



India's evolution from Look East Policy to Act East Policy

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ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy towards the Southeast underwent a transformative evolution over the past decades, transitioning from the "Look East" Policy (LEP) to the "Act East" Policy (AEP) with significant strategic, economic, and geopolitical implications. This research article examines the historical context, evolution, and the development of this policy, illustrating its impact on India's regional and global engagement. The study investigates the origins of the Look East Policy in the early 1990s, highlighting India's initial focus on Southeast Asia. It explores the historical foundations laid by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and subsequent administrations to deepen India's ties with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Furthermore, the article analyses the transition to the Act East Policy in 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, emphasizing the policy's rebranding towards proactive engagement with the ASEAN. The study assesses key milestones and initiatives under the Act East Policy. Moreover, the research article explores the policy's effectiveness in addressing India's strategic objectives to enhance regional stability and promote economic development in the region. The article provides a thorough assessment of India's transition from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy.

KEY WORDS

ASEAN, Look East, Act East, Economic liberalization, Cold war, Southeast Asia, Indo-Pacific, Dialogue Partner, Commemoration Summit, PM Narasimha Rao, PM Narendra Modi, ASEAN Economic Community, Bandung Conference, Trilateral Highway, Global trade dynamics.

Introduction:

India and ASEAN relations

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) consists of Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam. India's increasing focus on establishing a robust relationship with ASEAN is a consequence of significant shifts in the global political and economic landscape since the early 1990s, coinciding with India's pursuit of economic liberalization. India's relations with ASEAN have a rich historical context marked by diplomatic engagements, economic cooperation, and evolving strategic ties. The India's early diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia in the 1950s to 1960s predates the formal establishment of ASEAN. India supported the anti-colonial movements in the region and actively participated in the Bandung Conference in 1955 resulting in promoting ties with emerging nations. ASEAN was established in

1967 with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. India was not a founding member but maintained diplomatic ties with ASEAN nations.

Look East Policy (1991):

India's Look East Policy was initiated in the early 1990s by then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and this enactment of the policy during his governance marked a significant shift in its foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. The primary focus was on economic cooperation, trade, and diplomatic engagements. In 1992, India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, formalizing its engagement with the regional bloc. This partnership laid the foundation for increased cooperation across various sectors. The relationship was elevated to a full dialogue partnership in 1996, emphasizing broader cooperation in political, economic, and security domains.

Act East Policy Era:

In 2014, India rebranded the Look East Policy as the Act East Policy, reflecting a more proactive and comprehensive approach. The renaming signified a shift towards greater engagement and action in the region. India-ASEAN relations have witnessed a positive evolution, transitioning from diplomatic engagements to comprehensive partnerships covering economic, strategic, and cultural dimensions. The ongoing collaboration aims to foster regional integration and contribute to the prosperity and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The initiation of the 'Look East Policy' was a response to India's quest for economic opportunities. This policy has evolved into the more dynamic and action oriented 'Act East Policy,' formally articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 12th ASEAN India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit in November 2014.

The relationship with ASEAN is a cornerstone of India's foreign policy and the underlying principle of the Act East Policy. The elevation of the relationship to a Strategic Partnership in 2012 marked a natural progression from India's status as a Sectoral Partner in 1992, Dialogue Partner in 1996, and Summit Level Partner in 2002. There are currently 30 Dialogue Mechanisms covering various sectors between India and ASEAN. In recognition of the importance of ASEAN, India established a dedicated Mission to ASEAN and the East Asia Summit in Jakarta in April 2015. The 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations in 2017 witnessed a series of over 60 commemorative activities, culminating in the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in January 2018.

The strategic cooperation between ASEAN and India extends to political-security dimensions, economic ties, socio-cultural exchanges, and connectivity initiatives. Politically, both parties address traditional and non-traditional challenges through politico-security cooperation. Economically, India-ASEAN trade and investment relations have grown steadily, with ASEAN being India's fourth-largest trading partner. Socio-cultural initiatives include various programs to boost people-to-people interaction, such as exchange programs, training, and cultural events. Connectivity is a shared priority, with discussions on issues like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, maritime and air connectivity, and economic corridors.

