



A Comparative Analysis Of The Shift In India's Look East Policy To Act East Policy

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Abstract

This article critically analyses, within the larger context of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape, the transition of India's regional involvement policy from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the more proactive Act East Policy (AEP). Understanding the strategic drivers, methods of execution, and multifaceted effects of this policy shift is the goal of the study. The study illustrates how India's foreign policy has changed in response to regional and international events by tracing the LEP's historical origins and examining the subsequent transition to the AEP.

The article evaluates significant programs including connectivity projects, strategic collaborations, and cultural diplomacy and is organized around a multifaceted examination of the AEP's main pillars: economic, political-security, and socio-cultural. According to the findings, even if the AEP has increased India's prominence and involvement in Southeast and East Asia, there are still a number of structural and implementation-level issues, especially with regard to regional integration and strategic coherence.

Finally, by pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of the AEP as a strategic doctrine, the study adds to the larger conversation on India's place in the Indo-Pacific. The paper identifies areas for further investigation in India's developing regional diplomacy and ends with policy recommendations for improving the Act East Policy's efficacy.

Keywords:

India's Foreign Policy, Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific, Regional Engagement, Strategic Partnerships, Economic Diplomacy, Soft Power, Geopolitics, Regionalism, Constructivism.

Introduction

The Look East Policy (LEP) of the early 1990s and the Act East Policy (AEP) of 2014 marked a dramatic change in India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia. This strategic change reflects India's growing recognition of the region's crucial role in accomplishing its broader foreign policy objectives. Following the Cold War and India's subsequent economic liberalization, the Look East Policy was created with economic reasons as its primary driving force. The collapse of the Soviet Union, a vital strategic ally, forced India to alter its foreign policy, and it started establishing new business partnerships. Southeast Asia has emerged as a crucial region for India's political and economic goals due to its thriving economies and good geographic location.

The LEP emphasized the need of strengthening relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN, as a regional organization, provided India with a controlled arena to connect with other Southeast Asian countries, fostering communication and collaboration in a range of disciplines. Recognizing ASEAN's critical role in regional economic integration, the program aimed to boost

connectivity, commerce, and investment. However, as the geopolitical climate in the Indo-Pacific region has become more difficult, India has adopted a more comprehensive strategy, which includes sociocultural and political-security dimensions in addition to economic cooperation. The evolving Indo-Pacific environment, characterized by the increasing importance of maritime security and China's expanding influence, has had a considerable impact on policy evolution.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2014 Act East Policy is a strategic realignment meant to increase India's influence and presence in the Indo-Pacific, a region of critical geopolitical and economic importance. India's desire to take a more active part in influencing the regional security framework and furthering its strategic objectives is demonstrated by this policy change. Because of its extensive marine region and interconnected economy, the Indo-Pacific has gained international interest due to its growing geopolitical rivalry and changing security threats. The rise of China, particularly its assertive maritime expansion and growing economic influence, has underscored the imperative for India to strengthen its strategic partnerships within the region. The necessity to ensure freedom of navigation, promote a rules-based order, and enhance maritime security has become increasingly paramount.

The 2014 Act East Policy, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a strategic realignment aimed at increasing India's influence and presence in the Indo-Pacific region, which is critical geo politically and economically. This policy change demonstrates India's determination to play a more active role in shaping the regional security environment and achieving its strategic goals. Because of its vast marine region and integrated economy, the Indo-Pacific has attracted international attention as a result of rising geopolitical rivalry and shifting security challenges. The emergence of China, notably its forceful maritime expansion and expanding economic impact, has highlighted the need for India to strengthen its strategic ties in the region. The need to preserve freedom of navigation, establish a rules-based system, and improve maritime security has grown increasingly important.

Historical Context of the Look East Policy: Origins and Motivations.

The Look East Policy (LEP), launched by India in the early 1990s, marked a substantial shift from the country's historically inward-looking foreign policy. Its origins can be traced back to a combination of internal and foreign factors that changed India's strategic calculations following the Cold War. Domestically, India was going through a period of significant economic liberalization. The 1991 economic crisis, which forced a change away from previous socialist-inspired economic policies, highlighted India's need to integrate with the global economy.

Domestically, India was going through a period of significant economic liberalization. The 1991 economic crisis, which forced a change away from previous socialist-inspired economic policies, highlighted India's need to integrate with the global economy. The demise of the Soviet Union, a long-standing strategic partner, prompted India to broaden its economic and political ties. Southeast Asia, with its dynamic economies and strategic position, has emerged as a prospective area for India to pursue commercial interests.

Internationally, the end of the Cold War signaled a new era of globalization and regionalism. The establishment of ASEAN as a unified regional bloc, together with the growing economic vitality of East Asian economies, provided India with an opportunity to strengthen its regional footprint. The LEP was designed as a strategic reaction to these changing global and regional forces. The fundamental motivations for the LEP were primarily economic. India tried to capitalise on the economic vitality of Southeast Asian countries to bolster its own economic progress. The policy sought to strengthen trade, investment, and technology collaboration with ASEAN members. It also aimed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from these countries, which were regarded as essential drivers of economic growth.

