

India's Act East Policy and ASEAN: Building a Regional Order Through Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, India's security concerns have undergone a substantial change. With the formulation of the Look East Policy (LEP) in the 1990s, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional entity became an essential component and a corridor for India's outreach to Southeast Asia. In 2014, the LEP became more encompassing with a shift to the Act East Policy (AEP). The global security and economic environment too are witnessing significant changes with the USA taking a back seat, China's aggressive positioning and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) coupled with the emerging geopolitical construct of 'Indo-Pacific'. The regional stakeholders, such as ASEAN, the USA, Japan, Australia and India are yet to form a unified stand on the Indo-Pacific concept as well as the regional security architecture. The AEP appropriately fits into the current scenario as India is set to take up a larger role in the regional security environment while keeping the centrality of ASEAN intact. New Delhi seeks to create a platform for mutual development in the Indo-Pacific and engage with like-minded nations in the quest for a rules-based order that promotes transparency, respect for sovereignty and international law, stability and free and fair-trade framework. India and ASEAN can be apt partners in the Indo-Pacific to play a constructive role and build a regional order.

Keywords

Look East Policy, Act East Policy, ASEAN, India, Indo-Pacific, regional security order

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Introduction

The politico-economic and sociocultural ties between India and East Asia especially Southeast Asia goes back to the pre-Christian era, dominated by mercantile links and spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in the region. This is evident from archaeological remains, architecture and Sanskrit inscriptions (see Coedès, 1968). The cultural, as well as civilizational footprint of India on Southeast Asia is evident till today especially in their language, customs and the rituals of the royalty. Hindu-Buddhist concepts of kingship and administrative institutions became deeply embedded in the royal culture of Southeast Asia and continued even after the advent of Islam. However, India's trade, culture and maritime links with the Southeast Asian kingdoms were disrupted with the arrival of the colonial powers in the region. According to Muni (2013), 'As a civilization of sun worshippers, India has always looked towards, and engaged with the East, in many varied ways.' He categories four stages of India's eastward engagement: from the pre-colonial times, to British imperialism, during independence and most recently from 1991. As against the popular belief, the Look East Policy (LEP) of India started much earlier than 1991, and goes beyond economic relations (Muni, 2013).

After India's independence, initiatives were taken to gain regional integration among newly independent Asian and African countries. The Asian Relations Conference of 1947 held in Delhi and the Bandung Conference in 1955 were some instances of early efforts in this direction. The five principles or the *Panchsheel*¹ was an important mechanism to provide a regional order among the newly emerging Asian nations. However, Nehru's 'Asian dream' could not materialize and since the late 1980s, India became aloof from the newly emerging Southeast Asian nations. During the Cold War years, the relationship became strained due to the regional geopolitics, which resulted in the divergence of strategic interests and drifted India and Southeast Asia apart. Even at the time of the formation of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, India was apprehensive as it regarded ASEAN as an anti-communist grouping and 'an instrument of neocolonialism and a reincarnation of SEATO'² (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 349). As the Cold War peaked, these apprehensions and divergences also grew. India with its non-aligned stand and a tilt towards USSR took almost a different view on most of the international developments/issues as against most of the ASEAN nations which were pro-US. In other words, the regional geopolitics and the Cold War regime primarily dictated the relations between India and ASEAN and kept ASEAN divided due to the Indo-China wars. Besides the mutual suspicion, there was also no 'incentives and pressure' for India to have a closer relationship with ASEAN and vice versa. India's dealings with ASEAN countries were mostly bilateral rather than the ASEAN as a whole (Tan & See, 2009, p. 24). These traditional linkages have become the key element of India's 'Look-East' policy, which was initiated in the 1990s.

India-ASEAN Ties: From Look East to Act East

India's opening up to the East was influenced by several factors. The end of the Cold War and decline of the Soviet Union, the rise of multilateralism, economic

reforms and the subsequent opening of India's economy began to shift India's interest towards the ASEAN nations. The other factors which influenced India's outreach towards the East were to secure and improve land, sea and air connectivity and communication lines, peaceful settlement of territorial disputes and regional stability free from outside interference (Blank, Moroney, Rabasa, & Lin, 2015, p. xix).

