

A SUI GENERIS FOREIGN POLICY FRAMEWORK OF INDIA'S CONTEMPORANEOUS SOUTH EAST ASIAN SPECTRUM: LEVERAGING SPECIAL MENTION ON NORTH EAST INDIA

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Abstract

India's contemporary foreign policy appears to be largely focused on coherence with Southeast Asia; therefore, this paper will explore both constructive and critical aspects of this organic relationship. This paper shall initiate with a comprehensive and comparative brief of India's foreign policy in the context of the Look East cum Act East policy in various temporalities and analyse some real-time exigencies hindering this historical and prospective concurrence. A significant aspect of this article presents a unique 'secessionist' perspective on how the solidarity of India's North-eastern States is essential for stabilising India's Southeast Asian ambitions, and it discusses how the ongoing neglect of this region could lead to disastrous consequences for India's territorial integrity. A case study comprising how the Modi regime has been balancing both imperative bilateralism as well as conditional multilateralism with its approach to dealing with its Southeast Asian contours is well laid out in this paper. Contemplating over the fact that India's foreign policy was deprived of a strategic vision for the Asia Pacific, Act East attempts to congregate and correct this historical neglect with a tinge of focus on how India does and ought to prospectively counter China's leverage on Southeast Asian economies. An overarching aspect of discussion also exemplifies India's maritime security arena and suggestively addresses the question of India's holistic dilemma of Southeast Asian relations. Innovatively, the question of whether India shall vouch for a 'Monroe Doctrine' for Asia is to be addressed constructively.

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Objective

Comprehensively analyse India's Look East, or rather, "Act East Policy," in specificity and with a focus on the geopolitical and economic dynamics of Southeast Asia. It aims to explore the role of North-eastern India as a stabilising factor, examine India's bilateral and multilateral engagements, and evaluate its strategic responses to China's growing influence in the region, with a particular emphasis on maritime security and prospective regional doctrines.

Review of Literature

The existing research modules embrace a vast plethora of political, cultural, and social issues related to the metamorphosing changes witnessed across the two phases in the Southeast Asian policy framework. Harsh V Pant and Yogesh Joshi's 2017 research article comprehends well the Indian foreign policy towards Southeast Asian nations. T.N. Madan's publication also synchronises well with the same dynamics. Nonetheless, there's scant resource on North-eastern states as being the prime highlight as a stabilising factor for a flourishing relationship with the South-eastern as well as the extended Southeast Asian gateway. Despite recent emphasis on how to pursue this approach, the Indian counterpart lacks a specific doctrine to maintain at any point in its vital relationship with the region. The challenges being addressed undermine the understanding of contextual factors and therefore lack a compassionate grasp of their strategic significance.

Introduction and History

India prospectively initiated with its outlook on South east Asia in the form of its progressive political ideal as a recalibration termed "Look East" Policy under the able guidance of the then Prime minister PV Narsimha Rao.

Although there is scant resource on the exact origin of the policy, the establishment of India's sectoral dialogue with ASEAN in 1992 is most frequently cited as the start of the policy. The policy itself was enunciated during a speech by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao during a visit to Singapore in 1994 when he called for "forging a new relationship" with the region. In its annual report in 1992-93, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs noted that "India has decided to implement a special policy thrust to its relations with ASEAN," although the term "Look East Policy" was first mentioned in the 1995-96 report. Although not as a formal pronunciation, India's abstract concurrence with Southeast Asia is evident from Poplai's argument that "India had vehemently opposed Dutch action in Indonesia and refused to allow the refuelling of Dutch planes, which were being used to suppress the freedom movement there." At the bureaucratic level, Southeast Asia's growing significance in India's foreign policy priorities was demonstrated by the Ministry of External Affairs' Economic Cell designating ASEAN as one of its "thrust regions" and by the country's 1992 promotion from Secretary (East) to Foreign Secretary-level relations with ASEAN.

A number of academics and policymakers have distinguished between the first "phase" or decade of India's Look East policy, which took place in the 1990s and was marked by expanding trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia, and the second "phase" or decade that followed in the 2000s, when India's involvement in the region accelerated due to more institutionalised ties across a larger region and a broader agenda. This story of a first and second phase of the Look East policy has also been adopted by India's strategic strategists outside of official government discourse. Raja Mohan, for example, claims that phase two of the programme gave increasing connection between India and Southeast Asia more emphasis, with India's northeast gaining increased significance as a land bridge connecting it to Southeast Asian markets. India will therefore be able to find its "extended neighbourhood" and "break the artificial political barriers between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia."