However, the LEP was not motivated exclusively by economic motives. It also showed India's ambition to strengthen its strategic position in the region. By interacting with ASEAN, India wants to challenge China's

expanding influence while also asserting its own status as a regional force. The policy also sought to overcome India's perceived strategic isolation during the post-Cold War period.

The LEP's initial phase focused on developing dialogue relationships with ASEAN and boosting bilateral ties with important Southeast Asian states. This included taking part in ASEAN-related forums and initiating economic cooperation agreements.

Transition to the Act East Policy: Motivations, Drivers, and Strategic Shifts

While the Look East Policy (LEP) established the framework for India's engagement with Southeast Asia, it became clear that a more comprehensive and proactive approach was required to confront the changing geopolitical scenario. The transition from the Look East Policy (LEP) to the Act East Policy (AEP), which was officially implemented in 2014, represented a substantial shift in strategic direction, driven by a convergence of incentives and drivers.

A crucial driving element for this move was the recognition that the LEP, which was primarily focused on economic considerations, fell short of addressing the Indo-Pacific region's developing strategic issues. China's development and increasingly assertive maritime stance demanded a more strong and comprehensive engagement plan. India aimed to deepen its strategic relationships and foster a rule-based international system.

A further incentive was the desire to strengthen India's ties with Southeast Asia. While the LEP concentrated on commerce and investment, the AEP stressed the value of physical and digital connectivity. This includes attempts to modernize infrastructure, increase maritime connection, and foster digital collaboration. Such connectedness was viewed as critical for enabling trade, investment, and interpersonal exchanges.

Furthermore, the AEP stated that India intends to take a more assertive role in creating the regional security architecture. The policy aimed to increase India's defence ties with important Southeast Asian countries, improve maritime security cooperation, and encourage joint military exercises. This strategic pillar emphasized India's commitment to protecting its security interests and promoting regional stability.

The AEP also planned to increase India's role outside the ASEAN group to include other significant regional actors such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. This reflected India's understanding of the larger Indo-Pacific context and its desire to form strategic alliances with like-minded countries.

The primary strategic transformations associated with the transition from the LEP to the AEP can be stated as follows:

- **Enhanced Strategic Focus:** The AEP prioritized political-security collaboration with economic involvement.
- **Increased Connectivity:** The AEP promoted physical and digital connectivity measures to improve regional integration.
- **Expanded Regional Scope:** The AEP broadened India's participation beyond ASEAN to include other significant Indo-Pacific countries.
- **Proactive Engagement:** The AEP marked a transition toward a more proactive and forceful foreign policy focused at altering the regional security framework.

In essence, the transition from the LEP to the AEP represented a strategic recalibration, driven by evolving geopolitical realities and India's desire to play a more influential role in the Indo-Pacific region.

Analysis of Look East Policy Successes and Limitations: An Evaluation

Initiated in the early 1990s, the Look East Policy (LEP) constituted a major strategic realignment in India's foreign policy, aimed at enhancing its engagement with Southeast Asia. Although the LEP did realize some positive outcomes, it also encountered certain constraints that necessitated the transition to the Act East Policy (AEP).

Successes of the Look East Policy:

- **Enhanced Economic Engagement:** The LEP was successful in strengthening economic connections between India and ASEAN member states. Trade and investment flows surged, boosting India's economic growth. The policy promoted India's integration with Southeast Asia's dynamic economy, opening up new markets and investment opportunities.
- **Dialogue Partnerships:** The LEP formed dialogue partnerships with ASEAN, which provided a venue for ongoing discussion and cooperation. These collaborations encouraged the sharing of ideas, the formation of collaborative initiatives, and the deepening of bilateral ties.
- **Regional Integration:** The LEP helped India integrate with regional forums and initiatives, which increased its regional presence and impact. It signaled India's shift toward a more outward-facing strategy.

India's Strategic Presence in the Region: An Evaluation

Evaluating India's strategic position in Southeast Asia necessitates a thorough awareness of the shifting dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The Look East Policy (LEP) and its successor, the Act East Policy (AEP), played critical roles in determining India's geographical footprint.

Under the LEP, India's strategic presence was primarily characterized by its economic activities and dialogue linkages with ASEAN. While these efforts helped India's inclusion into regional forums, they did not result in considerable strategic influence. While the LEP's emphasis on economic cooperation was good, it fell short in addressing the region's mounting security issues.

Key Aspects of India's Strategic Presence:

- **Increased Maritime Security Cooperation:** India has expanded ties with important Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. This has included combined naval exercises, information exchange, and capacity-building efforts.
- **India has formed strategic alliances with Japan and Australia** to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. These alliances have strengthened India's ability to project power and protect its strategic interests.
- **India has invested in connectivity projects**, such the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, to improve physical connection with Southeast Asia. These programs have the potential to increase trade, investment, and one-on-one interactions.
- **India regularly participates in regional forums**, such the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, to foster communication and collaboration on security and economic concerns.
- **India has boosted defence relations with Southeast Asian nations** by selling military equipment and conducting joint training exercises.

