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**“India’s Vision on Act East Policy”**

**presented by**

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## **Introduction**

The political and economic developments in different parts of the world during the early 1990s brought radical changes in the relations among nations, resulting in the emergence of an era of globalisation. Globalisation brought about an increasing integration of economies and societies and threw open opportunities and challenges to both the developed and developing countries. Globalisation of the world's economies greatly intensified international competition and has, at the same time, given rise to a new wave of regionalism.<sup>1</sup> Changing economic frontiers, India's fast economic growth and international and regional economic challenges, brought the Indian leadership to forge a policy which stressed on bringing the South East Asian nations closer.

The importance of Southeast Asia was recognised by one of India's first strategic analysts, the visionary K.M. Panikkar, way back in the 1940s. The Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, also recognised the importance of Southeast Asia, which offered an opportunity for India to forge close political links. Indeed, India's first forays into foreign policy affairs were in Southeast Asia in support of anti-colonial movements in that region.<sup>2</sup>

## **India's Look East Policy**

The Look East Policy (LEP) was officially launched in the year 1991 during the tenure of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, although the term 'Look East Policy' was mentioned for the first time in the Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs in 1996.<sup>3</sup> I.K. Gujral had stated that 'What look east really means is that an outward looking India, is gathering all forces of dynamism, domestic and regional and is directly focusing on establishing synergies with a fast consolidating and progressive neighbourhood to its East in Mother Continent of Asia'.<sup>4</sup>

The relations with ASEAN were pursued with a lot of vigour and dynamism which saw India become sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1992 and full dialogue partner in 1995. In 1998, Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee intended to accelerate India's Look East Policy. The concept of "extended neighbourhood" was popularized by Indian leaders such as I.K. Gujral and Jaswant Sinha. After almost a decade, the policy

assumed a more pronounced strategic flavour and expanded to the countries other than ASEAN member like Australia, Japan and South Korea. India's then Foreign Minister Jaswant Sinha heralded the second phase of the Look East Policy in 2003.<sup>5</sup> While in the first phase, the emphasis was on political, diplomatic and people to people relationships, improved connectivity and enhanced trade, the second phase revolved around strengthening of economic relations, defence and security cooperation besides strengthening relationships in other areas. During the second phase, though the dominant impulse remained the economic engagement, increasingly the LEP also acquired strategic orientation. The LEP focused not only on the ASEAN members but also expanded to include South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and other countries in the East. Over the two decades, not only has India progressed from a dialogue partner to the present status of a strategic partner in respect of ASEAN but has also established strategic partnerships on bilateral basis with many ASEAN countries and Japan, Australia and South Korea. It can also be said that after 2012, the Indian government continued to work towards what it called the third phase that was termed as an 'Enhanced LEP'.<sup>6</sup>

The Look East policy stressed on regional integration, reform and liberalisation, rapid economic growth and development of the North Eastern region of India, adapting the approach of focussing on geographical proximity of regions, sub-regional cooperation and stress on free trade agreements. This policy has, though, without any doubt, brought India closer to the ASEAN nations, but was not fully able to tap the opportunities that such relations could have born. States falling in the North East remained deprived mostly of the benefits that could have been accrued from the policy being followed in earnest. The challenges that were faced by ASEAN internally and the financial crisis that it faced also kept Indian businesses and policy makers hesitant about the LEP being taken seriously as a policy.

LEP has yielded "mixed results" for the Northeast. It has benefited traders, industrialists and highly qualified professionals but it has not met the expectations in the field of employment generation.<sup>7</sup> The movement of natural persons and skilled labours remain still constrained or is open only to select sectors.

