



From Look east to Act east Policy: What it means for North East India?

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ABSTRACT

India's progression from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy signifies not merely a semantic alteration but fundamental reorientation in its foreign policy posture. The former conceived in the early 1990's, emphasized on fostering trade, investment and cultural connectivity with ASEAN, largely reflecting India's post-liberalism visions. The latter, unlocked in 2014, extended this vision by embedding strategic, security and linkage imperatives within the wider Indo-Pacific framework, thereby highlighting India's intent to play a more assertive and grounded regional role. This article examines the evolution, objectives and implications of this transformation with particular focus on its capacity, to strengthen diplomatic ties, stimulate developmental opportunities and reposition the North East as strategic gateway. It further explores political instability, connectivity delays and security concerns.

INTRODUCTION

India's North Eastern region take up a unique position in the country's strategic and developmental landscape. Rich in natural resources and cultural diversity, however historically marginalized in terms of



connectivity and integration, the region has long been seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. The shift in India's foreign policy approach from the **LOOK EAST POLICY** of the early 1990's to the more proactive **ACT EAST POLICY** since 2014 carries substantial implications for this frontier. What started as an attempt to expand trade and economic ties with South East Asia has now evolved into a wider framework of political, cultural and security cooperation. For the North East, this rigorous transformation is not just a matter of foreign engagement but also one of internal transformation- redefining its role as a gateway to the Indo-Pacific, and offering prospects for greater regional development and integration.

Foreign policy like any tool of spacecraft evolves and grow in response to ever changing geographical realities and domestic priorities. In 1990's The Look East Policy integrated into a part of India's broader economic liberalization strategy and a reaction to the shifting global order after cold war. Its objectives lay in enhancing trade and economic linkages with South East Asian nations, opening markets and building diplomatic goodwill. Over time, nevertheless the imitations of a largely economic approach became evident, particularly as regional geopolitics grew more complex with the rise of China and the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific.

In 2014, this orientation was recalibrated into the Act East Policy, signaling a more pro active stance. Unlike its predecessor Act East act extends beyond trade to encompass security cooperation, infrastructure building and so on with ASEAN and beyond. Yet the promises of Act East are not without difficulties. The region continues to grapple with insurgencies, porous borders, infrastructural deficits and fragile relationships with neighbouring states. These issues raise critical queries about policy transformation and its implications on sustainable regional growth and stability.

OBJECTIVES:

The paper aims to trace the historical trajectory of this policy transition examining how the Look East Policy of the 1990's gradually evolved into the more comprehensive Act East Policy in 2014. By mapping this evolution, the study seeks to highlight the changing priorities and geo political realities that shaped India's eastern outreach. Additionally the study seeks to assess the opportunities that the Act East Policy creates for the North East. At the same time, it also acknowledges the challenges that remain, which continue to limit the region's ability to benefit fully from the policy.

METHODOLOGY:

The Secondary sources of data like Books, Academic journals , government reports, online databases, previous research studies has been applied to make the study a fruitful one.

**DISCUSSION:**

The Look East Policy, indisputably was a timely initiative that reflected India's attempt to diversify its external relations after the cold war and align with the rapid economic growth of South East Asia. However the policy did not adequately address the role of North east as a gateway to South East Asia. Despite its geographical importance the region remained on the periphery of both national development strategies and foreign policy implementation. For the North eastern region in particular, the benefits of Look East were minimal as its emphasis on external trade did not translate onto robust infrastructure or local development. Simply looking toward the east was no longer sufficient in an environment of intensifying geopolitical competition.

Against this backdrop, the Government of India launched the Act East Policy in 2014, reframing the country's approach to its eastern neighbourhood. This transition meant a deliberate attempt to transform the region from a peripheral frontier into a central hub of India's eastern outreach. To put simply, the change in its approach was necessary for- a) to prevail over the limitations of trade-centric Look East Policy b) to attune to changing geopolitical realities and c) to integrate the North Eastern region more effectively into India's foreign policy frameworks. To put simply, the look east policy unlocked the door to South East Asia, while the Act East Policy walked through it with clarity.

