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## Ishal Paithrkam

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## **Towards Greater Cooperation: Re-Energizing India's Act East Policy for Southeast Asia**

**Nithya N.R**

The paper aims to illustrate the development of India's Look East policy into Act East Policy, Act East and North Eastern Regions, the role of China in the region and the challenges and prospects. Regional cooperation was built in south-east Asia by "ASEAN WAY" based on consultation and consensual decision making and flexibility rather than starting with ambitious political commitments. After Indian independence, Jawaharlal Nehru remarked that "India was the gateway to both west and south East Asia and therefore inevitably came into the picture." The independence and security of South East Asia served to strengthen India's own independence and security and any serious setbacks there, constituted a political threat to India too. But, the prominence to this region in India's international relations was given a long back later. The "Look East policy" of India was launched by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1991. This was mainly exercised through India-ASEAN ties. Later in 2014, prime minister Narendra Modi, transformed "Look East into Act East policy". Terming Look East into Act East, the main aims of this policy was to revive political ties, strengthen economic linkages, and forge regional security and ensure strategic cooperation with South East Asia, for which the North Eastern region serves as the gateway. This foreign policy has given geographic proximity, socio-cultural and historical ties with South Eastern countries. This policy is described as a comprehensive and multi-pronged effort to forge strategic alliances with several individual nations and foster constructive ties with the

Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the last several years, India's Act East Policy has enhanced India's relationships with Southeast Asian nations, Pacific Island countries, and other regions, including Taiwan, Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, and the United States. How is geopolitically significant in Southeast Asia to India's foreign policy? What are the geopolitical factors behind the genesis and transformation of the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy? How well is China pursuing its interests in Southeast Asia? How the changing power politics affect the relations between these nations? These are some of the questions that I will seek to answer through this paper.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Regional Cooperation, North East, Look East, Act East, Geopolitics, Foreign Policy

## **Introduction**

The post-Cold War phase in international relations experienced a clear tendency towards regional cooperation. To provide new momentum to a wide range of joint endeavours among themselves, many nations from different sides of the globe started to make considerable efforts to constitute themselves into regions. Overall, regional integration appeared to be a valued tool for these nations in pursuing their trade and economic objectives. Consequently, new clusters were created to align more effectively with the changing global political landscape, while outdated organizations were restructured. In the era of globalisation, integration is defined as "The consensual linkage in the economic domain of two or more previously sovereign nations to the point that authority over significant areas of national regulation and policy is shifted to the transnational level". India has been endeavoring towards regional integration ever since it gained its independence. One of the primary goals of the Indian independence struggle was to collaborate with our neighbouring nations.

India lost an important model of centralized economic planning and a vital financial and strategic ally when the Soviet Union collapsed. The situation worsened in the early 1990s as globalization accelerated, leading to a rapid transition to a capitalist growth model in the global

economy. The fundamental tenets of India's foreign policy are being reconsidered by its leaders due to number of internal and external demands. Thus, to establish broader relations with the nations of East and Southeast Asia, the 'Look East Policy' was formally introduced in 1991 by then-prime minister Narasimha Rao. India's 'Look East policy' instigated with an ASEAN-centered approach that prioritized trade and investment ties. With ASEAN at its center, the second phase, which started in 2003, covers a larger area and spans from Australia to East Asia. Thus, the new phase signifies a change in emphasis from trade to more extensive economic and security cooperation, political alliances, and physical connectivity via rail and road connections. The book titled North East India and India's 'Act East Policy' by Amarjeet Singh combines a balanced view of India's 'Act East policy' and North east India. It provides an understanding of expectations and challenges of North East Indian the context of India's 'Act east policy'. Similarly, Look East to 'Act East policy': Implications for North east Edited by Gurudas Das, c. Joshua Thomas analyses how well India's Look East policy has served to encourage trade with its Asian neighbours while also pointing out the policy's shortcomings in terms of spurring development in the Northeastern region, which serves as India's gateway to Southeast Asia.