## **India's Act East Policy**

The present government has strengthened and enhanced India's foreign policy perspective on multiple fronts. Initially, Prime Minister Modi's early foreign policy decision-making pointed to a prioritisation of relations within India's own neighbourhood. This has lent India's Look East policy even greater momentum, unveiling an upgraded 'Act East Policy'(AEP) during the India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014.<sup>8</sup> The foundation, objective remains the same but to provide impetus and increase its importance and focus on it, the policy was upgraded. However, Prime Minister Modi's commitment to stability in the South Asian neighbourhood will not necessarily come at the expense of East Asian engagement. India's North-eastern states cannot be easily accessed from the mainland without Bangladesh's cooperation, so positive relations with India's South Asian neighbours will be crucial to enhancing its land connectivity with Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> In addition, since becoming Prime Minister, Modi has advocated a 'Look East, Link West Policy' pointing to a broader Indo-Pacific conceptualisation of India's region.<sup>10</sup>

India has been pushing for greater regional integration of Indian economy with that of the ASEAN by expanding the scope of trade and investment. The main focus of 4th EAS Foreign Ministers' meeting was on strengthening cooperation in the areas of energy, education, disaster management and enhancing connectivity. Sushma Swaraj reiterated India's position that India "would soon draft a five-year action plan starting 2016 for enhancing connectivity and cooperation in diverse areas".<sup>11</sup>

The three pillars on which regional integration hinges are culture, commerce, and connectivity. The historical linkages between these countries in terms of culture and commerce are well known. But the implementation of the third pillar, connectivity, has become crucial in affirming the plausibility of strengthening regional ties. There is a need to improve connectivity through transport, technology, and cultural ties.<sup>12</sup>

India and the 10-member countries of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in services and investments on September 8, 2014. The final agreement was signed two years after the conclusion of

detailed negotiations on the pact. In 2010, India and the 10- ASEAN member countries signed the Free Trade Agreement in goods. The realisation of the FTA in services is expected to give the much needed impetus to India's trade and investment relations with the member countries of ASEAN, though there are many hurdles on its way, as in various sectors, deliberations are required to have a better understanding between governments as well as business houses to have a successful implementation of the FTA. The Indian government as well as the private sector have been ready for the agreement but the ASEAN members couldn't expedite the pact. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand took several months to set things right domestically. The other nine countries that have ratified the agreement include: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The primary reason for the Filipino apprehension was its fears that the Indian services sector might sweep the Philippine market and dominate the ASEAN services industry. However, as the FTA in services is implemented, India's share in total trade would also rise as India is a leader in the services sector, making India-ASEAN FTA a 'win-win situation' for all. With the completion of India-ASEAN FTA, the road to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) seems clearer. RCEP includes the 10 ASEAN member countries and its six partners including India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. To benefit most from the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, India needs to keep going on the economic reform path. In that regard, steps to strengthen its medium, small and micro enterprises (MSME) sector are critically important which can help it not only sustain the free flow of trade, but also to become a more competitive player.<sup>13</sup>

For India, an integrated South East Asia always remains to be something to look forward to. India signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with the ASEAN region on August 2009, which has come into effect fully.<sup>14</sup> However, like any other economic partnership, because of FTA implementation, there will be some gainers and some losers – some sectors in which India has competitive advantage will gain, whereas the sectors where the ASEAN has competitive advantages, India is likely to lose.



## India ASEAN Trade

India has growing trade relations with the nations in ASEAN bilaterally as well as through regional platforms. Trade between the two amounted to \$76.52 billion in 2014-15, with India's exports worth \$31.8 billion and imports \$44.7 billion.<sup>15</sup> There is also the human connect – more than five million citizens of the ASEAN nations trace their roots to India. The grouping is also seen as a huge middle-class market that Indian industries and services can take advantage of.<sup>16</sup> Though the volume of trade significantly differs from nation to nation, due to the complementarities and competition of commodities, the top traded products remain more or less similar to most of the nations in the region. AEC is a milestone and not a deadline, as achieving the aspirations of an economically integrated region need more deliberation and diligence from the members within the region as well as have a positive impact in the immediate neighbourhood. India is not yet directly engaged with ASEAN through a regional value chain (RVC). However, a regional FTA like RCEP is likely to generate a stronger value chain between ASEAN and India. Increasing road and maritime connectivity is also an aspect that needs to be strengthened and developed to bring the economies closer. Even if in the short term AEC might seem farfetched to bring any significant benefit for India, but in the long run, with strong bilateral relations with member nations of ASEAN, India will be able to play a larger role in AEC.