Challenges and Limitations:

- China's expanding economic and military dominance in the region presents a substantial challenge to India's strategic goals.
- Delays in connecting projects and efforts have harmed India's capacity to achieve its strategic goals.
- Balancing Economic and Security Interests: India must strike a balance between economic and security interests to ensure mutual benefit in regional engagements.
- ASEAN's unity on critical issues impacts India's capacity to use ASEAN to project dominance in the region.

Comparative Analysis: Key Differences and Similarities Between LEP and AEP

The **Look East Policy (LEP)** and the **Act East Policy (AEP)** represent India's evolving approach to engaging with the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Southeast Asia. While both policies share the overarching goal of enhancing India's presence in the region, they differ in their scope, strategic objectives, and implementation. This section aims to compare the two policies, highlighting key differences and similarities that underscore India's shifting geopolitical priorities.

Key Differences Between LEP and AEP

1. **Scope and Geographic Focus:** The Look East Policy, launched in the early 1990s, aimed to strengthen India's economic ties with ASEAN states. Its approach focused primarily on trade and economic cooperation, with a significant emphasis on regional integration.

In 2014, the Act East Policy expanded its scope to cover the Indo-Pacific area, including Japan, Australia, and the US, in addition to Southeast Asia. AEP demonstrates a more proactive approach to regional security challenges, as well as economic and geopolitical cooperation.

2. **Strategic and Security Dimensions:** o LEP prioritized economic involvement over security and defence cooperation. While India worked with Southeast Asia on security matters such as counterterrorism, these concerns were not essential to the policy.

In contrast, AEP places a greater emphasis on strategic alliances and security cooperation. The development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the deepening of defence connections with nations such as Japan and Vietnam, and increasing naval cooperation in the South China Sea are all important components of AEP's security strategy.

3. **Multilateral Engagement:** The Look East Policy relied heavily on bilateral relationships with ASEAN countries. Multilateral participation was secondary, but India did participate in regional forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

In contrast, the AEP stresses India's multilateral participation. Its strong engagement in regional organizations, including as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), has greatly expanded its diplomatic footprint.

4. **Economic and Connectivity Focus:** o The LEP prioritized strengthening trade partnerships and economic diplomacy. India aimed to expand exports and imports with Southeast Asian countries while also strengthening collaboration in fields such as agriculture, technology, and energy.

AEP expands on the economic focus and takes a holistic approach. It focuses not only commerce and investment, but also connectivity initiatives that connect Northeast India to Southeast Asia and improve regional infrastructure. Initiatives such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway demonstrate this transition.

5. China's Role: During the LEP era, India maintained a cautious approach to China due to persistent border conflicts and the need to balance economic cooperation with security.

Under AEP, India aims to offset China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. India's strengthening defence connections with Japan, Australia, and the United States, as well as its rising position in the Quad, indicate a strategic shift toward countering China's aggression, notably in maritime security and infrastructure development.

Key Similarities Between LEP and AEP

1. **Focus on Economic Integration:** The Look East and Act East strategies both aim to increase economic interaction with the ASEAN area. The ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA), agreed under the LEP and strengthened under the AEP, demonstrates India's commitment to supporting regional economic integration. Both strategies emphasize the value of commerce, investment, and connectivity.
2. **Focusing on Southeast Asia:** While AEP has a greater geographical scope, Southeast Asia remains central to both agendas. The ASEAN area remains India's principal economic partner in the Indo-Pacific, and both LEP and AEP seek to strengthen these connections through strategic collaborations, trade agreements, and people-to-people interactions.
3. **Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Ties:** Both policies use soft power as a diplomatic tool. Cultural exchanges, including as the promotion of yoga, Bollywood, and Indian classical music, have played an important role in both LEP and AEP's efforts to foster goodwill and increase India's cultural impact in Southeast Asia. The Indian diaspora in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand has also played an important role in strengthening ties.
4. **Both strategies aim to promote peace, stability, and collaboration in the Indo-Pacific.** While the security aspect has increased under AEP, both LEP and AEP have constantly highlighted the importance of a rules-based system, freedom of navigation, and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs.

Conclusion

Finally, the transition from India's Look East Policy to the Act East Policy is a fundamental shift in the country's foreign policy stance, indicating a shift from passive to proactive engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. While the Look East Policy laid the groundwork for economic and diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian nations, the Act East Policy has expanded upon this by incorporating strategic, security, and cultural dimensions, fostering a more comprehensive and dynamic relationship with the region.

The Act East Policy prioritizes not just economic cooperation, but also strategic partnerships, security collaborations, and cultural interchange. This multidimensional strategy has increased India's participation in regional forums and initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and has expanded connections with major countries such as Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN member states. Furthermore, the program has placed substantial emphasis on the development of India's northeastern area, promoting it as a gateway to Southeast Asia and incorporating it into larger regional connectivity projects.

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