The 'Act East Policy' is an up gradation of the "Look East Policy". It is a diplomatic program to encourage economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels. The primary goal is to promote economic collaboration, enhance cultural ties, and establish strategic partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region through a proactive and pragmatic approach. This initiative aims to boost the economic growth of the North Eastern Region (NER), which serves as a gateway to Southeast Asia. India's foreign policy has become stronger under the Modi administration, particularly when it comes to its connections with Southeast Asia (Ton, 1963) Christophe Jaffrelot's India's Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective made the argument that India has had a profound interest in Asia Pacific for a very long time—possibly since the early nineteenth century (Jaffrelot, 2003). The four Cs identified are Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, and Capacity Building. In 2022,

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma inaugurated a conclave on 'Act East through North East' where he mentioned that "Northeast India has the potential to become the link for trade with ASEAN." The present paper heavily relied on secondary data.

### **India and Look East Policy**

India has strong historical, cultural, and maritime ties with Southeast Asian republics and neighbouring territories. After gaining independence, India aspired to establish a presence on the Asian continent. The originator of independent India's foreign policy, Nehru prioritized developing Asian solidarity in his Asia strategy. He recognised the hopes and dreams of a rejuvenated and independent Asia. Therefore, he made the following observation in March 1947 during his speech at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi: "We are of Asia, and the people of Asia are nearer and closer to us than others." India is the centre of Western, Southern, and Southeast Asia due to its unique geographic location. Nehru's vision emphasized India's geo-strategic centrality in Asia, highlighting its deep historical and cultural connections with Southeast Asia. Additionally, the non-aligned policy he championed resonated significantly within the Southeast Asian region. Nehru emphasized the need for regionalism and multilateralism to foster mutual endeavour and collaboration. The unexpected collapse of the Cold War power structure forced Indian policymakers to look for a different agenda for their foreign policy in this region. This marked the opening of a profound change in India's Nehruvian perspective, which emphasised pragmatic rather than the idealism of the past. As one of Asia's and the world's most economically vibrant areas, ASEAN is home to nations such as China, Japan, and Korea. Indian officials were unable to overlook this region at this particular time, primarily because India deeply needed a fresh opportunity to expand its "liberalising economy." (Muni, 2011) Consequently, the Indian government initiated a novel effort known as the "Look East policy". The three tactics that comprised this initiative's fulfillment were to: revitalize political relations and mutual understanding with ASEAN member states; attain increased economic interaction, encompassing investment and trade; and fortify defense and strategic ties with these nations.

## **Situating the Roots of India's 'Look East' and 'Act East' Policy**

With the introduction of the Look East policy, Indian foreign policy gained a new geopolitical facet. Historically, India has long exerted considerable cultural influence over East and South East Asia as the birthplace of Buddhism. It is felt that the Chola kings sent maritime missions to the region of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia's abundant natural treasures and strategically located water bodies have long drawn the attention of foreign nations. The British used India as the central strategic base for its colonial presence in the rest of Asia, making India highly integrated with the region's economy. Upon gaining independence in 1947, India's new leaders sought to reset Indian foreign policy to achieve several aims: to distinguish the nation's foreign policy from that of its colonial masters; to assert a leadership role in the international system, despite its developmental challenges based on India's size and civilizational legacy; and to preserve the country's new-found autonomy despite growing pressure to do otherwise. In the inter-war period, Indian nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi promoted the idea of a common Asian identity in opposition to the West based on the ideals of non-violence, Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, anti-materialism, and communal solidarity over individualism. It was believed that this identity could be leveraged to unite the region in a shared pursuit of colonial liberation under Indian leadership (Jaffrelot, 2003).

In Nehru's view, India's size and cultural influence over Asia gave it a standing lead to Asia. More than that India was obliged to use its capacity as the first Asian state to achieve liberation and to assist other Asian states to achieve the same. To pursue these goals, India asserted a leadership role in key diplomatic gatherings centered on anti-colonialism, including the Conference on Asian Relations in March 1947, the 1947 Conference on Indonesia in New Delhi, and the 1955 Bandung Conference of non-aligned countries. However, from this juncture, New Delhi's wider Pan-Asian aspirations were redirected by the demands of the escalating Cold War and unexpected challenges with its neighboring countries. While the official guiding principles of India's foreign policy were rooted in non-alignment—remaining neutral between the superpowers—this proved challenging

to implement in practice. After formally recognizing China's sovereignty over Tibet through the Sino-India Panchsheel Agreement in 1954 and advocating for China's admission to the UN, Prime Minister Nehru was taken by surprise when China invaded India's northeastern border areas in 1962. India's military defeat in that conflict altered perceptions regarding China's intentions, diminished hopes for Pan-Asian solidarity, and led to an increased focus on strengthening its own military capabilities. India was disappointed with the United States' lack of support during this experience and after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s.