India's 'Act East Policy' will get significant momentum with FTA's like RCEP and possibly Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) when India gets inducted as a member which would remain advantageous to the Indian economy, will further strengthen economic interdependence with India and the ASEAN members.

However, the role of China with AEC, the manner in which it has been using some nations of ASEAN, tapping their cheap labour force as well as investing heavily in the nations, remains a challenging issue for India. India has not yet been able to develop such deep investment or labour relations with ASEAN in an integrated way. Both India, with the active cooperation of the ASEAN members should make serious attempts for creating economic inroads, looking at the complementarities of production and manufacturing, the issue of accessibility and various other dimensions. Problems like

regional value chains, services, which has not been opened up in some countries in ASEAN for India, the issue of negative list, easy movement of skilled labourers under Mode II and Mode IV and many more such challenges need to be discussed between the ASEAN members and India for both partners to be able to reap benefits of such integration in a mutually beneficial manner. For India to gain meaningfully there is a need to become part of the South East Asian production network. Another immediate alternative for India is to focus on services where it presently has comparative advantage relative to manufacturing and agriculture. Within services, India has strong comparative advantage in export of computer and information services, other business services such as financial, medical services, insurance, etc., and movement of natural persons such as IT professionals and maritime professionals.

### **Northeast and Act East Policy**

It is understandable that without significantly developing all the states in the Northeast, realising the vision of the Act East policy from all dimensions remain to be a difficult proposition. Prime Minister Modi in a whirlwind tour covering Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, coined a new acronym for the region: NEZ, or Natural Economic Zone, and called for the region to be developed through economic corridors to Southeast Asia. The Prime Minister on this visit also announced a slew of much needed projects, including scholarships for students, a national sports university, agricultural colleges, upgraded power and digital connectivity and new railway lines.<sup>17</sup>

Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, which was launched as part of the Look East Policy. The project aims to connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the Sittwe seaport in Myanmar; it will also link Sittwe seaport to Lashio in Myanmar via Kaladan river boat route and Lashio on to Mizoram in India by road transport. The progress of the project has been slow in the past, but the new government has expressed its intention of providing the project with all the necessary resources so that it can be implemented rapidly.<sup>18</sup>

For purposes of Burmese gas transfer through the northeast, India is investing \$100 million in improving the old colonial Burmese port of Sittwe on the west Burmese coast.<sup>19</sup>

The region could benefit immensely from water sharing. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Kunming Initiative have been undertaken by India and China respectively to reach out to ASEAN.<sup>20</sup> The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation was launched by India on November 10, 2000, at Vientiane, Laos, to boost cooperation in tourism, culture and education. The signatories were India, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.<sup>21</sup> These countries agreed to undertake joint transportation projects, including the trans-Asian highway. This initiative is India's most significant venture in the region. The best part about the Mekong initiative is that it has the potential for direct flights between Guwahati-Ho Chi Minh City-Imphal-Hanoi.<sup>22</sup>

The Asian Highway (AH 48), which would be connecting Phuentsholing in Bhutan to Indo-Bangladesh border point at Changrabandha in Cooch Behar, West Bengal via Dooars, which is being built in full swing should act as a major boost for further such road network being built connecting all the major social, cultural, economic and political points in the Northeast together. Several measures were undertaken by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao who envisioned and crafted the policy of linking the region with a proper road network. Under his Prime Ministership the proposal to build the Asian Highway and Asian Railway Link and natural gas pipeline were brought forth. The proposed geographical niche for the Asian Highway is the Imphal (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) road going on to the Kalemyo railway and then to Mandalay in Myanmar. A four-lane Asian Highway is sought between New Delhi-Singapore linked to Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Pen, Bangkok, Vientiane, Yangon, Mandalay, Kalemyo, Tamu, Dhaka, and Kolkata. Road construction has already started from Tamu to Kalemyo, Myanmar. Portions of the 1,360-km trilateral highway from Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Bagan (Myanmar) has already become functional and is on its way to completion.<sup>23</sup>