Besides, strategic cooperation gained pre-eminence due to the China factor. China's economic clout and allegiance with the ASEAN nations propelled India to up the game, and wield ASEAN-related forums to uphold 'peaceful resolutions to regional conflicts' (Singh, 2018, p. 14). Although India might not openly declare, the China factor has been the driving force of its endeavours in the region.

Against this backdrop, India's LEP 'seem like a logical, multifaceted organizing principle' to thwart Chinese threat without conflict (Ollapally, 2018, p. 146). The term 'LEP' only appeared officially in 1996 in the *Annual Report* of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) (Haokip, 2011, p. 248). The LEP became a turning point in India's foreign policy reinvigorating its engagement with Southeast Asia, with ASEAN as the focus. It was a significant step towards liberating India from the Cold War-centric foreign policy and strategic interest. The new policy orientation mainly focused on renewing contacts with the Southeast Asian region that India had drifted away. Hong (2007, pp. 122–123) points out that:

Look East policy was implemented with the purpose of rebuilding its economic relations with Southeast Asia so as to diversify trade away from its main trading partners in North America and Europe. ASEAN countries realized that with the rise of India, they can reduce their dependence on Japan, the Western countries, and China in trade and economic relations.

Despite disagreements, India's sectoral dialogue status with ASEAN in 1992 is regarded as the date of the commencement of LEP. (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 351). From sectoral dialogue partner, India became a full dialogue partner in December 1995 at the fifth ASEAN Summit, Bangkok. Later, in 2002 India became a summit level partner (ASEAN+1), after which the ASEAN–India Summit has been held annually. Besides, India also became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, thus allowing India's increasing engagement in bilateral relations, security and strategic cooperation with these countries.

In order to boost private sector engagement, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry have conducted India–ASEAN Business meetings since 2002 (Naidu, 2004, p. 332). In 2003, India acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia³ indicating its commitment and 'shared interest for peace, security, stability and development in Southeast Asia'. India also signed 'Joint Declaration for Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism' with ASEAN in order to fight against terrorism, at the same event (ASEAN, 2019).

In 2005, India was present at the East Asia Summit (EAS) for the first time, thus involving with the broader East Asian region. In 2009, Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in goods was signed, and in 2012 India and ASEAN became a strategic

partner. In 2014, the India–ASEAN Trade-in-Services and Investment Agreements were signed, which came into effect on July 2015. Besides, other ASEAN-related mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) and the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and others, offer the opportunity for India and ASEAN to come on board to discuss the issues of regional concerns. Between India and ASEAN, there are 30 annual institutional mechanisms for dialogue (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). India also participated in the sub-regional groupings like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) forum, Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

The LEP has been India's major policy instrument of engagement with ASEAN. It has grown and passed through various phases over the years. At the plenary session of the second India–ASEAN Business Summit, Shri Yashwant Sinha remarked:

India's 'Look East Policy' has now entered its Phase II. Phase I was focused primarily on the ASEAN countries and on trade and investment linkages. Phase II is characterized by an expanded definition of 'East' extending from Australia to China and East Asia with ASEAN as its core. Phase II marks a shift in focus from exclusively economic issues to economic and security issues including joint efforts to protect sea lanes, coordination on counter-terrorism etc. On the economic side, Phase II is also characterized by arrangements for FTAs and establishing institutional economic linkages between the countries of the region and India. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2003)

The first phase of the LEP started in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Congress government. The second phase begun in the 2000s during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's BJP-led NDA government and continued under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Congress-led UPA government (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 349). Though the LEP revitalized India's relationship with the neighbouring east, it did not live up to the expectations. The LEP, rather than being a complete success, often showed a lack of 'inertia and half-heartedness' in India's efforts to engage with the ASEAN (Palit, 2014). A case in point may be, the US Former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton in her speech at Chennai in 2011, indicated the US support for India's LEP, but urged India 'not just to look east, but to engage east and act east as well' (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Bajpaee argues that each phase of the LEP can be regarded as a 'rebranding exercise' to distinguish from the previous governments (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 350). He further contends:

the various phases of the Look East policy are rooted in domestic political rhetoric rather than foreign policy shifts as new governments have sought to differentiate their policymaking approach from previous administrations. (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 349)