Other Asian states are real sounding able to stay aloof from the pressures to-align with one or other super power. India opted not to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization established in 1954, viewing it as a tool of the United States. Similarly, it later regarded the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967, in a comparable light. Nehru criticised the SEATO, saying it was a military establishment. China, on the other hand, preserved its diplomatic position by acting as a mediator. India was against the signing of the Manila treaty in 1954. In order to create solid bilateral connections with the countries of Southeast Asia instead of through the ASEAN, India emphasised the importance of economic, technological, and cultural cooperation in the 1960s. India signed agreements with Indonesia in 1966, the Philippines in 1968, and Malaysia in 1969 to collaborate in a variety of fields, ranging from agriculture to cross-cultural interaction (Eekelen, 2015).

India backed the Communist-led Vietminh movement and recognised the Republican Sukarno-Hatta administration. India helped Vietnam during the 1978 conflict between China and Vietnam over Cambodia and recognised the government that the Vietnamese had installed there. This was certainly the beginning of the geopolitical component of India's approach towards Southeast Asia. Although there had been cultural interactions, India's policy toward Southeast Asia was regarded as latent for an extended period, especially during the Cold War, in terms of its geopolitical significance. India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia has been shaped by the shifting international environment's composition and character (Hartono, 2021).



The relationship between India and ASEAN truly strengthened after the Cold War, with India joining the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 and becoming one of ASEAN's dialogue partners. The relationship between India and Southeast Asia has changed due to ASEAN's role and the Look East strategy. In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, ASEAN countries began to assume “a more prominent role in the global political economy.” Regional integration and strategic initiatives enabled ASEAN to become increasingly interconnected with the international market. (Capanelli and Kawai, 2014).

Southeast Asia's economic and territorial integration grew stronger following the Asian economic recession. The ASEAN nations exerted significant effort to stabilise and fortify both their external circumstances and macroeconomic frameworks. Consequently, trade and capital inflows both domestically and internationally were observed to expand. The establishment of ASEAN+3 further enhanced ASEAN's economic collaboration. Understanding the particular significance and ramifications of the Act East strategy for Southeast Asia is also essential. In Amitendu Palit's ‘India's Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia’, he remarked that “While India's involvement with ASEAN is likely to become more comprehensive and strategic over time, the region would need to be prepared for the ramifications of India playing a more energetic role in regional affairs” (Palit, 2016).

Consequently, amid the uncertainty regarding China's future role, India has consistently explored ways to establish a multilateral security framework in the Southeast Asian region. To this end, India has been actively seeking opportunities to develop viable partnerships in various multilateral forums, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), driven by its commitment to strengthen strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations. China and Pakistan view India's association with the Southeast Asian countries as harmful. India is currently involved with numerous Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Therefore, the increasing trend of globalization, the US-China rapprochement, and the downfall of the Soviet Union have significantly influenced India's

foreign policy, particularly in the context of its “Look East” policy, which was later developed into the “Act East” policy.

### **Look East India in the age of Power Politics**

India’s re-engagement with Southeast Asia after the Cold War was distinct from earlier efforts in that it was multifaceted. This approach not only strengthened the nation’s long-standing historical, cultural, and ideological connections with the region but also fostered growing economic interdependence, political engagement, and shared security interests. The Look East policy, in this sense, is a “recalibration rather than a reincarnation” of India’s involvement with Southeast Asia, emphasising real involvement above pretentious assertions of “third-world solidarity” (Thongkhohal, 2011). The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in its report 1992-93 stated that “India has decided to give a special policy thrust to its relations with the ASEAN”. Southeast Asia recognises India on account of its diplomatic contacts with the region, which aim to improve regional collaboration rather than exposing hegemonic intentions. The strong pursuit of India’s Look East Policy demonstrates its enthusiasm to forge connections between India and Southeast Asia. India and ASEAN have been working together to rekindle their relations in numerous areas, including politics, security, and the economy.

