

India's Act East Foreign Policy

Abstract

The Look East policy was initiated by the then Prime Minister of India Narasimha Rao in 1991. In addition to this, the A. B. Vajpayee government followed the Look East policy for the economic development of the nation. However, Mr. Modi has transformed Vajpayee's Look East Policy into Act East Policy. The Act East Policy is the vital pillar of Modi's Foreign Policy. Through this policy, Mr. Modi wants to improve and strengthen India's relations with the South East Asian countries. The main focus of Act East policy is to promote economic development, security, political, technological and defence aspects also. In this paper, the dimensions of Modi's Act East policy have been specifically focused, and it also analyses the challenges to Act East Policy.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Act East policy, East Asia, ASEAN, Japan, China.

Introduction

The East Asia and South East Asia are the vital part of world politics and the economy of these regions is rapidly growing in the world. In world politics, South East Asia and East Asia are geographically wealthy. It is strategically important for other nations of the world. They are also known as the talented nations of the World. Therefore, both the regions are important for India's Developmental objectives. China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand are the eastern countries of the world. The eight nations of the East Asian region are Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia which are held as "East Asian miracle" because of their strong economy making them more advanced and developed. Therefore, other nations of the world are getting attracted towards them to collaborate and engage with them to achieve mutual national interests. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the group of South East Asian countries. Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, Brunei, Myanmar and Laos all these countries are the member countries of ASEAN. ASEAN is also the regional organisation, consisting of 10 members of the ASEAN group. Given the significance of the ASEAN and other countries of the region and also aiming its multiple progress and development, India is also getting attracted towards this area.

In 1990, the world observed multiple transformations in the international politics. Even India had been facing economic crisis. However, with the changing circumstances and to improve India's economic condition, in 1991-92 the then finance minister in the P.V. Narsimha Rao government, Dr. Manmohan Singh, the globally well known economist, introduced new economic reforms such as LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) process in India. Subsequently, at the same period, as a part of new economic reforms, "the Look East Policy" was initiated in 1991. The Look East Policy was aimed at cultivating and strengthening of economic and strategic relations with the countries of South East Asia in terms of concretising India's standing as a regional power. However, after the change of government led by Narendra Modi in 2014, the government of India transformed the earlier policy into "the Act East Policy" and Sushma Swaraj as a foreign minister promoted this policy. Mr. Modi's decision to invite all 10 ASEAN country's head on the Republic Day of India in 2018 justified and indicated India's motive in the direction of consolidating India's solid relations with these states. This policy mainly focuses on making India stronger. In his reply to a question in the Lok Sabha (House of the People or Lower House of Indian Parliament), Minister of State for External Affairs, General V K Singh (Retd.), said, "India's 'Act East' policy focuses 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 [the] establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation"¹



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According to the Government of India, "The objective of the 'Act East' policy is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and to develop strategic relations 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 (emphasis added)"². Through this policy, Mr. Modi can co-operate and coordinate with India's North East states and with Myanmar. Under the Act East Policy, the Modi Government coordinate and cooperate with ASEAN countries and with other East Asian countries. In the East Asia Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on 13 November 2014, Prime Minister Modi assured that, "Since entering office six months ago, my government has moved with a great sense of priority and speed to turn our 'Look East' policy into the 'Act East' policy." He stressed that the East Asia Summit is an important pillar of this policy because it was critical for peace, stability and prosperity in Asia-Pacific and the world³. The Act East Policy was unveiled at the Nay Pyi Taw (2014) on the 12th Asia-India summit 2014. In the opening statement of the occasion, Prime Minister Modi said that "A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's Look East policy has become 'Act East policy.'⁴ There are some goals of Modi's Act East policy such as that India can promote regional cooperation create a regional power and can prevent the growing influence of China in South East Asia.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to focus on the main features of India's Act East Policy and to identify the probable difficulties emerging in the success of this Policy.

Dimensions of Act East Policy

Mr. Modi is working closely with South East Asia and East Asian nations given China's growing influence in East Asia. And India sees the ASEAN as the best alternative to counter Chinese influence that threatening India's own interest there in the region. Therefore, looking at its interest in this direction, India's North East Region is extremely important. The North East region of India offers India a gateway to outreach the countries of the East and South – East Asia. Therefore, viewing this objective, the Modi government has been initiating important development programmes the North East Region. While addressing the North Eastern Council meeting in May 2016, Mr. Modi said, "The Government has been focusing on development of the region through its proactive Act East Policy. As part of this policy, we are focusing on reducing isolation of the region by improving all – round connectivity through road, railway, telecom, power and waterways sectors⁵. The states such as Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram are the North–East states of India. The North East has become an important pillar of Modi's Act East Policy. Therefore, its development is very important for the development of India's Act East policy. And

significantly, Japan is playing an important role for the development of this region

