic approach in its foreign policy leading to the birth of Look East Policy. The Look East Policy was vocalized in 1992 and the term 'Look East' was mentioned for the first time in the Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 1996.^{vii} India in its pursuit for closer relation with ASEAN region emphasised on long historical and cultural ties that it shares with Southeast



Asian countries and based on these it stressed on building a strong political, cultural, economic and security relationship with the region.

The Look East Policy means “looking eastwards for fostering newer ties with the immediate neighbours of Southeast Asia.”^{viii} In India’s Look East Policy, ‘East’ refers to the Southeast Asian and East Asian region. In the post Cold War era India’s Look East Policy became a driving factor in India’s pursuit for forging a warm relations with the South East Asian countries. The Look East Policy perceived South East Asian region as crucial partner in India’s venture to secure not only economic interests but also to gain strategic footing in the region. As such under the Look East Policy framework India outlines three prolonged approaches towards the ASEAN region: First “to re-establish political contacts and understanding between India and ASEAN nations,” second “to achieve enhanced economic engagement with the ASEAN countries and finally to strengthen defence and strategic ties with the countries of South East Asia and East Asia.”^{ix} Thus, the major objective behind the Look East Policy was a “strategy to connect with Asian partners to expand engagement with the rest of the world.”^x Through Look East Policy India is aiming to serve its future economic and political interests by greater integration with Southeast Asian and East Asian nations.

Historically, India’s contact and relations with Southeast Asia evolved in four different waves over the centuries. S.D. Muni writes:^{xi}

The first wave was cultural engagement between India and its extended eastern neighbours that lasted until the 12th-13th centuries. During this period, the first Hindu Empire, what later became the Indo-China region, flourished based entirely on cultural and philosophical contacts with India. The second wave was initiated during the British period. Search for capital and market expansion led British look at the east. In second wave strategic interests of India was given prominence together with the commercial interests. The third wave was initiated by Jawaharlal Nehru post independence by emphasising on East Asia as a crucial part of India’s policy of Asian resurgence. In this regard Nehru called the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947 in which he envisaged closer ties with the East. The fourth and final wave took the initiative of opening up to the South East and East Asian region which was driven by strategic compulsions. This happened after the Indian economy came under the spell of global economy. Fourth and the current wave of India’s LEP which was initiated by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao is being driven by the economic necessity and geo-



strategic compulsion in post Cold War period. Hence India's LEP in its current manifestation is said to be largely driven by India's economic imperatives and strategic considerations.

Look East Policy is thus, a policy which aims at achieving greater political and economic engagement with the Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. India's initiation of the Look East Policy in 1991 is considered as a turning point in its venture into the South East Asia and East Asia. The policy was brought into effect in the backdrop of changed international relations, various compulsions, changed perception and changes in the geo-strategic environment. Further, factors like the introduction of economic reforms in the country and India's growing concerns of China's increasing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region, made India to rethink its South East Asia policy which consequently led to the launch of the Look East Policy. India's Look East Policy represented a reorientation of its foreign economic policy in the post Cold War period. The launch of Look East Policy clearly indicated that "East Asia would be integral to India's economic opening. The region would no longer be overlooked, as it had been by India's previous foreign economic policy."^{xii} With the introduction of economic reform in the country in the early years of 1990s and the subsequent opening of the doors for the process of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation India looked for new economic partners. Accordingly, the ASEAN region was singled out as India's prospective economic and strategic partner.

The Look East Policy provided India with necessary push "to revitalize India's ties with Southeast Asia and to forge a close association with ASEAN that further diversified the range of cooperation."^{xiii} With the initiation of Look East Policy India made a remarkable progress in establishing close bilateral relations with Southeast Asian nations. India's continuous effort to forge closer ties with the ASEAN bore fruit when in 1993 India- ASEAN relationship was upgraded to a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in three critical areas i.e., trade, investment and tourism. Another major development in India's ASEAN policy came with the up-gradation of India to a Full Dialogue Partnership at the 5th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, in December 1995. These desired positive developments led to the growth in Indo-ASEAN partnership not only in economic spheres but also in the area of security linkages which eventually resulted in India's admission to the ASEAN Regional Forum^{xiv} (ARF) in 1996.