India’s decision to initiate its Look-East Initiative in its second phase was prompted by the strengthening of bilateral economic relationships with ASEAN. During this period, India shifted its focus from addressing specific economic issues to a broader agenda that encompasses security cooperation and the establishment of transit routes to enhance connections and connectivity. Given its geographical location in South-East Asia, which has elevated it to a major strategic area, a number of academicians emphasised that India’s Look East Policy carries crucial relevance to the advancement of its North Eastern Region (Majumdar). G.V.C. Naidu observed that “The policy was a multidimensional and multipronged perspective to build strategic ties with several countries, develop more connected political connections with ASEAN, and establish robust financial obligations with the region” (Naidu, 2004). Here we have to comment on the role

of China. India and certain Southeast Asian countries have converged in their strategic interests as a result of China's expansion, which has been a major source of contention between them. Abhijit Singh, specialist in Maritime Strategy noted that "The growing frequency and size of Chinese maritime units stationed in anti-piracy operations near Somalia and the progressively aggressive attitude taken by China's maritime security community indicate that worry is not limited to China's neighbours in Southeast Asia" (Singh, 2016).

The United Progressive Alliance led by Manmohan Singh aimed at extending India's economic and strategic influence all over Southeast Asia to restrict China's growing prominence in the area. Look East Policy had progressed significantly under the UPA government. Dr. Manmohan Singh achieved significant milestones in strengthening geopolitical and commercial ties with Southeast Asian nations, facilitating high-level political exchanges, enhancing trade relations, and fostering collaboration to counter China's dominance in the region. Following the global economic crisis, there was an increasing focus on bolstering economic ties throughout the larger region.

### **The Role of China in the Region**

From a geopolitical perspective, India and Myanmar share the northeastern boundary, which includes Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. China's claim and intrusion in some areas have long made the northeastern region of India a contested area. Additionally, there are unresolved insurgent issues in the region (Singh, 2007). Regarding the security model, Prime Minister Modi underscored the importance of improved connections between India and Myanmar, highlighting the necessity of their joint efforts to combat terrorism and insurgency activities that threaten the security interests of both nations. Additionally, Modi assured that India would keep helping Myanmar achieve its goals of expansion and progress. However, China's interference in Myanmar prompted India to drastically alter its stance towards the Military Junta. The effort to transport natural gas and crude oil from diverse areas of the globe to China via two separate pipelines that cross through Myanmar poses a

danger to India. According to Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Hong Liang, China has long been Myanmar's top trade partner and foreign shareholder. An increasing amount of foreign investment will flow to Myanmar in conjunction with the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Project (Lintao, 2017).

Right from the beginning, there has been a strong bilateral relationship between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of India. India showed a great deal of support for Vietnamese independence from France and supported Vietnam during times of trouble. India was a key player in the severe denunciation of US military operations in the Vietnam War. Substantial political and commercial ties have shaped Indo-Vietnam relationships as a result of India's Look East/Act East policy. Moreover to reinforce their safety and defense ties, India and Vietnam committed to working together more in the areas of atomic energy, science, technology, oil, and gas (Bajpae, 2017). Both nations view the South China Sea as a crucial component of their Indo-Pacific strategies. Vietnam further declared its continued support for India's permanent seat in the UN Security Council. The arrangement for a code of conduct to address the disputed territory in the South China Sea has been approved by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China opposes Vietnam's invitation to India for investments in the oil and gas industry on the South China Sea's contested islands. Concerning the Arunachal Pradesh case, China maintains dominion over Arunachal Pradesh, even though India is in possession of it. Given its location in the northeast and its shared borders with Burma to the east, Bhutan to the west, and China to the north, Arunachal is strategically crucial. China has emerged as a stakeholder, asserting its ownership of the majority of the area despite India's strong objections (Hindustan Times, January 11, 2018).