Myanmar as the Gateway: Furthermore, Myanmar is a neighbouring country of India and it is very important in terms of India's security. Mr. Modi visited Myanmar in September 2014 to promote economy and security with this country. This was an important part of Prime Minister Modi's Act East policy⁶. While putting more emphasising on Indo-Myanmar relations, the government of India expressed that Myanmar has been a key pillar of India's Act East policy as it connects the North eastern states with Southeast Asia via land route. In fact, Myanmar is not only the geographically a proximate with India in terms of strong historic and economic linkages, but the people of both the countries across the border share various common social and cultural features such as lifestyle, food habits etc. Myanmar is also the member of ASEAN that is why Modi's government emphasising on Myanmar for security and defence purposes. Besides, India is connected politically and economically with the member countries of ASEAN. The ASEAN is the main pillar of India's Act East Policy. Mr. Modi also visited ASEAN countries to attend East-Asia and India-ASEAN Summits in November 2014. Besides, former Foreign Minister of India Sushma Swaraj has also extended myriad efforts to make India's Act East policy more successful. In Modi Era, India has been playing vital role for ASEAN countries, because it's very beneficial for India's economic development and for the perspective of security. Prime Minister Modi addressed the 14th ASEAN Summit in Laos, Vietnam. Mr. Modi has talked about the importance of ASEAN towards India's Act East Policy.

Furthermore, the ASEAN is the centre of India's objective in this direction. Mr. believed that India-ASEAN ties have been the major source of balance and harmony in the region and the substance of this strategic partnership covers the various spheres of economic, security and socio-cultural features. The ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2016-20) has served th member countries well in fulfilling the mutual objectives. Besides, both the sides have already implemented various mutual activities for the strengthening of bilateral partnership and benefits. In fact, Mr. Modi has been trying to increase India's engagement on multiple levels with the ASEAN countries in the specific areas such as physical, digital, economical, institutional and cultural. This has been the heart of India's strategic partnership with the ASEAN. However, India has expressed the concerns emerged due to global terrorism that the export of terrorism and extremism, growing radicalism and the spread of extreme violence posing severe common security threats to the societies in India and the ASEAN countries.

Furthermore, *BIMSTEC* (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) is the regional organisation, and in present scenario BIMSTEC has become the most significant part of India's Act East policy, and India has also optimized its proactive engagement with the member countries of the BIMSTEC. Given strong

relations, in this direction, Mr. Modi invited all the leaders of BIMSTEC for the second time on the occasion of his oath ceremony on 30th May 2019. Mr. Modi has reflected his activism towards the Act East policy through this initiative. Moreover, Japan is also very important and strategic partner of India in its Act East Policy. India and Japan are mutually connected to each other through historical, cultural and economic bases. Japan is the reliable partner for India in economic area. Japan has always extended priority and economic aids to India for the improvement of India's infrastructural development. In September 2014, during Modi's visit to Japan, Japan announced to provide 35 billion for the development of India. Japan also assured India to provide Bullet Train Facility. Besides, India-Japan are also the strategic partners in terms of security in the Indo-Pacific region against the Chinese influence, and both are the members of 'Quad' (other members are the US and Australia). Further, Vietnam is also the most important trading partner of India. India-Vietnam basically are affiliated in defence area. India is looking at Vietnam as an important nation to control the expansionist trend of China. Vietnam is also an important pillar of Modi's Act East policy.

South East Asia and East Asian nations are extremely important for India's economic development. If India has to be included in the category of global superpower then Prime Minister Modi has to strengthen the economic relations with these nations. In this direction, Prime Minister Modi making efforts to strengthen the economic ties through the tours of these nations. Moreover, Mongolia has also been held as an integral part of Act East Policy that shares close link in the Asia-Pacific region for the desired goals. As a result, India has been thinking in terms of providing some sort of credit for the Mogolian economic capabilities, institutions, infrastructure development and the advancement of human resources. Besides, India believes that the ASEAN has always been India's largest investment provider and has always proposed the extension of line of credit to promote the various projects to support the physical and digital connectivity between Indian and the member countries of the ASEAN.

Furthermore, Culture has always played an important role in the history of India. Through this, India has continuously engaged in establishing relations with many nations of the world. In this direction, Buddhism has helped in tightening the connections between India and ASEAN countries. And in this direction, Mr. Modi made optimum efforts by using Buddhism to engage with this region, as India is the home of the Buddha. The last phase of the ASEAN - India Commemorative Summit started on 25 January 2018. In this context, the former foreign minister Sushma Swaraj had expressed that they (Indians) are in South Asia and they (people of ASEAN) are in Southeast Asia, as a result, Indians can not be the part their region geographically. However, the people of both the region have common cultural links that was not just a mere connection, but it was a living link. More significantly, Buddhism and Ramayana connect the people of both the regions.