Subsequently, Act East Policy is now providing the North East not just opportunities for economic gain, but a chance to restore its identity-from a historically ignored borderland into a gateway of connectivity, cultural diplomacy and commerce. The initiatives like INDIA-MYANMAR-THAILAND TRILATERAL highway and the KALADAN MULTI-MODAL TRANSIT TRANSPORT PROJECT is forging a constructive change in the infrastructural sector of these regions, and thereby boosting connectivity, states are now attracting foreign investment. Next, easy access to the ASEAN market creates an unprecedented economic opening for the region. The North East can utilize its strengths in tea, bamboo, handicrafts and natural resources to expand exports. Emerging trade hubs like Moreh(Manipur) can evolve into gateways of commerce turning borderland into centers of economic vibrancy rather than zones of neglect. The North East has some of the richest cultural and ecological assets in India. Through Act East, tourism is no longer only about domestic visitors but about positioning the region as an international destination for eco-tourism and heritage exploration. Shared cultural threads- Buddhism, tribal traditions, linguistic ties with South East Asia allow the region to act as a bridge of civilization diplomacy, projecting its identity beyond orders. Also geopolitically the North East is being reframed from a security problem into a strategic asset. The policy also addresses the long standing



marginalization of the North East by embedding it into India's national development. Good market access and skill development programs hold the potential to curb down unemployment, strengthen human capital and locate local communities into global value chains. Beyond trade and security, Act East also fosters intellectual opportunities. Exchange programs with ASEAN universities, collaborations in research and innovation can empower the youth, equipping them with the skills and exposure needed to survive in a globalized world.

Both the policy particularly Act East Policy has created a blueprint for transforming the North East but its success is contingent. Weak administrative capacity, bureaucratic delays and lack of coordination between central and state governments stall progress. While Act East is ambitious in its scope, local communities often feel excluded from decision making processes. Another challenge is the persistence of insurgency movements and conflicts in parts of the North East creates an atmosphere of instability. Act East envisions the region as a bridge to South East Asia, instability threatens to reduce it to a vulnerable frontier.

Though challenges remain, the present progress asserts a decisive shift. Trade and investment indicators are gradually showing promising signs. For instance- the inauguration of the SELA TUNNEL in Arunachal Pradesh illustrate how Act East is being operationalized through hard infrastructure that directly reduces the region's isolation. Railways, highways, waterways, energy pipelines and digital networks are slowly knitting the region closer to both Indian mainland and South East Asia. In the recent years economically under the prospect of Act East Policy, North East witnessed greater attention through initiatives like North East Road Sector Development Scheme and cross border energy cooperation. Cross border power projects with Myanmar and increased promotion of eco-and cultural tourism in the region. Moreover North East is now increasingly included in sub-regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC and the BBIN initiative (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) which complement Act East connectivity.

In conclusion, the transition has definitely repositioned the North East as more than just a borderland- it is emerging as India's gateway to Indo-Pacific. Yet, its true potential will only be realized when connectivity, inclusivity, sustainability and regional cooperation move in tandem. Development must be sustainable and ecologically sensitive. The fragile environment of the North East demands infrastructure that balances growth with conservation. India must take up more result-oriented approach that goes beyond declarations. While much emphasis is on land connectivity, the North East could truly benefit more from maritime linkages via Myanmar and Bangladesh which can drastically shorten access routes to ASEAN markets. Indubitably, the region has massive hydroelectricity potential. Exporting clean



energy to nearby countries could foster the possibility of making the region an energy hub of the Act East framework. Besides, shared ecological challenges in the Indo-Myanmar region create scope for regional environmental diplomacy. This aspect is negligibly explored in the mainstream discussions. Consciousness about Act East among the people of the North East is still limited. Greater outreach and capacity building workshops could generate local support and reduce alienation.

CONCLUSION

The evolution from the Look East to Act East policy reflects not merely a diplomatic recalibration but a reimagining of India's own geography and identity. For the North East this shift is not just about foreign policy linkages, it is about repositioning itself from the margins of the Indian state to the forefront of global engagement. The region's cultural kinship with South East Asia, its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific and its resource potential collectively offer an unprecedented opportunity to transform historical isolation into meaningful connectivity. Regardless this transformation will succeed only if it is accompanied by sensitivity to the region's complex socio-political fabric and fragile ecological balance.

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