

## LOOK EAST, ACT EAST: INDIA'S QUEST FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### ***Abstract***

*Since 1947, India has undergone significant changes, and consequently, its foreign policy has also evolved, with the Look East Policy (LEP) representing a major shift. The rationale pursued by the policy was to bolster political, economic and security closer ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia, thus making use of geographical proximity and common historical and cultural ties [1]. Geopolitically, India's relationship with Southeast Asia has formalised and crystallised policy over three decades, helping lay a foundation for regional community development. The main issue here is differing priorities and strategic visions between two countries, which will prevent further cooperation from being deepened. India needs to bridge these divides and take a more integrated, multi-pronged approach that emphasises economic, security and cultural diplomacy in equal parts to be a bigger player in the region. This paper, therefore, seeks to identify the challenges facing India as it seeks to enhance its engagement with Southeast Asian states and sets forth strategies to strengthen the foundation for greater regional security cooperation.*

*Historical experiences, political cultures, and strategic interests lead to diverging global perspectives between India and Southeast Asia. Indian foreign policy is about strategic autonomy, whereas Southeast Asian countries have been more pragmatic, often trying to balance between China, the US and other bigger powers. India has been focusing on increasing its economic engagement in the region, with the Look East, Act East policy leading to the aim of having \$100 billion by 2020 in bilateral trade with ASEAN. Nonetheless, India has a smaller economic footprint than China in*

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*Southeast Asia and cannot project power in the rest of the region like China. India must deepen itself as an engaging partner through increased economic interaction, common visions for security and stability, cultural and people-to-people interaction, and balance against Chinese influence. India needs to immerse itself deeper in the region, tackle regional security challenges more squarely and align foreign policy priorities (also of the neighbours) with those of the larger region to come out as a major power.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN Secretariat, Security and Defence Corporation

## **Introduction**

There has been a significant evolution in India's foreign policy since the country got independence in 1947, with its objectives and global posturing adopting trappings of changes with the passage of time. The Look East Policy (LEP), initiated in 1991 by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, has been one of the most significant elements of this reorientation. This policy came in line with the post-Cold War thinking that accentuated the importance of Southeast Asia following greater economic integration and political cooperation. While posting the economic reforms & liberalisation, India was seeing the opportunity to play a stronger role in the Indo-Pacific region, but the prominent focus remained in the Southeast Asia region, owing to its proximity, strategic importance and historical & cultural linkages.

Since 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Look East Policy was reprised as the Act East Policy (AEP). The rebranding reflected a more activist and muscular foreign policy for India as an agent of regional security, regional economic integration, and multilateral mechanisms. The aim was to make India a key component of the economic and security architecture of Southeast Asia and assert its place in wider Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Nonetheless, more than 30 years of policy around this issue has seen India not reach the aspirations of a relationship with Southeast Asia. However, we

are still far from policy goals and real-world results. The key problem is the global idea, which can on occasion be at odds between India and SE Asian countries. Despite shared interests in regional stability and economic development, priorities and strategic visions regularly diverge between the two sides, preventing a greater depth of cooperation.

The story unfolds with the investigation of the opportunities and challenges regarding the Look East Act East policy of India and the influence of the changing global order on them, with solutions that India can adopt to develop its engagement with Southeast Asia. The paper concludes that India needs to address these divides if it is to play a more critical role in the region and that it must adopt a more holistic, multidimensional strategy that incorporates economic, security, and cultural aspects as well as diplomacy.

## **Research Objectives and Questions**

The research has the following objectives:

1. To analyse the progress and challenges of India's Look East, Act East policy in developing relationships with Southeast Asian states.
2. To examine the differences in global perspectives between India and Southeast Asian nations and their impact on the policy's effectiveness.
3. To identify strategies for India to enhance its engagement with Southeast Asian states and become a significant player in the region.

The research questions that guide this analysis are:

1. What are the key challenges hindering the development of India's relationship with Southeast Asian states under the Look East, Act East policy?
2. How do differences in global perspectives between India and Southeast Asian nations impact the policy's effectiveness?
3. What strategies can India employ to overcome these challenges and become a major player in the Southeast Asian region?