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election in May 2014, the so-called third "phase" of India's Look East policy began. The formal announcement took place in November 2014, when Modi presented the Act East policy at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit and EAS in Myanmar. The phrase "Act East" emerged in geopolitical discussions when former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during her visit, urged the Indian government to "not just look east but engage East and Act East." Replacing "Look" with "Act" implied that India would be taking a more proactive and action-orientated approach towards the region with a "priority on security, connectivity and regional integration". In a speech in Singapore in November 2015, Modi noted the "purpose and vigour" with which his government had engaged Asia, adding that, "in the course of the last 18 months my government has engaged more with this region than in the world." This was also reflected in the establishment of a separate Indian Mission to ASEAN and the EAS in April 2015 with a dedicated ambassador to manage relations based at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. New Delhi had also invited the leaders of all ten ASEAN member states to attend as chief guests for India's Republic Day parade in 2018. Moreover, the South China Sea has also added an acquired significance as a "maritime gateway" between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. In this context India has developed a more emphatic position on maintaining freedom of navigation along these strategically vital waterways while calling for the peaceful resolution of maritime territorial and boundary disputes in the region.

To tactfully maintain the equilibrium in territorial and cohesive affluence of holistic congruence, a specific stabiliser has to be maintained to its utmost potential, i.e., Northeast India. Northeast India stands to be the natural buffer between India and the Southeast Asian nations, and oiling this natural toggle shall only yield results for the true integration under the aegis of the Act East Policy envisioned.

North East India: The Requisite Stabilizer

The problems we see today in North-eastern India started with the Sino-Indian War of 1962, when China crossed the borders of Arunachal Pradesh and reached central Assam, only stopping after a lot of damage was done. The containment of China was the ultimate goal of the Indian counterpart. Although matters subsided in due course of time, we could not completely confide in them, as history had been a witness to several transgressions of India's territorial sovereignty. Contemporary evidence also suggests the build-up of a large number of Chinese villages in the territory of Arunachal Pradesh (World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues), which can be a point of contention for both nations.

History has been a sheer witness to how violent upbringings conjunctured with administrative obviation have resulted in a civil war and seldom in a secessionist movement. The contemporary hegemon, in the 1860s, faced a brutal civil war resulting in the southern states forming the Confederate States of America. We cannot rule out the circumstantial eventualities of Western nations, but they certainly present a different context altogether. Undoubtedly, the South Sudanese Civil War in the 2000s presents a clearer mandate to the supposition of how a civil war can turn into a secessionist sentiment. Dismissing the experience of the Indian Union in relation to the previously mentioned disturbances may seem unreasonable, but it is important to remain cautious about the vulnerabilities present in the far-off, neglected Northeast India. To further highlight the existing sensitivities, Mr Veena Sikri, a former diplomat, stated in a conference that "NE India is Bangladesh locked," which exacerbates the region's vulnerability.

Days have passed, transforming the once rough standoff between the Kuki and Meitei communities into a violent arms battle. The looting of central weaponry, the involvement of a foreign power, and the escalating militant sentiment eliminate the possibility of a civil war. With the exception of Manipur, the situation in the heartland of Northeast India – Assam – is not comparable to peace. Anti-minority stirs by the Khilonjiyas have to an extent

caused havoc in several pockets of the state (Debjyoti Biswas, 2019). It is to bring into light that such eventualities may not have significant force to turn into a civil war, but the preponderance of a separatist sentiment fuelled by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) shall prick up ears of the close observers of the shadowed developments. A turmoil also persists in various areas of Nagaland, with roots that can be traced back to the 1950s, and these historical lineages continue to expose the region's vulnerabilities.

Moreover, a transnational perspective on the region reveals that the situation in Bangladesh bolsters the belief in a potential violent rebellion. Yunus's "redesigning the state" may be far off from reality, as the alleged student movement's volatility in being preyed upon by a foreign nexus stands up to be a much more convincing analysis. The theory of a foreign nexus, if it at all stands out to be true, means gigantic social and political turmoil can be foreseen across borders. The region's susceptibilities will be summed up by the infiltration of persecuted minorities into landlocked Northeast India, demographic alteration, weak social sentiments, and political negligence. An alternative hypothesis can be the possible paralysis of the "Chicken Neck"; being eyed and glued up by a foreign element at this juncture will completely slander the statute of the region.

Not far from eventuality, an internal tension at play may unmask the vulnerabilities of the region, as such a turmoil would render the states weak. The upsurge in a viably neglected Manipur convincingly suggests a deep nexus which, when unchecked, shall entirely cruise upon a civil war. The "Hilsa Diplomacy" (Soumya Bhoumik, 2021), mentioned here with a sardonic tone, is a clear example of how the affinities of the region are being exploited.

The point is also not to overlook the fact that the countries bordering northeastern India, except Bhutan, are no more reliable allies and may, at times of volatility, reap benefits or be a partner to the existing volatility. Theorising Mandala (Kautilya), a transnational circumvention of Northeast India by the Ari (neighbouring countries), excepting Mitra (Bhutan), may barely aid the exposure of the region. These eventualities, along with the

relevant restrictions imposed by the Indian Union, could ultimately result in secessionist tendencies and a long-overdue emotional subjugation of the region.

Internalised tensions in this area may expose the region to further vulnerabilities, as any negative modality may lead to the region's subjection to adversaries and impair the natural buffers of connectivity between India and Southeast Asia.

