Geopolitical Importance Of India’s Act East Policy Towards The Southeast Asian Region: Challenges And Prospects

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| **Abstract**This paper aims to contextualize India’s “Act East Policy” within the geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region. Focusing on greater strategic importance and the new strategic outlook in India’s eastward engagement. so considers the China factor in India’s strategic calculus and its implications for the Act East Policy. The emerging “Indo-Pacific” concept, the article explores its complimentary nature to India’s Act East policy and how it fits within the policy’s theoretical framework. Additionally, it observes India’s geostrategic approach in the Asia-Pacific. Overall, the article examines the strategic dimensions of the Act East Policy, Regional mechanism its implementation, and the related challenges considering India’s growing geopolitical engagement in the Asia-Pacific region.**Keywords:** Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Geostrategy, Geopolitics, Asia-Pacific and South China Sea. |

**Introduction**

The Southeast Asian region is an emerging geopolitical discourse in the International Relations. Expanding China’s geopolitical ambitious and countering its American strategy switch on India's strategic move in the region. Therefore, it is critical to assess India’s role. Particularly, examining the geopolitical importance of India’s Act East policy towards Southeast Asia is a vital to India’s foreign policy and its global power image.

India and Southeast Asia have had great civilizational contacts in history. It is a region of unusual lands between India and China on an Indian Ocean and South China Sea corridor and its archipelago’s strategic location along the most important premodern and postmodern maritime route and the critical point of connection between East of the Pacific Ocean and West of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Hall, 2011).

Geopolitically, this region has divided into two likewise mainland and maritime. Southeast Asia mainland includes Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam and Maritime includes Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. In the early periods CE Indians and Westerners called Southeast Asia the Golden Khersonese, the “Land of Gold” and it was not long afterward that the region became identified for its pepper and the goods of its rainforests: first perfumed woods and resins, and then the finest and rarest of spices (Wheatley, 1959).

**Historical Overview of India and South East Asia**

The geopolitical significance of Southeast Asia as a geostrategic region for India’s security matrix which has been highlighted in 1941 when Japan invaded India by launching attacks during the Second World War. K.M. Panikkar to developed the idea of collective security who has been asserted that India should attempt for establishing independence with SEA to ensure that it forms a sphere of co-prosperity with India at the centre of that sphere (Singh, 2019).

Since independence, Indian leaders always believed that India’s geographical location and its supremacy could transform into the Pivot of Asia. When India became sovereign, a core element of its foreign policy was the promotion of decolonization. It believed that strategic autonomy can only be preserved if India dealt with states which were decolonized. Only decolonized States would give India an option to preserve autonomy of action in global affairs. In January 1949, New Delhi organised the conference on Indonesia and forwarded the idea of an independent Indonesia. India tried to materialise its decolonization policy to make independent for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. India also used its policy of non-alignment to build up relationships with Southeast Asia (Singh, 2019).

For adoption of a closed economic policy, India has unable to offer any support for the economic growth of Southeast Asia. In 1962, after the Sino- India conflict, Southeast Asia began to believe that India might not be able to provide military security to any of the decolonized states either. Post 1962 India came to be perceived as a marginal player in the region till the end of the cold war. In 1965, when India and Pakistan were engaged in the conflict, Indonesia supported Pakistan. In 1964, the US-Vietnam war began and India began to extend their support to Vietnam. So, India criticized the US presence which has not well received by the Southeast Asian state. The states of Southeast Asia began to pursue India’s hostility towards the US as a part of its Alliance with the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).  In 1971, when India-USSR signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, the Southeast Asian countries doubts increased further and India picked up an anti-west fault line (Singh, 2019).