With these critical developments India was able to found its place in the greater Asia-Pacific region since “India’s admission to the ARF signifies the acceptance of its role and position in the Asia-Pacific region.”^{xv}

The year 2001 saw another major development in Indo-ASEAN relationship when India became a Summit-level partner of ASEAN at par with China, Japan and South Korea. With this development India’s Look East Policy entered its second phase. In the second phase, the Look East Policy became “more comprehensive in its coverage, extending from Australia to the countries of East Asia with Southeast Asia as its core.”^{xvi} The second phase of the Policy helped India to see beyond ASEAN members to “embrace countries from East Asia and Asia Pacific, including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.”^{xvii}

Chakraborty and Ray^{xviii} in *The Look East Policy and Northeast India* argue that in the new phase the Look East Policy shifted its focus to economic and security issues. On the economic side, the second phase made arrangements for Free Trade Agreement^{xix} (FTA) and institutional economic linkages between India and the countries of South East Asia and on the security issues both India and ASEAN made arrangements for joint effort to protect sea-lanes, coordination on counter terrorism etc. It was argued that cooperation on economic and security issues would help India to not only strengthen its economic status but also its standing in the region as emerging power.

LOOK EAST POLICY TO ACT EAST POLICY

A major change in India’s Look East Policy came when it was rechristened and redefined into ‘Act East Policy’. On August 24, 2014 the former Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj while addressing a gathering in Vietnam declared in a statement that “we must Act East and not just Look East.”^{xx} She further said that Act East Policy would replace the two decades old Look East Policy. This new coinage was also mentioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his opening statement at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit held in November 2014 at the Myanmar capital Nay Pyi Taw. During his address Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that “India’s Look East Policy has become Act East Policy.”^{xxi} These statements implied that the new government under the leadership of Prime Minister



Narendra Modi wanted to give new boost to two decades old policy of India towards Southeast Asian neighbours in the form of Act East Policy. According to the Ministry of External Affairs the Act East Policy envisages accelerated engagement between the two growth poles of a vibrant Asia.^{xxii} Although the Act East Policy retained the spirit and rationale of Look East Policy, the Government's move to make the policy more proactive and result oriented had led to a change in its nomenclature. Act East Policy in its present form aims to establish meaningful and constructive engagement between India and Southeast Asia countries and wider Asia-Pacific.

The transition of Look East Policy into Act East Policy was necessitated by the evolving regional dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region. Discussing the factors that had led to the transition of India's Look East Policy to Act East Policy, Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy writes:^{xxiii}

At least six key factors had triggered a shift in India's gear from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy. First, China's growing assertiveness vis-à-vis its neighbours and its strong position on the South China Sea issue have become a matter of strategic concern for the countries in the region as well as for India. Second, India's relations with China have become more difficult. Fear of India losing ground to China had changed India's approach and narrative. Third, due to the unaccommodating and often confrontational positions of some of the powers in the region, India's deepening economic and security engagement with the Asia Pacific region is seen as a factor of stability by many countries. Fourth, with countries in the region negotiating a number of regional trade agreements it is, thus, natural for India to step up its engagements with the region. Fifth, the most important factor which led to the shift from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy was the recognition that India's northeast region lay at the heart of India's eastward engagement. Finally, the dynamics of internal growth and the developmental agenda of the Modi government need active external cooperation. New Delhi wanted to make the countries in Asia-Pacific partners in India's growth story.

Thus, it can be said that India's Act East Policy is actually an upgraded version of the Look East Policy. "The policy which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions."^{xxiv} The Act East Policy outlines certain important features which makes it different from its earlier manifestation. In its present form



the Act East Policy recognises the importance of the northeast region in connecting with the Southeast Asia. Under the new orientation, the northeast region of India has been accorded an important place in the Look East Policy design.

CONCLUSION

In its new avatar, the Act East Policy which was originally initiated as an economic policy in its previous form has embraced political, cultural and strategic dimensions. Today, the objectives of Act East Policy includes promotion of economic cooperation, strengthening cultural ties and developing strategic partnership with countries in the Southeast Asian region through positive and continuous engagement at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels.

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