China has voiced concerns regarding Indian troops entering the Asaphalia region along the border with Arunachal Pradesh, a strategically important area given the security dynamics between China and India. This has resulted in a new episode of friction between the two countries. Beijing's opposition to India's proposal to join the NSG shows that it still views India as a serious nuclear rival. China is an

important NSG member, and India faces significant obstacles as a result of China's refusal to grant India NSG membership (Estrada and Leveringhaus, 2017).

To safeguard its strategic dynamics, the Modi administration is making efforts to establish relations with several Asia Pacific nations. India needs to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia to counter the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative and enhance its political and security engagement in the Asia-Pacific with ASEAN. India believes that closer associations with the most significant economies in Southeast Asia are imperative. India is expected to effectively curb China's ambitions in Asia and usher in a new era of active connectivity with Southeast Asia through its rising involvement with ASEAN. India is believed to have considered China's growing competitiveness while determining how best to bolster its influence strategically. Rand's Grossman, Defence analyst, remarked that India "is bolstering strategic ties — diplomatic, economic, and security — to Southeast Asian states to help them balance or hedge against, or outright counter Chinese power," India's calculations are also being driven by China's increasing presence in Southeast Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (Bala, 2023).

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that this was "a reflection of the priority that we give to this region". These changes were supported by a more assertive foreign policy, which has been driven by the Modi government's robust mandate, its economic and development-oriented agenda, and the innate hawkishness of the ruling Hindu-nationalist BJP. With the government announcing a "Neighborhood First" strategy and promising to adopt a more "integrated and holistic" approach to its regional engagement, India's extended neighborhood received particular attention in the framework of this audacious and forceful foreign policy (Bajpae, 2017).

The proposal to institutionalize annual conferences between ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)—a regional forum comprised of countries bordering the Indian Ocean—was also initiated with the establishment of a Transport Connectivity Working

Group in 2016. Additionally, Modi has focused mainly on connecting with Indian populations living abroad. Considering “the role of the over 6-million strong Indian Diaspora in the east in acting as a bridge and platform in developing a close partnership with the countries of their adoption, and in the economic development of India,” this is especially significant to the Act East policy (Chakraborty, & Anusree, 2018).” Additionally, there are signs that the Act East policy’s geographical reach has extended to nations in the Indian Ocean region (Christophe, 2003).

### **Act East Policy and Development Models in Northeast India**

The Northeast region has historically trailed behind other parts of India in industrial development and economic growth; this was attributed to a ‘step-motherly treatment’ by the centre that led to regional political agitations. In 2014, the Look East Policy (LEP) was renamed the Act East Policy (AEP), which academics and observers noted as a re-energization of the original initiative. This change was particularly significant because the LEP had not been perceived as effectively enhancing industrial and infrastructural development in the Northeast region. Proactively expanding economic cooperation with the neighbors to the east, the LEP/AEP has become a symbol of foreign policy. Since the Indian North Eastern Region is strategically positioned between the edges of Southeast Asia and South Asia, a number of academics have proposed that the area will gain more from the shift from LEP to AEP (Connell and Nour, 2014). By moving away from traditional foreign policy imperatives, the Look East Policy (LEP) and its successor, the Act East Policy (AEP), aimed to address the geographical challenges and isolation faced by Northeast India. The goal has been to do this by building transportation routes and connection infrastructure in the Northeast and across adjacent transnational regions. For this reason, Northeastern India has gained attention in geopolitics as the area that would link the economies of Southeast Asia and India (Barua, 2020).

Since the period of economic liberalization, objectives for increasing trade output and economic productivity have been linked to the development of roads and other connectivity infrastructure.