## Literature Review

### *India's Look East, Act East Policy: Evolution and Intentions*

India's Look East policy appeared for the first time in 1991, after the era of economic decline and the Cold War ended. By building on geographical proximity and historical and cultural ties, the policy intended the strengthening of political, economic, and security ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia, respectively. As the regional order was taking shape, India became more active in regional institutions in the 1990s, between regional mimics of ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, which India tried to enter to secure its place in the emerging order.

When the previous NDA renewed the Look East Policy into the Act East in 2014, it was in accordance with the paradigm shift of Indian foreign policy priorities. Although the Look East Policy was more economic in character, the Act East Policy was more engaged, as it involved commitments on security issues, infrastructural development and agreements on trade (Panda, 2019). Such a change was fuelled by changing geopolitical realities such as the rise of China in the region—inducing India to want a more strategic and stronger role to balance this.

Yet, neither the NDAP nor the NDAP 2017 take steps to develop India's interaction with Southeast Asia to the level of where it should be, keeping in mind the growing clout of China in the region. The reasons for this have been identified by scholars as a combination of India prioritising domestic needs, economic concerns and a lack of capacity for power projection in Southeast Asia (Chengappa, 2014). Alongside geopolitical competition, this has led to a disconnect between some of the diplomatic ambitions of India and the results of its Look East, Act East policy under the constraints outlined above.

### ***Challenges Hindering India's Engagement with Southeast Asia***

Nobody in the world is unaware that India's relations with Southeast Asia are increasingly complicated by the geopolitical competition posed by China. The wide-ranging economic relations it has fostered and the infrastructure investments associated with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the increasing military presence of the Chinese, have made countries in Southeast Asia pay more attention to China. Although India has much in common, particularly its permanent common interests with Southeast Asia when it comes to countering the rising influence of China in the region, the resources with which to compete for influence are limited (Bajpai, 2020).

Also, the Southeast Asian countries have their own security issues and priorities that are sometimes at odds with India's foreign policy perspective. In particular, ASEAN, the major regional organisation for Southeast Asian countries, places a great deal of stock in a rules-based regional order and has been resistant to external powers gaining regional dominance. As a result, a balance of power building between the US, China and regional powers such as India has been a core tenet of Southeast Asia's strategic policy (Acharya, 2018). India's conciliation policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy invariably clashes with the more realist, multilateral optics espoused by Southeast Asia. It adds to the diplomatic gap and complicates India's ability to position itself as a dependable regional ally.

In addition, Southeast Asia would have also wanted India to engage more forcefully on security issues like terrorism, and its involvement in the South China Sea dispute has not been as strong as New Delhi would have hoped. India has a little echoed ASEAN positions on subjects including the South China Sea but doesn't have a solid presence in regional security architecture like the ADMM-Plus (Ghosh, 2017) or the RCEP. This has caused Southeast Asian countries to seek other (more powerful) security guarantees.

### ***Diverging Global Perspectives: India and Southeast Asia***

These differences in outlook stem from the disparate historical legacies and political cultures of each region, as well as their diverging strategic interests. The ideals of strategic autonomy have steered India away from aligning itself fully with any one global power or bloc as it has pursued, upon independence, an international policy. It indicates India's anti-colonial legacy in global affairs and its guiding principle of independence from alliance politics, reaffirmed during India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War period (Taneja, 2020).

By contrast, Southeast Asian countries have been considerably more pragmatic in their foreign policy and more motivated by economic interests as well as security—both regional and international. Indeed, Southeast Asia enshrined similar values as part of their foreign policy with India—such as democracy and pluralism—but has been notably more pragmatic in balancing the interests of China and the United States as well as other powers (Bhattacharya, 2020). Regionalism and cooperative security among its member states are vital points of ASEAN centrality that prevent one country from imposing its hegemony over others.

Such differences in viewpoints are most visible in the South China Sea discourse, where Southeast Asian states have been reluctant to fully align with a more confrontational view of China advocated by India (Kohli, 2019). India's push for a rules-based order and freedom of navigation in the region is not consistent with the prudent strategy of ASEAN, which strives not to provoke China directly.