Indonesia is the biggest Muslim nation in terms of population, which is well-known for the Ramayana. They believe that our religion and their religion is main that is Buddhism. Religion has linked mutually. The propagation of religion reflects the cultural scenes of the region.

Moreover, in the present time, the attention of the nations around the world has been focused on the sea. And to simplify the sea trade, its security is very indispensable. So, in this direction, Prime Minister Modi has been paying special attention towards the East Asia and South East Asia. It is also very important in the direction of making India a superpower. During his visit to Mauritius in 2015, while promoting Maritime Security, Prime Minister Modi said, "Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries, sensitivity to each other's interest; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues, and increase in maritime cooperation."⁷ The Indian government has considered the Indian Navy as an important part of the Act East policy and with keeping the objective in mind, the Modi government has been trying more efforts to improve the strength of Indian Navy.

Among others, Vietnam has also emerged as a strategically vital pillar of Modi's Act East policy. To advance the bilateral partnership further, in 2014, India and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that opening a line of credit for Vietnam to purchase advanced and more sophisticated defense equipment from India. In fact, it has observed that the dispute with China in the South China Sea has been considered as the biggest security threat to Vietnam, a South East Asian nation. Besides, India looks forward in maintaining the security, stability and independence of this sea. So, given its interests in the region, India has always expressed to stand by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for the protection of the interests of the countries including Vietnam in the region. Further, for the purpose of countering the global terrorism in the region, Mr. Modi has been making significant efforts for the advancement of relations with the ASEAN countries. In fact, Mr. Modi during his visits to the region and while talking to the leaders at various India – ASEAN forums expressed that Terrorism has been emerged as a global challenge that has posed severe threat to all the people of the nations around the world. And India and the ASEAN countries have excellent bilateral cooperation and coordination. Therefore, Mr. Modi believed to enhance the cooperation between India and the countries of the ASEAN at the regional and the international levels and also should work in tandem to support each other to adopt the Comprehensive Convention on Global Terrorism.

Challenges to Act East Policy

Regional Security is the most prominent challenge to Act East Policy which has affected both India and the ASEAN member countries as well. In South East region, China has been creating the atmosphere of insecurity. China's Expansionist policy and aggressive behaviour has affected this region

from very long time. Therefore, India along with the East Asia and South East Asian countries trying to normalise the fear of insecurity in the region by emphasising on peace and security for the development of this region, and just for easing the trade and welfare of the nation. And therefore, aiming the development of the region, the 'Regional Security' is important and necessary driver for India's Act East Policy. Moreover, South China Sea is one of the most conflicting areas of the World. In the South China Sea, China also creating challenges for Eastern Countries and for South East Asian countries as well. China forcing that South China Sea is the part of China, but Japan discarded China claims over this. And India supported Japan on the issue because of Indo-Japan strategic partnership. The East Asia and South East Asian nations are encouraging and seeking help from India to counter the Chinese domination in the South China Sea. Further, connectivity is the main challenge in front of Modi's Act East policy, in fact, special reference to its North – Eastern states. The border of South East Asian nations starts from where the North East region of India ends. India and South East region need to make better regional connectivity. For the purpose of Trade, India needs to do great work for the betterment of regional connectivity by Road specifically. Besides, insurgency is also one of the major challenges for Modi's Act East policy. The North Eastern region in India is most affected by insurgent activity. This region has been grappled with insurgency problem since 1950. And it has believed that China has been actively involved in supporting the insurgency in India's North East region given the hostile history of India-China relations. As a result, because of the external support for insurgency, the government of India failing to root out the problem from the North East region. In fact, for Modi's Act East policy, it is very important that the region to be safe for easing the trade purpose.⁸

Conclusion

In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi brought paradigm shift in India's foreign policy, and his initiative to transform India's earlier 'Look East policy' to 'Act East Policy' has been the unprecedented contribution in India's Foreign Policy. Aiming at making India one of the most powerful and significant actors in the world politics, Mr. Modi has been making restless efforts. However, India sees China's increased power as major challenge to India's

ambitions worldwide so in the region. Therefore, India's present leadership has been trying to mitigate the emerged challenges by proactively adopting policies such as the Act East Policy as a tool to deal with the unexpected and critical situations. In fact, to achieve the better position through its foreign policy India has to strengthen its economic and military sectors. To counter China's influence in the South East Region, India should play proactive role in the ASEAN, East Asia Summit and BIMSTEC regional organisation. If India begins and performs better at regional and other multiple levels proactively and skillfully, there will be success to India's Act East Policy to consolidate its position moving towards joining the elite club of the world's superpower nations.

Endnotes

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