India’s relations with Southeast Asia during the cold war era were a slew of missed opportunity, mistrust, misperception, and unskilled diplomacy due to the protectionist policy. After the end of Cold War, India began to forge a closer relationship with the US and then develop relations with countries which were allies and partners of the US. As India embarked upon a path of open economy and liberalisation, the Southeast Asian countries emerged as the natural choice of India for economic partnership. In the late 1980’s China was becoming militarily assertive in the region and its military assertion on Paracel and Spratly Islands had created a new sense of anxiety among the countries of Southeast Asia. China was also excreting influence on the ASEAN, and many Southeast Asian States perceived it and attempted to dominate the ASEAN. The Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN members initiated a Look West Policy to engage with India as a potential regional balancer.  India responded positively and in 1991- 92 declared that Look East Policy to engage with Southeast Asian countries at the political and military level, India also began to integrate economically with ASEAN countries (Singh, 2019). Grossman has rightly pointed out the holistic approach of India's Act East Policy, which stated that “Overall, India’s Act East policy is a net positive for the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at countering China. Washington should welcome and gently boost New Delhi to do even more” (Grossman, 2023).

India’s engagement towards Southeast Asia can be traced to its historical and cultural linkages with its neighbours to the east. These connections weakened during the colonial era and during the Cold War period and were rejuvenated in the early 1990s when national and international requirements bound India to re-engage with the Southeast. India’s eastbound engagement established impetus with the launch of the “Look East Policy” in 1991 (Horam, 2022).

**Look East Policy (LEP) and Act East Policy (AEP)**

By emerging China’s geopolitical ambitious in Asia, ASEAN states adopted a Look West Policy to counter and balance with China. At the same time, India began to look towards the East. India’s economic crisis in 1991 and the end of the Cold War led the then India to give a strategic drive to India’s engagement with Southeast Asia. India decided to recover the loss of the USSR by building up a relationship with the US and allies of US in Southeast Asia. India’s Look East Policy and its succeeding development into the Act East Policy have been noteworthy foreign policy approaches that reflect India’s strategic matrix towards the Asia-Pacific region. The idea of Look East Policy has been economically integrated with ASEAN countries but Look West Policy is extended and expanded version of LEP.

The core policy objective of the LEP has led economic integration with SEA, renewed thrust for political, trade, investment, technology, and tourism ties, develop India’s North East, enhance cooperation in MGC (Mekong Ganga Cooperation) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and influence economic development through FTA (Free Trade Area) the countries in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

 Recognizing the evolving geopolitical landscape and the growing importance of the region, India further redefined its approach towards Asia-Pacific in 2014, after the coming of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government to power, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 12th Indo-ASEAN summit at Nay Pyi Taw in Myanmar, announced the transition from Look East Policy (LEP) into the more proactive Act East Policy (AEP). This policy shift marked a commitment to deeper and more extensive engagement under the AEP. India wants to promote culture, commerce, connectivity and capacity building with South East Asia and East Asia. The Act East Policy holds deep implications for India’s foreign and defence relations, regional dynamics, and its position in the global order.

The core objectives of AEP are to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and developing a strategic relationship with countries in Indo-Pacific region with an optimistic and pragmatic approach and thereby improving the economic growth of the North Eastern Region (NER) which is a gateway to the Southeast Asian Region. The Asia-Pacific region is emerging as a key driver of global economic growth and a theatre of geopolitical rivalry, therefore, India’s proactive approach towards this region assume strategic significance and future prosperity in North East India. It also aims to accelerate engagement with Asia-Pacific region at a strategic level in the form of partnership with focus on transnational crimes, maritime piracy, terrorism, and freedom of navigation. It will further boost the infrastructure connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

**Significant Regional Mechanisms**

**(Association of South East Asian Nations) (ASEAN)**

Since the adoption of India’s Look East Policy and the commencement of regional integration of Southeast Asia, both India and ASEAN have developed a mutual comprehensive understanding in terms of common vulnerabilities, common economic progress, and shared stakes in making a peaceful and prosperous Asian Economic Community. The signing of the framework agreement on comprehensive economic cooperation and the signing of an ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA). In order to expand and diversify the economic linkages, India and ASEAN have set up various institutional mechanisms, through which, negotiations are being conducted and the two parties are making efforts to overcome the barriers in deepening interactions (Shekhar, 2007). India-ASEAN economic cooperation is being managed and overseen through the following institutional arrangements at the official level.