Economic liberalization of 1991:

Concurrently, Southeast Asia was experiencing rapid economic growth, industrialization, and geopolitical significance. The economic liberalization of 1991 opened avenues for India to forge closer economic ties with Southeast Asian nations, leveraging their burgeoning markets and industrial potential. India sought to attract Southeast Asian investment, recognizing the importance of cross border capital flows for mutual economic development. The economic liberalization created an impetus for India to articulate a strategic vision beyond its immediate borders. India recognized the economic dynamism of Southeast Asia and aimed to integrate itself into the regional economic architecture. The Look East Policy, launched in the early 1990s, went beyond economic considerations, emphasizing cultural and diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian nation. It signified a diplomatic outreach to the ASEAN countries, reflecting a commitment to political and security cooperation.

The Look East Policy positioned India as an active participant in the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region. The economic liberalization of 1991 laid the foundation for sustained economic growth in India, contributing to its emergence as a significant player in the global economy. Over time, the Look East Policy

evolved into the more dynamic Act East Policy, reflecting a deeper and action-oriented commitment to Southeast Asia. India's engagement with Southeast Asia has diversified to include not just economic ties but also strategic and security collaborations. The economic liberalization of 1991 was a transformative moment in India's economic history, catalysing its engagement with Southeast Asia and laying the groundwork for the visionary Look East Policy. The economic reforms not only revitalized India's domestic economy but also positioned it as an active participant in the dynamic and evolving economic and geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia. The Look East Policy, born out of economic liberalization, continues to shape India's strategic outlook, promoting and enduring relationships with Southeast Asian nations.

End of Cold War (1990s):

The end of the Cold War had profound and varied impacts on Southeast Asian countries. The conclusion of the Cold War led to a shift in regional security dynamics. With the waning influence of superpower rivalry, Southeast Asian nations had more room to assert their autonomy and pursue regional security cooperation. The end of the Cold War coincided with the rise of globalization. Southeast Asian countries, particularly the newly industrialized ones like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, experienced rapid economic growth and increased foreign direct investment. Economic liberalization became a common theme in the region. Some countries in Southeast Asia underwent political changes, partly influenced by the changing global environment. The Cold War's end contributed to political transitions, including shifts toward more democratic governance in certain nations.

However, this was not uniform across the region. The resolution of the Cold War had a direct impact on the countries of Indo China, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The withdrawal of Soviet support and the changing geopolitical landscape forced these countries to reassess their political and economic structures. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) gained prominence as a regional organization promoting economic cooperation and political stability. With the diminished threat of superpower intervention, ASEAN countries could focus on building regional mechanisms for conflict resolution and economic development. In some Southeast Asian nations, the post- Cold War era saw the rise of movements advocating for greater political freedoms and democratization. This was often met with resistance from entrenched political elites. Changes in the geopolitical landscape led to adjustments in military alliances. Some countries, previously aligned with one of the superpowers, reassessed their security arrangements and sought more diversified partnerships. It also brought increased international scrutiny on human rights issues. Countries in Southeast Asia faced growing pressure to address human rights concerns, and the global community became more active in monitoring and influencing domestic policies.

As the Cold War came to an end, Southeast Asian nations reevaluated their relationships with major powers, including the United States, China, and Russia. New geopolitical considerations influenced diplomatic ties and economic partnerships. Southeast Asian nations recalibrated their foreign policies to adapt to the changing global order. This often involved diversifying economic partnerships, engaging in regional cooperation, and participating in international organizations. The end of the Cold War brought about a complex set of changes in Southeast Asia, impacting political, economic, and security dynamics in the region. The aftermath witnessed both opportunities for growth and challenges associated with political transitions and shifting global alliances.

ASEAN's Dialogue Partnerships: India's Journey as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (1992):

In 1991, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expanded its engagement with other countries in the region and beyond by establishing the ASEAN Dialogue Partners framework. The purpose was to promote cooperation and dialogue with external actors on various political, economic, and security issues. The ASEAN Dialogue Partners in 1991 includes Australia, Canada, The European Union, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, The United States, China, Russia. Over the years, ASEAN has expanded its network of dialogue partners to include other countries and organizations. India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1992. This marked the beginning of India's formal engagement with ASEAN under the Look East Policy, which later evolved into the Act East Policy. This partnership has played a significant role in shaping India's relations with Southeast Asian countries over the years.