Enlarging transport and communication infrastructure networks due to its role in improving trade transits has constituted part of the post-liberalization development model. External policies aimed at enhancing trade, particularly through the Look East/Act East Policy, recognized unique advantages for Northeast India in building stronger ties with ASEAN, unlike previous regional development initiatives. It has been determined that Southeast Asia and Northeast India share commonalities in their respective civilisations. There was a connection between the Northeast and Southeast (Sarah, (2007). Under the foreign policy objectives, increased infrastructure investments are made in the region and its international surroundings. For instance, highway expansion programs and the Asian Highways Project, which are funded by international funding agencies, aim to transform transportation and communications in the region. But even with the strengthening of ties with ASEAN following the Look East/Act East policies, the “idea of connectivity” has been controversial due to the possibility that the drive for connectivity could be interpreted in neighboring nations as “an exercise in hard-wiring that influences choices”. Act East aims to tap into the economic potential of Southeast Asian markets. Increased trade and investment are expected to create opportunities for the northeastern states, fostering economic growth and employment generation. The northeastern part of India, which is made up of Sikkim and the seven sister states, shares 98 per cent of its international border with neighboring nations including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China. Notwithstanding its advantageous location as a gateway to these emerging markets, the Northeast is characterized by inadequate infrastructure, restricted industrialization, limited connectivity, and communication bottlenecks. Due to these underdevelopments, the area is now cut off from commercial routes, productivity hubs, and regional development. Due to significant limitations, most of the connectivity projects that were started years ago are crippled (Panchali, 2016)). In his speech at the Global Investors Summit in Guwahati in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that the “The northeastern region is central to India’s Act East Policy, as our goal is for this area to thrive; the nation’s rapid progress cannot be sustainable without the development of its

northeastern communities.” (Hindustan Times, Feb 03, 2018). In 2020–2021 and 2024–2025, the Government of India approved projects for inland water transport (IWT) infrastructure on national waterways in the Northeastern Region (NER) for a duration of five years.

While addressing the first election rally in Shillong, the prime minister stated that “Meghalaya and the broader northeast region have great prospects for trade and tourism, making it a solid foundation of the Act East Policy” (Business Standard, February 24 2023). At the 20th ASEAN-India Economic Ministers’ Meeting, which took place on August 21, 2023, Shri Rajesh Agrawal, Additional Secretary, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, mentioned that the amount of bilateral trade between India and ASEAN in 2022–2023 was USD 131.5 billion. In 2022–2023, 11.3% of India’s total international trade was with ASEAN countries (PIB, 2023). In an effort to further stimulate industrial growth throughout the North-Eastern Region, including Sikkim, the North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) has been introduced. The overarching development plan for the Northeast embodies the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as announced by the United Nations Development Programme. But our foreign policy and security are concerned about China’s territorial claims in Arunachal Pradesh. Numerous problems and obstacles prevent the area from developing and integrating into the larger Indian landscape (Singh, 2023). To further strengthen governance in the area, it is imperative to implement an inclusive growth model, increase trust and transparency, and engage with the local community.

### **India, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific**

India’s relations with most ASEAN member countries have been characterized by cordiality and a shared interest in enhancing cooperation across various domains. India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific region has indeed been growing significantly in recent years. The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point for global geopolitics due to its strategic significance, and India, as a major regional power, has been actively working to strengthen its influence and partnerships in this area. India’s Indo-Pacific policy has been



focused on building partnerships with like-minded countries and forming issue-based coalitions to address common strategic and security challenges in the region. This approach is evident in India's deepening engagement with key partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and others (Saha, 2023). Prime Minister Narendra Modi delineated India's vision and policy components for the Indo-Pacific region. In his address, he called for "an open and inclusive order in Indo Pacific based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations." The United States, Japan, the European Union, ASEAN, and India jointly advocated for a diplomatic resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international laws, notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Vashisht, 2023). SEAN recognized the critical significance of a stable Indo-Pacific for global peace, security, and prosperity. The AOIP represents a significant milestone as it acknowledges the merging of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions and underscores ASEAN's priorities and areas of focus concerning the Indo-Pacific. To achieve the ASEAN vision for the Indo-Pacific, the AOIP concentrates on four key priority areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and economic collaboration, along with other relevant areas of cooperation. Both the AMO and AIPF have underscored the prominence of cooperation over competition in the Indo-Pacific region. India's support for a rules-based regional order, its push for economic integration, and its efforts to strengthen maritime security go beyond simple reactions to a changing global environment; they reflect a proactive evolution in its foreign policy (Ladwig, 2024).