* ASEAN-India Business Summit
* ASEAN-India Business Council
* ASEAN-India Economic Ministers’ Meetings
* ASEAN-India Trade Negotiation Committee
* ASEAN-India Working Group on Trade and Investment

India and ASEAN registered a bilateral trade of USD 131.5 billion in 2022-23. The trade with ASEAN accounted for 11.3% of India’s global trade in 2022-23 (MoC & I, 2023).

**ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**

India has been a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 1996, the year after New Delhi achieved the status of a full dialogue partner with the ASEAN. The forum largely outlines the following two aims: fostering constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and making important participation and contributions towards confidence building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. Not limiting its membership to the southern reaches of Asia, the ARF also includes Canada, the United States, and the European Union among its participants, making for a far broader aggregation of interests than those of ASEAN (Pant, 2019)

The ARF has consequently played a significant role in multilatralising security concerns in the Asia-Pacific, with the interests of member states frequently joining on non-traditional security issues in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Asia-Pacific. ARF is viewed as a benevolent and significant actor in India’s Act East Policy, New Delhi remains cognizant of the need for further structural reinforcement before the ARF is fully capable to meet India’s security concerns in the region. As India enhances its economic and security activities with Indo-Pacific countries, the ARF will also have to take India more seriously than it has done so far (Pant, 2019).

**ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus)**

The ADMM-Plus is a key platform for ASEAN and its eight dialogue partners Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States (collectively referred to as the “Plus Countries”) (ADMM, 2023), to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region. The inaugural of ADMM-Plus has organized in Ha Noi, Vietnam, on 12th October 2010 (ADMM, 2023).

The ADMM-Plus offers a unique forum for regional defence leaders not only to sit across the table from their counterparts and discuss important security issues but also to take practical steps to promote military cooperation and participate in confidence-building activities. The main difference between the ARF and the ADMM-Plus is that the ARF is mainly driven by foreign ministers, whereas the ADMM-Plus is directed by defines ministers. In order to curtail overlap, there is an informal understanding that the ARF will focus on civil-military coordination, while the ADMM-Plus will focus on military-to-military coordination or more specialized defence issues, specifically when dealing with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. A further difference is that the ARF holds intersessional group meetings, whereas the ADMM-Plus functions through six experts’ working groups (Singh U. B., 2016).

**East Asia Summit (EAS)**

East Asia Summit (EAS) has been established in 2005, it allows the main players in the Asia-Pacific region to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern, in an open and transparent manner, at the highest level. The membership of EAS consists of ten ASEAN Member States (i.e., Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam), Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, and the USA (MEA, 2023). From the Indian side, the Prime Minister of India participates and intervenes at the plenary session, on various regional and international issues of common concern. The EAS Summit and ASEAN-India Summit are usually held in October-November every year (IMA, 2023).The East Asia Summit is a unique leaders-led forum of 18 countries of the Asia-Pacific region formed to further the objectives of regional peace, security, and prosperity. It has evolved as a forum for strategic negotiation and cooperation on political, security and economic matters of common regional concern and plays a significant role in the regional security architecture (MEA, 2023).

 This study will be evaluating and interacting with the above-mentioned regional mechanisms. These institutions are playing a key and significant role in the Asia-Pacific region on politico-economic and security dimensions.

**Geostrategic Significance of South China Sea**

The South China Sea is considered as one of most geostrategic important zones in the region, because it connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Strait of Malacca). According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), it carries one-third of global shipping, carrying trillions of dollars in Seabourn trade, making it an important geopolitical water body in Asia-pacific (Manishsiq, 2023).

The South China Sea functions as the throat of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans - the mass of connective economic tissue where global sea routes merges - the heart of Eurasia’s navigable rimland, punctuated by the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. More than half of the world’s annual commercial fleet tonnage sails through these choke points, and a third of all maritime traffic worldwide. The oil transported through the Malacca Strait from the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), enroute to East Asia through the South China Sea, is triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that transits the Panama Canal (Kaplan, 2015).