### ***Progress and Challenges in India-Southeast Asia Relations***

#### ***Economic Cooperation:***

The high degree of economic engagement by India with the ASEAN states has been one of the successes of the Look East, Act East policy. ASEAN has emerged as India's 2nd largest trading partner after China, and trade with

these countries has grown significantly. India-ASEAN bilateral trade came close to the \$100 billion mark by 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). India has also concluded numerous FTAs with ASEAN and other regional organisations and been a key participant in RCEP negotiations. Such arrangements have helped in the movement of goods, services and investments across India and Southeast Asia.

India, too, pledged billions of dollars on physical infrastructure projects to further regional linkages. For this, different projects are in the pipeline, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which aim to provide connectivity and facilitate trade routes. By doing so, these projects are not only reinforcing the Southeast Asia trade route for India but also enhancing India's strategic presence in the region (Mukherjee, 2021).

Yet the size of the Indian economic footprint in Southeast Asia is vastly smaller than China's. India has shown remarkable capability over recent years in sectors such as information technology, education and pharmaceuticals; however, not at the scale of China in areas of infrastructure development, investment and manufacturing. That economic disparity had kept India from being able to put itself on the table as a real alternative to China in Southeast Asia.

### ***Security and Defence Cooperation:***

Also in the area of defence and security cooperation, India steps up its engagement with southeast Asia. India engages in joint military exercises with a number of ASEAN members, particularly in counterterrorism, disaster relief, and maritime security. India — A Miscellaneous Power If there is one aspect of India's security engagement in the South China Sea, it has been its naval presence, with regular freedom of navigation operations in the contested waters. Strategic dialogue with ASEAN states has been actively leveraged by India as part of its efforts to enhance its security partnerships and engagement at the multilateral level has included India's participation in the East Asia Summit (Nehru, 2020).

Nevertheless, India lacks full capacity and reach to project its power in SE Asia. Although India has been more active in the region, its navy is not capable of countering the rising Chinese military power. The absence of a regional security framework lacks coherence and cohesiveness; moreover, India seems immersed in its domestic issues, and the context doesn't favour India to play an effective (whether minor or major) security guarantor in Southeast Asia (Kapoor, 2018).

### ***Strategies for Strengthening India's Engagement with Southeast Asia***

To overcome the challenges outlined above and position itself as a key regional player, India must adopt several key strategies:

1. **Enhanced Economic Cooperation:** India should focus on deepening its economic ties with Southeast Asia by investing in infrastructure projects and promoting sectoral cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, technology, and agriculture. This can be achieved through initiatives like the India-ASEAN Connectivity Partnership and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway Project.
2. **Building a Unified Vision for Regional Security:** India needs to adopt a more proactive stance in regional security cooperation. By engaging more deeply with ASEAN's security frameworks, including the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), India can solidify its role as a strategic partner in regional security.
3. **Cultural and People-to-People Engagement:** Strengthening cultural diplomacy and enhancing people-to-people ties between India and Southeast Asia is crucial for fostering long-term cooperation. Initiatives such as academic exchange programs, tourism initiatives, and cultural diplomacy can deepen mutual understanding and build goodwill.
4. **Balancing China's Influence:** India should continue to build its influence in Southeast Asia by promoting a rules-based international order, strengthening multilateral institutions, and emphasizing peaceful coexistence in the region. While competing with China,



India must focus on areas where it has a competitive advantage, such as technology and green energy (Emmerson, 2016).

## Conclusion

Although India has effectively advanced its Look East, Act East policy towards stronger ties with Southeast Asia, gaps in the relationship remain rooted in different outlooks on the world, competition within Asia, and limitations at home in terms of economic and military power. Although the Look East, Act East policy of India has succeeded in economic and strategic engagement with the Southeast Asian region, it has been limited by the divergence of global perceptions, ongoing China-India dynamics and the challenge of domestic politics in India. India needs to increase its presence in Southeast Asia, take a firmer line on regional security challenges, and coordinate its foreign policy objectives more closely with those of the wider region if it ever is to achieve the position of a regional power it seeks.

This will reaffirm India's identity as a pivotal country in Southeast Asia and bolster its capacity to shape the Indo-Pacific into a regional order centred on India. India must move ahead in strengthening ties, particularly with the Southeast Asian nations; they share fine interests and values with India after all. The Indian government needs to create a much better framework for reaching Southeast Asian countries, including scheduling regular diplomatic consultations and people-to-people exchanges among them. But India should also try to accommodate Southeast Asian countries with respect to their trade, security and development needs and perspectives.

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