

# INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**NEWS:** Recently, the Vice-President of India highlighted the transformation of India's "Look East" policy into "Act East" by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

## WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

### Look East Policy (Post-Cold War Era)

#### Introduction and Rationale

- The **Look East Policy (LEP)** was introduced in **1992** by **Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao** as a strategic initiative aimed at strengthening India's **economic, political, and cultural ties with Southeast Asia**.
- India, despite having **deep-rooted historical and cultural connections with Southeast Asia**, had historically **neglected the region in terms of trade and diplomacy**.
- The policy was formulated to **correct this historical oversight** and position India as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region.

#### Scope and Expansion

- Initially, the policy **focused primarily on strengthening economic and trade relations with Southeast Asian nations**.
- Over time, the scope of the policy **expanded to include broader East Asia and Oceania**, reflecting India's growing aspirations to integrate more deeply with the region.

#### Key Objectives of the Look East Policy

- **Enhance economic and trade relations** with ASEAN nations and beyond.
- **Strengthen cultural and diplomatic engagements** with Southeast Asia.
- **Draw inspiration from East Asian economic models** to accelerate India's own economic growth and modernization.

#### Initial Outcomes and Developments

- **Reduction of trade barriers**, facilitating smoother commerce between India and ASEAN nations.
- **Increase in inbound tourism from Southeast Asia**, boosting cultural and people-to-people ties.
- **Strengthened economic ties**, with India becoming a **dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996** and joining the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) the same year**.
- The policy **paved the way for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries**.

### Act East Policy (Post-2014): A More Proactive Approach

## **Transition from Look East to Act East**

- The **Act East Policy (AEP)** is an **evolution of the Look East Policy**, introduced to ensure a **more action-oriented and outcome-driven engagement** with the region.
- The shift towards an **active role in the Asia-Pacific** was **partly influenced by the US**—in **2011**, then **US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton** urged India to adopt a **more assertive role** in Asia-Pacific affairs.
- The transition from **Look East to Act East** was formally announced in **2014** by **External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj**, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi reinforcing this commitment.

## **Key Advancements and Features of Act East Policy**

- **Greater emphasis on concrete action and measurable outcomes**, rather than just diplomatic engagement.
- **Recognition of India's Northeast as a strategic hub** for India-ASEAN engagement, focusing on **infrastructure development and connectivity projects**.
- **Expansion of India's engagement beyond ASEAN to the broader Indo-Pacific region**, considering the growing geopolitical significance of the region.

## **The 3Cs Approach Introduced by PM Modi at the 2014 East Asia Summit**

- **Commerce** – Expanding trade and economic partnerships with ASEAN and Indo-Pacific nations.
- **Culture** – Reviving and strengthening cultural and historical linkages between India and Southeast Asia.
- **Connectivity** – Building **physical and digital infrastructure** to ensure better regional integration.

## **Objectives and Achievements of the Act East Policy**

### **1. Strategic Expansion Beyond ASEAN**

- Unlike the **Look East Policy**, which focused primarily on **ASEAN**, the **Act East Policy** expands India's engagement to the **broader Indo-Pacific region**.
- India has actively **strengthened regional organizations** such as:
  - **BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)**
  - **Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD)**
  - **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**
- India has also developed **strategic military and defense ties** with Indo-Pacific countries.

### **2. Strengthened Defense and Security Cooperation**

- India has engaged in **enhanced defense diplomacy** in Southeast Asia through:
  - **Sale of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines**, strengthening India's defense exports.
  - **Military logistics agreements with Vietnam**, allowing increased naval cooperation in the South China Sea.

- India has actively participated in regional **maritime security dialogues** to counter security threats in the Indo-Pacific.

### **3. Economic and Trade Expansion**

- India has worked towards **reducing trade barriers** and increasing **economic integration** with ASEAN and Indo-Pacific nations through:
  - **Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)** with ASEAN and individual countries like **Japan, South Korea, and Australia**.
  - **Elevating strategic partnerships** with **Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore, and ASEAN**.
  - **Inviting ASEAN nations to join the International Solar Alliance (ISA)** to promote renewable energy cooperation.



## India Acts East

With its Act East policy, India hopes to deepen its political, economic and security relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. Balancing against the rise of China is a key driver.

**China:** India views the rise of its principal strategic rival as a serious challenge and is forging relations with countries along its periphery to maintain the balance between them

**ASEAN:** Boosting exports with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a core plank of Modi's Act East policy  
**Australia:** China's rise has compelled India's outreach to Australia to forge a stronger defense partnership

**Japan:** The key regional power shares India's concerns over China's expansion

**Northeast India:** New Delhi wishes for its remote northeastern wing to serve as a trading hub that connects to Southeast Asia through Myanmar

**Australia:** China's rise has compelled Indian outreach to forge a stronger defense partnership

**South Korea:** India wants to deepen trade, investment and security ties with this regional economic power

### 4. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

- India has **actively promoted shared cultural heritage** by reviving traditions such as **Ramayana and Mahabharata connections** with Southeast Asian nations.
- India has hosted **cultural events like the Ramayana Festival**, inviting participation from Southeast Asian countries.

- The government is also focused on **reviving Buddhist and Hindu linkages** to enhance **people-to-people diplomacy**.

## 5. Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

- India is **investing heavily in infrastructure projects** to improve connectivity between India and Southeast Asia. Major projects include:
  - **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**, facilitating road connectivity between India and Southeast Asia.
  - **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project**, improving trade and transportation links between India and Myanmar.
  - **Rhi-Tiddim Road Project and Border Haats**, strengthening trade ties with Myanmar and Bangladesh.

## Challenges and Areas of Improvement

### 1. Strategic and Economic Challenges

- **Environmental concerns** due to **urbanization and industrialization in Northeast India**.
- **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** offers **strong financial incentives** to Southeast Asian nations, posing competition to India's projects.
- **China's Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)** competes with India's connectivity efforts.
- **Myanmar's political instability** has created difficulties in implementing infrastructure and trade projects.
- **India's Northeast is yet to be fully integrated** into national connectivity programs like **Bharatmala and Sagarmala**, limiting economic potential.

### 2. Soft Power and Cultural Challenges

- **China's claims over Buddhist heritage** have challenged India's **narrative as the birthplace of Buddhism**.
- **Limited linguistic engagement**: Few Indian universities offer courses in Southeast Asian languages like **Khmer (Cambodian), Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, or Burmese**, restricting deeper cultural and diplomatic exchanges.

### 3. Connectivity Bottlenecks

- **Delays in infrastructure projects** like the **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project** have hindered India's integration with Southeast Asia.
- **Underdeveloped transport and trade facilities** in Northeast India continue to slow down trade expansion with ASEAN nations.

## Conclusion and Way Forward

- The success of the **Act East Policy** will require **significant improvements in infrastructure, increased investments, and addressing security challenges** to maximize India's engagement with Southeast Asia.
- **Northeast India must play a central role** in strengthening India's **economic and cultural ties with ASEAN**, given its geographical proximity.

- **India's connectivity projects should be accelerated** to ensure better integration with Southeast Asian trade and commerce.
- As **Southeast Asia faces challenges like climate change and non-traditional security threats**, India must expand its role in **regional disaster management, climate diplomacy, and maritime security cooperation**.
- India should also focus on **expanding strategic partnerships with middle powers in the Indo-Pacific**, ensuring a balanced and proactive role in the region.

**Source:** <https://neindiabroadcast.com/2025/02/26/indias-look-east-policy-has-transformed-into-act-east-bringing-tremendous-progress-to-the-northeast-highlights-vice-president/>