A number of recent developments in the North East region of India are notable. The level of education has certainly risen in the region, as has the demand for professionals from this part of the country. Some of these growth patterns are a result of the establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region in 2001. The Ministry is entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring security.<sup>24</sup> There is a need to “rebrand” the North Eastern part of India. Many “movements” are on to restore greater integration and prominence to the region. Nagaland and Myanmar have hosted many cultural events that are an evidence of this movement. Shillong is being promoted as the “Education Capital” of the North East. Similarly, Sikkim is being hailed as India’s “brand ambassador” in terms of zero plastic consumption, organic produce, and eco-friendly industries. A number of laboratories have also been set up to study the innovative methods of entrepreneurial activity in this area. Google has also set up some enterprises in the region.<sup>25</sup>

The government has also taken multiple initiatives recently. The Prime Minister has taken a serious initiative of developing organic farming, making the entire region as a major economic hub for organic farming.<sup>26</sup> The government also proposed to have an airstrip at Rupshree in Dhubri district bordering Kokrajhar, that it would be upgraded to an airport for both Air Force and civilian use. The PM also strengthened the need for education as a base while unveiling the plaque for the foundation of the Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIT), Guwahati.<sup>27</sup>

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, the Centre is also planning to have a venture fund to promote start-ups in the North-eastern states. Addressing a conference organised by industry lobby ASSOCHAM, Minister of State for Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Jitendra Singh said India is on the verge of becoming a world power on the basis of the strength of its youth, who comprise over 65 per cent of country's population and are thus the real torchbearers of ‘Startup India’ mission and the DoNER Ministry is contemplating the feasibility of creating a venture fund for start-ups.<sup>28</sup>

There are also proposals for establishing an Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research center in Nagaland, a research based hospital like All India

Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Assam, centre of Film production, Animation and Gaming in Arunachal Pradesh, as well as developing the region for film production, various fiscal packages moulded as per the need of the states in the region, to initiate a 'Make in North East' in the model of 'Make in India' project, promote exclusive NE expertise like tea processing, organic farming, food processing, exploitation of wind power, AYUSH , Wellness therapies etc., develop cultural tourism and strengthen the bonds of the region with the rest of India.<sup>29</sup>

The incentives for increased trade are enormous, given the contiguous landscape, common lifestyles between the peoples overlapping borders as well as the promises of a better life once the Asian highway and railway are set in place. There are, however, a few pressing challenges, which have to be dealt with simultaneously for the people of the northeast to truly benefit from a massive opening up to Southeast Asia, amongst which the political disturbance and insurgency activities in the region, remains to be a major hurdle that needs to be addressed with urgency.

### **Challenges to the Act East Policy**

ASEAN can be symbolised by the uneven political and economic playing field that it portrays. Indonesia has a nascent democratic setup; Malaysia having a two party democratic structure; Myanmar, having a semi-democratic structure as well as many territories under insurgent rule; Thailand, having a military rule with the promise of yet another constitution; Brunei under a monarchy; Philippines, having a democracy with unique characteristics; Singapore with a single party political structure with a symbolic opposition, and; Vietnam and Laos both having Communist governments in power.

The other major challenges that were there during LEP and have not changed much during AEP are and has grown are:

- Regional security – China's assertive posture.
- The issue of the South China Sea.
- Islamic Radicalism and IS influence.
- Fragile governance structures, especially in countries like Myanmar.
- Chinese Diaspora controlling economy in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

- The Russia and China growing synergy.
- ASEAN fissures coming to surface that is even weakening the ASEAN integrative process.
- India's lack of initiative on economic and trade issues.
- The issue of connectivity that acts as a major hindrance.
- Multilateral institutions and proactive diplomacy.

