

India- ASEAN Strategic Partnership: Post Look East Policy



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Abstract

“Maritimes links established thousands of the year ago between India and ASEAN countries’ have enabled our trade relations in the past and we have to world closely to further strengthen them.”

-NarendraModi

In the changing global world order, India pro-active approach towards Southeast Asia is best suited when the global geo-politics has shifted from Europe to Asia-pacific region due to its geo-strategic and geo-economic implications in the emerging post-Cold war global environment. In consonance with its growing power, India is expanding its footprint well beyond its borders to serve its national interest. In geopolitical terms, the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the emergence of globalization paved the way for India to re-establish the close ties with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Keywords:

Introduction

Foreign policy of a country is designed to protect and promote national interests in a particular region of the world by appropriately responding to the developments that occur in that region. For which it requires continues assessment of the situation in the region thereby developing policy responses tailored to take into account of the changing Dynamics in that region. Essentially a successful policy has to be creative, far-sighted and broad-based so as to be able to sustain itself against international and sometimes even national developments which may militate against that policy. A policy which enjoys a wide national consensus has a better chance to endure and make a major contribution to the national interest.

Aim of the Study

The topic entitled “India – ASEAN Strategic Partnership: Post look Policy” to examine the emerging strategic & economic partnership between the India & ASEAN and explore the opportunity and potential of North – East India and role or influence China in ASEAN and its impact on LEP

Adopting to changing Geopolitics and need for India to re-assert itself in the region, the LEP was upgraded as Act East Policy in 2014, by the Prime Minister NarendraModi. The focus, which was earlier restricted only to Economic considerations, have now been widened to include that of Security as well. While the primacy of ASEAN countries were still maintained, other regional players like CLMV and BIMSTEC have also been given due prominence. The Prime Minister NarendarModi took the interaction level with the ASEAN to the dizzying heights when heads of all ten ASEAN Nations were the chief guests at the Republic Day Parade on 26 Jan 2018. In his own words:

“Today (January 26, 2018) 1.25 billion Indians will have the honour to host 10 esteemed guests – leaders of ASEAN Nations – at India’s Republic Day celebrations in our capital, New Delhi.

I had the privilege to host the ASEAN leaders for the Commemorative Summit to mark 25 years of ASEAN-India Partnership. Their presence with us is an unprecedented gesture of goodwill from ASEAN Nations.

This is no ordinary event. It is a historic milestone in a remarkable journey that has brought India and ASEAN in a deepening partnership of great promise for their 1.9 billion people, about one-fourth of human kind.

The India-ASEAN partnership may be just 25 years old. But, India’s ties with Southeast Asia stretch back more than two millennia. Forged in peace and friendship, religion and culture, art and commerce, language and literature, these enduring links are now present in every facet of the magnificent diversity of India and Southeast Asia, providing a unique envelope of comfort and familiarity between our people”.

Along the way, from dialogue partners, ASEAN and India have become strategic partners, we advance our broad-based partnership through 30 mechanisms. With each ASEAN member, we have growing diplomatic, economic and security partnership. We work together to keep our seas safe and secure. Our trade and investment flows have multiplied several times. ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner; India is ASEAN's seventh. Over 20% of India's outbound investments to go to ASEAN. Led by Singapore, ASEAN is India's leading source of investments. India's free trade agreements in the region are its oldest and among the most ambitious anywhere.

Look Easy Policy from 2008-2018 in Last One Decade

In this phase, India's Northeast region figures prominently in the LEP after many years of lost opportunities. The announcement of a *North East Region-Vision 2020* in July 2008 by the North East Council, Government of India was the most important step in this direction. It is only after the launch of the *NER Vision Document 2020* that North East India (NEI) appeared in related policy formulation of our country. The vision statement signifies seriousness from the centre for the troubled region but much would depend on its translation into action.

The third phase has added a new dimension and that is to give emphasis on the development of India's remote northeast. India's search for better economic relationship with South East Asia is no longer driven by considerations of globalization, but to facilitate development of the Northeast by increasing its connectivity to the outside world. In this phase, New Delhi recognizes the importance of opening it up for commercial linkages with South East Asia.

Besides, there emerged a consensus among the policy makers, scholars and academicians on the need to include the underdeveloped Northeast region to the LEP. They hold the view that the LEP if implemented properly would bring about a paradigm shift in the scenario confronting the region at present. The indispensability of NEI came in the focus of Indian Policy makers mainly with the initiation of the LEP. Before that the region was merely viewed from security point only. Indeed, situated in the tri-junction of South, Southeast and East Asia NEI has a locational importance of its own in the shifting regional economic trends. The LEP should aim to change in the security paradigm of this troubled and underdeveloped region into one in which India's security needs in the north-eastern region would move in tandem with its paramount need for development. With that paradigm shift, of intertwining the development and security needs of its north-eastern region as an imperative of India's LEP, development of relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar and further down with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore came to the fore as symbolized by BIMSTEC.

BG Verghese, a well-known expert on northeast has very rightly noted that, 'If the western Gateway of India is in Mumbai, the eastern Gateway of India must be built at Moreh. For Manipur and the

northeast, this can turn out to be a big opportunity. Its geopolitical and geo-economic predicaments may suddenly change, after all the northeast can become the connecting hub between three huge and fast developing markets – the ASEAN, South Asia and Far East Asia.'

India's former Union Minister of State for Commerce, Mr. Jairam Ramesh during his visit to Northeast in June 2007 has underlined the importance of North East region in India's LEP that, "India's LEP has to look North-East first. Today one-third of India's trade volume is with South -East Asia which has emerged the largest trading partner with India but it has had no impact on the country's North-East. India's Look East policy is meaningless if it does not have any impact on the region."