Imperative Bilateralism and Conditional Multilateralism

The Modi government's pursuit policies have shifted due to changes in global and regional politics. This policy allows India to pursue essential bilateralism and conditional multilateralism, which it has faithfully adhered to even as the country has never officially applied to join the ASEAN bloc. The Modi administration has thus pursued national interests without compromise by taking a nuanced approach to regional integration.

Imperative bilateralism refers to India's targeted efforts to strengthen ties with individual nations that hold strategic, economic, or cultural significance. Under the Modi government, bilateralism has been a cornerstone of the AEP due to several factors. First, India has pursued strategic partnerships with key nations such as Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand. India's partnership with Vietnam exemplifies its strategic balance in the South China Sea, where enhanced defence cooperation focusses on maritime security and capacity building (Pant & Joshi, 2017). Similarly, India's relationship with Japan has deepened in areas such as infrastructure, technological cooperation, and maritime security. Joint initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor underscore the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific (Madan, 2019). Moreover, partnerships with Indonesia and Thailand are pivotal for connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and maritime cooperation in the Andaman Sea.

India's approach to ASEAN, as with all engagement with multilateral fora, involves a finely tuned balance between active participation and national

interest considerations. This conditionality ensures that India's participation is utilitarian rather than purely symbolic. The fact that India is not pursuing membership in ASEAN, for example, is an intentional strategy to avoid excessive commitment to regional integration that may undermine its independence. Rather, India seeks to strengthen the relevance of ASEAN in the structures of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). While India did not participate in RCEP, as it was concerned about the negative trade balance and China's participation, it has nevertheless been strengthening bilateral trade relations with all ASEAN countries.

Way Forward for an Empowered Southeast Asia: Monroe Doctrine

With the Act East Policy (AEP), India has already demonstrated its commitment to engaging with the region. However, Southeast Asia is also a contested space where great powers like China and the United States compete for influence. Adapting a Monroe Doctrine-style framework would allow India to strengthen its grip over Southeast Asia by focusing on limiting the influence of external actors, particularly China, while asserting its role as a natural partner and leader.

India's geographic location provides it with a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). By expanding its naval presence and defence collaborations, India can act as a security provider for Southeast Asia. The Indian Navy's increased participation in joint exercises, such as Malabar (involving the U.S., Japan, and Australia) and Milan, underscores its commitment to regional security. India's role as a net security provider can be reinforced by partnering with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines to build their defence capacities. Vietnam, for example, has welcomed India's support in modernising its military and maintaining a balance of power in the South China Sea (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

Connectivity is a critical element of India's Monroe Doctrine in Southeast Asia. Projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the

Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project aim to integrate India's northeastern region with Southeast Asia. These initiatives boost economic ties and strengthen India's influence in the region by creating interdependencies. Moreover, India's engagement with the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 highlights its commitment to improving regional infrastructure. As Singh (2019) argues, robust connectivity initiatives can serve as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering Southeast Asian nations an alternative development model.

A central pillar of India's Monroe Doctrine would involve countering China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia. China's aggressive policies, including its militarisation of the South China Sea and economic dominance through the BRI, have raised concerns among Southeast Asian nations. India can position itself as a reliable and non-coercive partner, emphasising respect for sovereignty and international law.

According to Mohan (2020), India's adherence to a rules-based order and its willingness to engage multilaterally through forums like the Quad make it an attractive partner for Southeast Asia. By promoting initiatives like the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), India can help reduce Southeast Asia's overdependence on Chinese supply chains.

Expanding Trade and Investment

India's trade with ASEAN countries reached \$110 billion in 2021–22, making it one of the region's largest trading partners (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2022). To deepen economic ties, India must address barriers to trade and investment, such as bureaucratic hurdles and tariff issues. Agreements like the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can be renegotiated to make them more favorable and mutually beneficial. India's development assistance programs in Southeast Asia, such as capacity-building initiatives and technical assistance, reflect its commitment to the region's growth. For example, India's cooperation with Myanmar on agriculture, healthcare, and education underscores its role as a development

partner. Furthermore, India's focus on digital connectivity through the ASEAN-India ICT Corridor can help the region's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) integrate into global value chains. As Chaudhury (2021) highlights, such initiatives position India as a partner in Southeast Asia's economic transformation. India's economic policies must focus on reducing Southeast Asia's reliance on external powers like China. By promoting regional trade agreements and enhancing market access, India can offer Southeast Asian nations viable alternatives. Initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which India joined in 2022, demonstrate India's willingness to shape regional economic architecture.

Cultural and Soft Power Dimensions

India's historical connections with Southeast Asia, such as the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism, create a strong foundation for cultural diplomacy. Programmes like the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) framework promote cultural exchanges and reinforce historical ties. According to Behera (2020), such initiatives enhance India's soft power, making it a more acceptable and trusted partner in the region. India's scholarships and capacity-building programmes for Southeast Asian students foster long-term goodwill. Institutions like the South Asian University, which attract students from across Southeast Asia, symbolise India's commitment to regional knowledge-sharing and collaboration. India's administrative training centres also take in cadets from Southeast Asian countries to disseminate administrative resources.

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