### **Challenges and Future Prospects**

Although India's "Act East Policy" has made considerable strides and has strengthened relationships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, there are numerous challenges that must be addressed for its successful implementation. China poses a serious risk to the security of India's region. India's strategic policy is intimidated by China's powerful military, technological, and nuclear presence in its neighboring countries. Given the unresolved border disputes between China and India, China's repeated incursions into contested areas and

attempts at territorial expansion could pose a significant threat to India's regional security. Considering the close ties between China and Pakistan, India's standing in South Asia is precarious. It is a fact that China is one of the most important players in Southeast Asia. Ongoing border disputes, particularly with China, can impede the smooth functioning of the Act East Policy. Resolving these disputes is essential for building trust and ensuring stability in the region. The lack of sufficient air, rail, and road connectivity poses problems for the northeastern states. To enable more seamless commercial and people-to-people exchanges with Southeast Asian nations, infrastructure improvement in these areas is essential. The government has initiated numerous steps to reinstate a proactive engagement of the North Eastern states with the Act East Policy. Security issues, such as insurgencies in some northeastern states, can discourage foreign investment and make it more problematic to take benefit of the Act East Policy's full economic potential. Some of the challenges include economic disparities among Indian states, cultural and linguistic differences between the northeastern states and Southeast Asian nations, China's active involvement in the region through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, environmental degradation linked to infrastructure development, regional security concerns, a lack of a comprehensive approach, and ongoing uprisings. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began at the end of 2019, has triggered plentiful issues, including supply chain disruptions, service interruptions, and economic harm. Notwithstanding these problems, the epidemic created a renewed need to reconsider cooperation and investigate fresh directions for cooperation in line with the Act East Policy. New fields of collaboration like health, digitalization, and the green economy were brought about by the epidemic. In order to guarantee energy security in fields like electric cars, storage devices, solar energy, wind energy, etc., India and Japan established the Clean Energy Partnership. By constructing green bridges, ASEAN and India could mitigate the effects of climate change. In the post-COVID age, India and Japan have the potential to collaborate closely in areas such as ICT, 5G, Open RAN, cyber security, telecom network security, quantum communications, and submarine cable systems (James, 2020). During the 2022 India-

Japan Summit, Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Kishida emphasised the necessity of digital transformation in the post-COVID world. India must consider certain noteworthy problems that could jeopardize its strategic role in Asia. In South Asia, regional integration and intra-regional connectivity could be greatly assisted by SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BCIM-EC. In his address at the 20th Association of Southeast Asian Nations-India Summit in Jakarta on September 7, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the grouping a “central pillar” of India’s ‘Act East’ policy

### **Conclusion**

One important facet of India’s foreign policy has been the Look East Policy. India’s foreign policy has undergone a significant variation as an outcome of a number of events, including the start of a new chapter in its relations with Southeast Asian nations. India has long shared boundaries with nations in East and Southeast Asia, including those on land with Thailand and Myanmar and those in the sea with Malaysia and Singapore. India opted for a non-alignment policy during the Cold War to be equally apart from the US and Soviet blocs. However, it is accused of continuing to have a Soviet Union bias. However, with the end of the Cold War, India witnessed a shift in the global order, transitioning from a bipolar world to a multipolar one, marked by the emergence of several Southeast Asian countries gradually taking a leading role in the world economy.

India initiated the Look East Policy to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia, recognizing the potential for political and economic collaboration in a world increasingly defined by globalization and security challenges. The mounting influence of China in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean Region presents a direct geopolitical difficulty to India. In 2015, India launched the Act East Policy, emphasizing an action-oriented approach towards Southeast Asia. This policy aims to fulfill the diplomatic objectives of both India and the ASEAN group, focusing on the effective implementation of the Look East Policy and the development of an Asia-centric strategy. India’s Act East Policy is undoubtedly the continuation of the Look East Policy but its reformulation and action-oriented traits mark a new change in

its strategic paradigm. The North Eastern Region of India must be integrated into the Act East Policy framework to realize its enormous potential and fortify its relationships with its neighbors. India's Act East Policy reflects its aspiration to play a more prominent role in the evolving geopolitical environment of the Asia-Pacific region and contribute to regional stability, economic growth, and cultural exchange.

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