India's engagement as an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner has yielded numerous benefits for both sides. Economically, India-ASEAN trade has witnessed substantial growth, with bilateral trade volumes reaching new heights. India's participation in regional forums and initiatives has contributed to the maintenance of peace and stability in Southeast Asia, while also enhancing its own strategic influence in the region. Cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties have fostered greater mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's rich heritage and traditions. India's role as an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner underscores the importance of multilateralism and regional cooperation in addressing common challenges and advancing shared interests. By actively participating in ASEAN-led initiatives, India has demonstrated its commitment to promoting peace, prosperity, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, India's engagement with ASEAN serves as a catalyst for broader regional integration efforts, paving the way for enhanced connectivity and economic cooperation across the Indo Pacific.

ASEAN-INDIAN Commemoration Summit (2002):

The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit of 2002 was a significant event that marked the 10th anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership. It took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and aimed to strengthen the relationship between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India through various areas of cooperation including political, security, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. The summit resulted in the adoption of the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity. It also highlighted the shared commitment of both ASEAN and India to work together for mutual benefit and regional peace and stability. The inaugural ASEAN-India Summit signified a milestone in the cooperative relationship between ASEAN and India. This pivotal event saw leaders from both regions engage in discussions and reinforce their ties. Leaders of ASEAN member states and the then Prime Minister of India expressed contentment with the swift development and enhancement of ASEAN-India relations since their inception. ASEAN appreciated India's acknowledgment and readiness to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Prime Minister Vajpayee's address emphasized the depth of the India-ASEAN Partnership, highlighting its potential beyond economic collaboration. He underscored the shared values, cultural affinities, and the necessity for deeper engagement across various sectors. The ASEAN-India Friendship Year in 2002 laid a robust foundation for enhanced diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges between ASEAN and India. It stands as a seminal moment in their enduring relationship.

Evolution from Look East to Act East (2014):

In 2014, the "Look East" Policy of India was rebranded and transformed into the "Act East" Policy. The rebranding signified a shift from mere economic engagement towards a more strategic and comprehensive approach in India's relations with countries in East and Southeast Asia. The "Act East" Policy was focused on strengthening India's relations with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and ASEAN nations. It aimed to enhance economic cooperation, improve connectivity, bolster strategic ties, and promote people-to-people exchanges in the region. Under the "Act East" Policy, India increased its engagement in various sectors such as trade, investment, defence, and culture with East Asian countries. The policy also emphasized the importance of maritime security and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

The rebranding of the policy highlighted India's commitment to actively participate and contribute to the evolving regional architecture in East Asia. It also aimed to leverage India's economic and strategic interests while engaging in greater connectivity and integration with its eastern neighbours. The Look East Policy was initiated by India in the early 1990s to reinvigorate its focus on Southeast Asia within its foreign policy agenda. It aimed to build upon historical, cultural, and ideological ties with the region by fostering tangible cooperation in economic, political, and security realms. The LEP was formally articulated by then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao during a visit to Singapore in 1994, coinciding with India's broader foreign policy realignment towards greater economic emphasis. This shift was prompted by India's economic liberalization efforts following a foreign exchange crisis in 1991, as well as the need to adapt to changing global trade dynamics. India's desire to prevent exclusion from regional economic integration led to its participation in initiatives in East Asia, culminating in the conclusion of the ASEAN-India Regional Trade and Investment Area in 2015. Despite criticism suggesting that the LEP's

rhetoric has not been matched by concrete actions, India's engagement with Southeast Asia has indeed gained momentum over the years.

Nonetheless, India's regional engagement has evolved significantly under the LEP, reflecting its growing importance in India's foreign policy priorities. Asia is a primary focus of India's external engagement, with Southeast Asia specifically receiving significant attention. Previously perceived as a distant and disconnected power in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, India has transitioned to being considered an integral participant in the regional landscape in the post-Cold War era. In the 1950s, there was a brief attempt by India to foster an Asian community of nations, but this initiative was followed by a period of neglect in India's engagement with the East during the 1960s and 1970s, mainly due to domestic priorities and concerns following conflicts in the region, such as the 1962 war with China. India's relationship with ASEAN deteriorated during the late 1970s and 1980s due to their opposing positions during the Cold War, exacerbated by India's support for Vietnam and perceived naval expansion efforts. However, with the launch of the Look East Policy in the early 1990s, perceptions of India in Southeast Asia shifted from being viewed as a threat to regional stability to being seen as a benign and stabilizing force. While other major powers have developed more institutionally and economically integrated relationships with Southeast Asia, India has achieved greater political and strategic alignment with the region. India's adherence to regional norms and confidence-building mechanisms has been recognized.