Since the launch of the LEP, the successive Indian Government has done very little for the NEI. In this regard, *NER Vision 2020* has emphasised the need for refashioning the development process of NEI so as 'to ensure that the region plays the arrow-head role it must play in the vanguard of the country's LEP'. India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia has improved significantly, but not to the advantage of the Northeast. Even in the existing bilateral trade between India and Myanmar the share of NEI form only about 3 to 4 percent of India's total trade with the latter. The NEI has the potential to not only bring India and the countries of Southeast Asia closer but also increase the level of trade volume that both sides enjoy at present. More details on the potential of LEP transforming India's Northeast region bordering ASEAN nations will come in the following chapters.

With a comprehensive shift in India's foreign policy post change in government in India in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India is interested and committed to do more in its LEP and declared that it will be Act East Policy henceforth, in 2014.

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.

Although, right since the beginning many critics tended to be cynical and apprehensive about the outcome, India, so far had done reasonably in Act East Policy and shows tremendous potential for more to come. Lavina Lee (2015) argues that whilst India's economic integration in the region has improved, its potential is yet to be realised. She adds that the greatest scope for an expanded role for India is clearly in terms of its capacity to play a soft-balancing role to manage the rise of China. India could assist other strategic players by exerting additional costs and constraints on China to discourage behaviour that disrupts and undermines the normative and strategic basis of Asia's regional order. She concludes that India's own strategic culture may be the greatest impediment to it playing this role.

Gurudas Das (2016) has compiled articles that analyses various aspects of Act East Policy and their implications to Northeast India. It analyses the economic relations with ASEAN countries, Why and How to engage China, sustainability of BCIM Forum, India's Myanmar policy and implications for Northeast India and also has a lucid perspective of Energy Security Perspective. It has a detailed article on how to make Act East Policy work for Northeast India.

Although we strongly believe that Act East Policy is yet another phase of Look East Policy albeit with more intense focus on economic and security perspectives, it is essential to deconstruct the previous phases to understand how the relationships have, over a period, grown. ChietigjBajpae, in his article, describes the evolutions within each phase over last three decades of existence of Look East Policy and clearly brings out how much work has actually been done on ground towards reaping benefits in Act East Policy.

India's LEP: Response for ASEAN Nations

The LEP of India had evoked positive response from the countries of Southeast Asia as the policy would bring tremendous benefit for the latter from the economic and strategic point of view. There emerged sound convergence on the need to closely engage in economic terms between India and ASEAN countries so as to remain competitive. For the countries of Southeast Asia, access to Indian markets and raw materials was the key priority. Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Singapore and Thailand welcomed India's LEP with the greatest enthusiasm. Both countries were very quick in sensing the need to diversify their investment destinations. Thailand in particular introduced 'Look West' policy which is a reorientation of its external relations toward India and Africa.

In response to the LEP, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong kicked off an 'India fever' with his 1994 speech to draw attention to the rise of India. Similarly, Thailand also introduced the Look West Policy in 1997 in an effort to look for better markets and investment. In further support to the above point, Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong has stated that, 'if ASEAN is a fuselage of an aircraft, and Northeast Asian economies serve as one wing of the aircraft, then India's engagement with Southeast Asia is - and should be viewed as - the other wing which made the aircraft operational and stable.'

Malaysia is one of the major supporters of India's Look East Policy. The countries relationship with India has grown manifolds during the period and trade and economic ties have strengthened. People to People contacts between India and Malaysia are indeed encouraging. The status and growth path has been well analysed in the article by R S Yadav (2016)

With expanding relations under the banner of LEP, ASEAN perception about India and its role in the region has changed significantly. There is an emerging consensus among the ASEAN members about the fact that India is not only an important partner but has a key role to play in the region. The ASEAN members have called upon India to become a

more active player in the economic, security and strategic arena. India remain committed to working closely with the ASEAN in bringing lasting peace, security and stability in the region, including the fight against terrorism, piracy, arms and drug trafficking and the security of the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean for smooth flow of raw materials, merchandise and energy supplies. Besides, there is a growing recognition in the Southeast Asian region security problems and the concerns the ASEAN members are likely to face in the near future will be shared by India.

ASEAN, on realizing India's potential and importance as Asia's third largest economy, responded positively to India's initiatives and advances. ASEAN changed perspectives towards India can be reflected from the very fact that India's status has been upgraded yet now with ASIAN Countries.

At Present Scenario

Without any doubt, the LEP marked a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and seeks to find a suitable place in the evolving global order and in particular to Southeast Asia. The LEP as such has been developed keeping in mind the changes that took place in the whole of Asia and in particular to Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War scenario. Despite the fact that the LEP has not been pursued by India in a well-planned and structured manner but notable progress has been made so far. But still a long way to go and tremendous potential remains to be harnessed.

The LEP took India on the path to sustainable development. India seems to realize the fact that the comprehensive engagement with the ASEAN region is vital for India's economic progress and security needs. The results of the two decades of India's LEP have been characterized by both success and failures. The success part of the LEP has been the expanding multi-faceted ties between India and ASEAN and India's gaining strategic weight in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN members have responded positively to India's growing stature in the region of Southeast Asia. While on the other side, the policy has so far not been able to make its impact felt in the Northeast region. As expected by the seven sisters of the Northeast, the LEP has so far been unable to usher the much talked about the security and development in the region. The lack of Indian initiative to develop adequate physical connectivity between India's Northeast and Southeast Asia is one of the most important factors that hindered the prospects of sustainable development in the Northeast region. LEP offers tremendous potential but the delay in implementation of crucial connectivity projects is hampering forward movement.

Conclusion

Act East Policy, further bolstered the initiative of Look East Policy and laid foundation for various proactive initiatives in three dimensions, namely; Commerce, Connectivity and Culture that are mutually complementing.

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