Roughly two thirds of South Korea’s energy supplies, nearly 60 percent of Japan’s and Taiwan’s energy supplies, and 80 percent of China’s crude oil imports come through the South China Sea only. Whereas in the Persian Gulf only energy is transported, in the South China Sea you have energy, finished goods, and unfinished goods are transported. Moreover, to the centrality of location, the South China Sea has proven oil reserves of seven billion barrels, and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas(Kaplan, 2015). If Chinese calculations are truthful that the South China Sea will ultimately yield 130 billion barrels of oil (and there is some serious doubt about these estimates), then the South China Sea contains more oil than any area of the globe except Saudi Arabia. Some Chinese observers have called the South China Sea is the “the second Persian Gulf.” (Kaplan, 2015)

**India’s Interest on South China Sea**

India is not directly engaged in the SCS (South China Sea) dispute, but India's interest to its presence in the SCS is to protect its own economic interests, particularly its energy security requirements. Though, China’s growing capability to adopt and expand its role in the South China Sea has forced India to reevaluate its position and interest. As part of the Act East Policy, India has started internationalising disputes in the Indo-Pacific region in order to counter China’s intimidating strategies in the South China Sea. Furthermore, India has also positioned its navy in the South China Sea with Vietnam to protect Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), disagreeing China in any room for assertion. In addition, India is a member of the Quad initiative (India, the United States, Japan, and Australia) and the key player of the Indo-Pacific narratives (Manishsiq, 2023).

Strategy on South China Sea of the Narendra Modi led NDA government is totally different than previous government. Those earlier governments have upheld distance from territorial disputes and their stance has territorial waters remain open for global trade. But the present NDA governments strategy on SCS has somewhat advance, AEP made more sensitive to concern of its ASEAN countries. No interference in the internal matters of the SEA & EA countries but resolve dispute through negotiations and United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India’s position to endorse freedom of navigation in South China Sea is a prerequisite for India to meet its rising military ambitions in South China Sea (Singh P. , 2019).

**Conclusion**

The Indo-Pacific might be the new strategic reality of the twenty-first century. Japan was the first country to use the concept of a “free and open Indo- Pacific” across the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that Japan is working towards the creation and development of new connectivity corridors. Prime Minister Narendra Modi adopted the same vision for the region. It is important for India to remain positive. India’s geographic and geopolitical location in the Indo-Pacific region is considered vital to counterbalance China’s rising presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

The rise of China across the Indian and Pacific Oceans has triggered numerous challenges in the maritime domain. As Alfred Thayer Mahan says, “whoever controls the Ocean controls the world.” The Indo-Pacific space is creating bigger geostrategic competition as well as new and emerging power dynamics in the region. Although India strategies to play a vital role in the Indo-Pacific region to fulfil its great power ambitions. This region is considered vital by countries such as Australia, France, Japan, and the United States for their geoeconomic and geostrategic interests. India’s diplomatic footprint on its Indo-Pacific policy will bring both geopolitical threats and strategic dilemmas on the one hand and emerging opportunities on the other.

With the greater strategic implications of its eastward engagement, India’s geopolitical engagement in the Asia-Pacific has further delineated and reinforced the theoretical framework of the Act East Policy, which is based on the centrality of Southeast Asia as the foundation of India’s eastward engagement and underpinning India’s regional outlook in the Asia-Pacific region. The “centrality of ASEAN” in India’s Indo-Pacific vision shows, at its best, the delineation and actualization of such framework. India’s geopolitical engagement under the Act East Policy has also reinforced the basic principles of the larger Indian foreign policy such as upholding the freedom and equality of all nations, respect for international laws, strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and non-violent means to conflict resolution.

The Act East Policy has sought to improve vitality and pro-activism to India’s eastbound engagement to meet the emerging security and strategic challenges as India charts more geopolitical ambitions. The coming years will determine how effectively the policy helps India to manoeuvre its strategic pathway in keeping with its principles and objectives.

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