The present Indian government, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, made a major revamp in the policy framework as well as in the nomenclature of the LEP thus bringing the Act East Policy (AEP) in high gear. On November 2014 at the 9th EAS in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, Modi officially articulated the transformation

of LEP into 'AEP'. This is marked as the 'third phase' of India's LEP (Bajpaee, 2017, p. 358). The intensification of the strategic partnership between India-ASEAN is reflected in several high-level visits by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ASEAN countries and the rounds of 'security dialogues, political consultations, joint military exercises and training' (Rajagopalan, 2018). The AEP may seem like old wine in the new bottles; however, after a closer look, it can be observed that it is a huge departure from the old policy. In other words, the LEP appeared more rhetorical and primarily economic or trade-oriented while the AEP is more action-oriented.

In November 2015, at the ASEAN-India Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN leaders voiced appreciation for India's AEP and concurred that it could be complementary to ASEAN's community-building efforts. The ASEAN leaders exhorted India to cooperate in order to enable the vision of 'ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together' (ASEAN, 2019). In 2017, India-ASEAN reached 25 years of their Dialogue Partnership, 15 years of Summit meetings and strategic partner for 5 years. In celebration, the ASEAN-India Commemorative was held on January 2018 in New Delhi on the theme 'Shared Values, Common Destiny'. As a symbolic gesture of India's foreign policy venture, during the Republic Day celebration on 26 January 2018, all ten heads of the ASEAN countries were invited as chief guests. Compared to the 1990s, now India was in a position to offer better trade and services. It is now expected that improvement in connectivity, trade prospect and market, and information exchange will augment the AEP as well as attract the 'export-oriented ASEAN' (Viswanath, 2018).

The AEP is omnidirectional in approach ranging from 'strategic, political, security, socio-economic and cultural' aspects and extending from ASEAN countries to China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Pacific littorals and the USA (Bhatia, 2016). It emphasizes on strengthening the cooperation with extended neighbours and stronger relations with the big powers by keeping ASEAN as the core interest (Bhatia, 2018). It is an attempt at 'soft balancing the power in the east' (Mulay, 2017). India's relations with Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, Pacific Island Countries (PIC), New Zealand and Australia have also laid a strong foundation for the AEP and the larger Indo-Pacific.

India-ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific Conundrum

In the present context, the AEP has become a bridge between Indo-Pacific as a regional framework and the ASEAN. As India is aspiring to become a world power, it also seeks to be in tandem with other regional powers, thereby expanding its horizon of interest and influence. Besides, the regional framework of the Asia-Pacific is shifting to a larger geopolitical construct of Indo-Pacific, which in turn has posed fresh implication and challenges for the region. According to Khurana the 'Indo' in Indo-Pacific is not India; but the Indian Ocean; nonetheless, India is expected to play a crucial position in the maritime security in the region (Kuo, 2018).

Different countries have their own concept and definition of the Indo-Pacific. For instance, Japan formulated the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' (FOIP).

India voiced Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Russia has projected ‘Indo-Asia Pacific’ idea to ensure inclusion in the emerging regional architecture. ASEAN’s notion of the Indo-Pacific is not about amalgamating different concepts into a single idea. It focuses on ‘common interests rather than common values’, and ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’ (Saiman & Bayuni, 2018). After much deliberations, in June 2019, ASEAN came up with the Indo-Pacific outlook which delineates the following key elements: the ‘integration and interconnection of Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions’ underlining the centrality of ASEAN; upholding dialogue and cooperation rather than rivalry; the ‘development and prosperity for all’ and the significance of ‘maritime domain’ in the ‘regional architecture’ (ASEAN, 2019).

The idea of Indo-Pacific as projected by the USA as ‘FOIP’ was seen by many scholars, as an extension of Obama’s ‘Rebalancing’ that rejuvenated under the President Donald Trump (Chen, 2018a). As far as China is concerned, there is no Chinese official statement on the concept of Indo-Pacific. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on being asked about the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’, responded:

It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea-foam in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean: they may get attention, but soon will dissipate. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018)

Scholars like Pan (2014) questions the ‘naturalness’ of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and explicates that it is an upshot of ‘geopolitical imaginations’ about the perceived ‘rise of China’ that is shared and fueled by ‘collective anxieties’ of the USA, Australia, Japan and India. Khurana points out that the concept of Indo-Pacific is not ‘exclusive’ one. It can also accommodate China’s geopolitical interest by increasing its spheres of influence in the Indian Ocean and strengthening its BRI (Kuo, 2018).