### **Recommendations**

To counter the above mentioned challenges, obstacles and making AEP more vibrant, dynamic and more result oriented than LEP, the viable options open to India can be pointed out in the following manner:

- Engage member states of the ASEAN in services and trade.
- Understand and study the equations that are growing out of the Trans Pacific Partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation that may turn into key regional economic zones of tomorrow and how India can benefit from such regional economic FTAs.
- India also needs to formulate short term, medium term as well as long term economic policies both with the member states bilaterally as well as ASEAN as a whole, assessing the opportunities that becomes available to it.
- While growing such relations, India needs to develop trade on the basis of the Maritime Silk route and join as well as study the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, its role and the manner in which it will be able to strengthen the AEP.
- Northeast should not be the gateway for ASEAN, rather be the point of convergence where trade facilitation between mainland India with ASEAN will be possible.
- Initiating all political dialogue between Center and the states, within the states, communities within the states living in developed and undeveloped regions, with various communities and governmental institutions, including the defence forces, making a sincere attempt to have a long term peace process in place. Political and economic empowerment, reforms of age old laws for better

integration of the region, and various other instruments of integration should be attempts both at the state as well the central level.

- Immediate establishment of financial institutions facilitating money exchange and financial transfers are needed in all the trading points as well in all the major growing trade hubs in the region, which would facilitate the process of trade.
- Bringing in dynamism into the relation not only between India and the ASEAN members, but making the states of the Northeast an integral part of the growth process. Fully integrate the North Eastern Region 2020 Vision proposal while adding more dimensions of growth in it.
- Promotion of language centers that would facilitate teaching as well as doing research on languages spoken in the states of the Northeast as well as in the countries in ASEAN.
- The government should seriously delve in knowledge and capacity building in the North East.
- The commonalities between the states in the Northeast and the Southeast Asian nations should be studied and assessed, turning them into an advantage for AEP.
- Create technological and knowledge hubs in the North East, by both indigenously as well as creating opportunities that would attract professionals from throughout the nation, to select Northeast as the destination of growth and productivity.
- The government should immediately adapt policies and actions for tapping energy resources, which remains in opulence throughout the region, featuring on sustainability and development.
- The North Eastern region, due to the availability of resources and pristine climate should be selected for the research and production of high end technological hardware, which includes nano and micro technologies which would support the Indian space programme as well as strengthen the electronic and software sector.
- All the states of the Northeast should plan for comprehensive rail and air connectivity, which would facilitate to and fro movement of people from within the region as well as beyond. Along with developing the present infrastructure, there is a need to establish and strengthening feeder routes supporting the tribal

hinterlands, than only developing the capital valleys. There should be a constructive framework in strengthening and developing the inner water routes and channels that might assist in creating a traditional transport route within the states.

- There is a need to seriously work in the improvement of the regional value chain and integrating them with the government policy framework.
- Built, strengthen, modernise and functionalise the border trade points between India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, building them into international trade hubs, while fully respecting and catering to the local and traditional trade between the existing trade points that has been operating within the communities from both sides of the border.
- Creating opportunities for the establishment of technical, management and business schools in all the states in the region, which would provide a strong base for the local youth to build a dynamic career strengthening the region of its productivity.
- Stress on cultural tourism, religious tourism as well as develop aspects on tourism on Ayurvedic medicine and tribal history and culture, similar to that of the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland. The region should also develop platforms for nature, adventure and sports tourism as well, developing infrastructure to strengthen eco-tourism platforms.
- Laying down a comprehensive plan to develop international educational, professional and vocational institutions throughout the region, which would assist in not only strengthening the local youth base, but turn into an attractive destination for students from the Eastern neighbours.

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