The Act East Policy of India encompasses a range of economic cooperation efforts aimed at bolstering ties with Southeast Asian nations and beyond. One of the primary objectives is to enhance bilateral trade and investment with countries in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo Pacific region. This involves promoting two-way trade in goods and services, as well as facilitating investments through various bilateral and multilateral agreements. The Act Policy emphasizes the development of physical infrastructure, such as roads, ports, railways, and air connectivity, to facilitate smoother trade and investment flows between India and its eastern neighbours. While the Act East Policy holds great promise, there are significant challenges. These include navigating the complex geopolitical rivalries in the region, dealing with non-traditional security threats such as piracy and terrorism, and overcoming the barriers to trade and investment integration.

Moreover, ensuring a balanced approach to bolster strategic ties with other countries in the region is a delicate task India's Act East Policy is a comprehensive strategy aimed at leveraging economic, strategic, and cultural ties to reinforce its position as a major power in the Indo-Pacific region. By engaging proactively with countries to its East, India not only seeks to drive its own economic growth but also plays a crucial role in ensuring the stability and security of a region that is pivotal to global prosperity in the 21st century.

The changing global dynamics and the economic rise of Southeast Asian region:

The evolving economic landscape in the 21st century has witnessed the dynamic rise of Southeast Asia as a formidable player on the global stage. The region's economic growth, characterized by robust trade, industrialization, and technological advancements, has not only reshaped the dynamics of the global economy but has also left a profound impact on India. The economic resurgence of Southeast Asia has been marked by sustained growth rates, attracting global attention and investment. Nations such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam have become economic powerhouses, leveraging their strategic geographical locations, natural resources, and demographic dividends. The adoption of pro-business policies, infrastructural development, and integration into global supply chains have propelled the region into a significant economic force. The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed a profound restructuring of global economic and geopolitical paradigms. The end of the Cold War, the rise of emerging economies, and technological advancements created an interconnected world marked by heightened economic interdependence. This global evolution necessitated a recalibration of foreign policies, prompting India to broaden its horizons beyond traditional alliances.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a pivotal role in fostering economic cooperation among its member states. The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and regional trade agreements have facilitated seamless trade and investment flows. This economic integration has created a vibrant market that not only attracts global investors but also serves as a crucial trade partner for India. Southeast Asian countries have transitioned from agrarian economies to hubs of industrialization and innovation.

The development of robust manufacturing sectors and the embrace of technological advancements have enhanced the region's competitiveness. This transformation has created opportunities for collaboration between Indian and Southeast Asian industries, particularly in technology, research and development, and advanced manufacturing. Improved infrastructure, including ports, roads, and digital networks, has facilitated smoother trade and business interactions. India, recognizing the potential for enhanced connectivity, has sought to actively engage in infrastructure projects within the region.

Impact on India:

The economic rise of Southeast Asia has opened new avenues for bilateral trade between India and the ASEAN nations. India's 'Act East Policy' has gained momentum, emphasizing enhanced economic engagement and collaboration. Growing trade ties have not only increased the export potential for Indian goods and services but have also presented opportunities for mutual investments. Southeast Asia's emergence as a global manufacturing and trading hub has prompted India to consider diversifying its supply chains. The region offers an alternative to traditional partners, providing India with options to secure raw materials, components, and markets for its products. As global dynamics shift, Southeast Asia becomes a strategic ally for India's economic resilience. The technological advancements in Southeast Asia also present opportunities for collaboration in areas like IT, biotechnology, and renewable energy. Joint research and development initiatives can foster innovation, addressing common challenges and accelerating economic growth in both regions.

India's participation in infrastructure projects within Southeast Asia, such as the India-Myanmar, Thailand Trilateral Highway, reflects a strategic approach to capitalize on the region's growing economic prominence. By investing in connectivity projects, India aims to strengthen economic ties and facilitate the movement of goods and services. The changing economic global dynamic, driven by the impressive rise of Southeast Asia, has far-reaching implications for India. As the region continues to thrive, the symbiotic relationship between India and Southeast Asia offers mutual benefits. India's engagement with Southeast Asia in this changing economic landscape is a testament to the adaptability and resilience required in a world where economic interdependence is paramount.

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