Despite these differences in the definition, there is an increasing acceptance among the policymakers as well as the scholars about the concept of the Indo-Pacific to define the changing regional order. Though it might be challenging to develop a comprehensive approach, it is an increasing necessity for the regional powers to evolve a framework for the Indo-Pacific strategy, whether dominated by rivalry or based on cooperation (Medcalf, 2015).

India’s Security and Economic Interests in the Indo-Pacific

There is a confluence of interest in India’s economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific as both are closely interrelated. India’s security perspective in the Indo-Pacific started with an aspiration for a more significant presence in the region as well as to give a framework for regional order. The economic might of the Indo-Pacific and evolving security dimension is pertinent to shifting of the centre of gravity towards the region (Singh, 2016). In addition, the undeniable ascendancy of China’s economic, political and security clout is another primary driver. As the Indo-Pacific region became the centre of regional geopolitics, it fits quintessentially into India’s already existing ‘geopolitical outlook’ for the expanded

neighbourhood, under the aegis of the AEP (Scott, 2012, p. 169). Besides, India's concerns range from economic, political, social to environmental factors as well as nontraditional security threats, such as transnational crime, terrorism, arms smuggling, human trafficking, piracy at sea, money laundering, terrorist financing and cybercrime (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2017).

Furthermore, with the aspiration to become a major player in the region, India seeks to engage at a broader level with other major powers active in the region, in addition to ASEAN countries. In recent years, there have been many efforts to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.⁴

According to Sundararaman (2017):

Much of the core focus for the realignment of the Quad ... is a reaffirmation of the fact that countries have begun to express a sense of uncertainty as the power shifts occur and the Quad demonstrates the need to maintain the current status quo in relation to the normative order that prevails in interstate relations. (p. 76)

However, among the Quad members, many feel that India is 'the most ambivalent of all' (Thu, 2019). In his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue June 2018, Prime Minister Modi did not even mention 'Quad' he rather used 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific. According to Prime Minister Modi:

Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity ... lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. Moreover, by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. (MEA, 2018)

However, given China's activities in the region, Quad appears to be compelling for India's security interest. Another major dilemma is concerning the centrality of ASEAN. According to Saha (2018), though India seeks to evolve with other big players in the region, it is uncertain regarding how it will draw a balance between the Quad and the ASEAN, as Quad can 'dilute ASEAN centrality.' At the same time, if India wants to engage in the Quad actively, it must ensure that AEP objectives are not sidelined. Besides, many in the ASEAN region are concerned about the Quad; however, others believed that Quad 'complements the ASEAN-centred regional framework' as the Quad members have also acknowledged the Centrality of ASEAN (Thu, 2018). Some scholars also perceive the resurgence of the Quad as 'Quad-plus' to include ASEAN in the future (Saha, 2018). Besides, India's idea of SAGAR is already acknowledged by the ASEAN (Singh, 2018).

India-ASEAN and the Regional Security Architecture

The ASEAN nations are inclined towards India playing balancing role in the region as the regional order and security environment in the Indo-Pacific unfolds. There is uncertainty to what extent the USA will be able to maintain its role as a strategic balancer in the region. The dwindling of US security guarantees became a concern for its regional allies. Under these circumstances, India and ASEAN are

both directly confronted with uncertainties in the regional power balance. India's compatibility with the ASEAN countries in forging regional cooperation is due to India's 'abstinence from exhibiting hegemonistic ambitions' (Ahmed, 2012). As the region is under the escalating US-China trade war and China flexing muscle in the South China Sea, many in southeast Asia and East Asia would like India to play a 'proactive role' (De, 2019). Moreover, ASEAN has been the crux of India's AEP and it is 'the glue' that holds other countries together for interactions based on common understanding (Ambassador Singh, 2014, p. 16).

Countries that are caught in a power dynamics between the USA and China are in a dilemma as they are sceptical of the regional security changes led by China, but at the same time, they do not want to miss out the economic benefits brought by China (Chen, 2018b). Despite China's aggressive presence, ASEAN, as well as India, may not prefer a confrontationist attitude towards China. In the current regional security environment of great power concerts, ASEAN and India stand in the centre of prime importance and can act as balancers among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific.

With India becoming a formidable power in the region, it is an apt partner for the ASEAN. Moreover, India's aspiration can be validated by the support of ASEAN nations. India's emergence as a significant global power and the rising Chinese threat urged ASEAN countries to welcome India's increased presence in the region. New Delhi too is seeking to create a platform for mutual development in the Indo-Pacific and engage with like-minded nations in the quest for a rules-based order that promotes transparency, respect for sovereignty and international law, stability, and free and fair trade. Thus, India and ASEAN matter to each other and should put themselves in the driver's seat in the Indo-Pacific framework to evolve rules-based order for the region.

However, there is fragility in the ASEAN itself to provide the necessary leadership in the region. At the same time, it is also entangled in the power dynamics from within and outside with regard to its confrontation with China in the South China Sea. Thus, ASEAN as a regional organisation needs to act cooperatively and unitedly to define its own role in the regional security environment and engagement with the external powers. In addition, the benign perception of India by ASEAN makes India to be taken casually at some level.

Conclusion

Foreign policy of a country is a mixture of 'symbolism and substance' (Malholtra, 2018), in the case of India–ASEAN relations, India appears to have grown from rhetoric to reality with its shift from LEP to AEP. At the same time, its reputation is also at stake.

Regional security environment in Indo-Pacific is complex and multilayered. The hegemonic presence of China and its complex relations with individual ASEAN countries adds further complexity to the already existing situation. The ASEAN is in a dilemma about handling the Chinese threat. On the one hand, it is

threatened by the Chinese posturing in the South China Seas, and on the other, its heavy economic dependence on China compels it to adopt for constructive engagement. Against this backdrop, the ASEAN wants the presence of great powers, still it desists from creating a conflicting front against China.

India has an opportunity to fill this vacuum in the regional power balance. Its closer ties with Southeast Asian countries and recognition of ASEAN centrality can provide strength to its quest for regional order. A powerful India with confident dealings with China and cordial relations with the USA will contribute significantly to the stability of the region. ASEAN and India can work together in future to provide rules-based order which may be based on the TAC. All major powers active in the region are already the signatories of the treaty. Although they do not agree on the modalities because of divergence of interests, the TAC can provide a base from where the regional order can be built in the future. Thus, India's AEP as a driving force in India's relations with ASEAN can play a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific.

The biggest challenge for India is to work out a 'grand strategy' that includes economic cooperation, political engagement and strategic interest. It will be a significant step forward in India's emergence as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India's relevance could be proved by its presence as a balancing force in the emerging power dynamics and an effective economic partner. The current Indian government has the mandate and apparent political will to carry out these goals with an effective strategy and its implementation.

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1. It first enunciated between China and India in 1954 containing five main principles: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence. These five principles of *Panchsheel* was adopted into the Ten Principles of International Peace and Cooperation enunciated in the declaration issued by the April 1955 Bandung Conference of 29 Afro-Asian countries. In 1961, the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Belgrade accepted *Panchsheel* as the core principle of the Non-Aligned Movement.
2. Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)—It was an anti-communist grouping formed in September 1954 by the USA, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan.
3. TAC is a regional code of conduct signed on 24 February 1976 to govern interstate relations in Southeast Asia. It also allows non-ASEAN countries to join the treaty. TAC

- endorses the principles of the UN charter, the 10 principles of the Bandung Conference and the ASEAN declaration.
4. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad is an informal dialogue between four democratic countries, such as the USA, Japan, Australia and India. It was informally organized in December 2004 for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to respond to the massive Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. After which in 2007, the four countries met on the sidelines of ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila. Later on, the first naval exercise by the Quad members gained Chinese opposition pertaining to which Australia Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pulled out of the exercise. The Quad became inactive for years; however, in 2017 there was talk of reviving the Quad.

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