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Act East Policy of India: A desire for hegemony in South East Asia

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Abstract

This research analysis the regions of Southeast Asia with a particular focus on the Act East Policy as practiced by India and the effects it has on the sovereignty of countries within that region while also looking at ways in which all parties involved can benefit from such policies. With respect to the growing extent of confrontational geopolitics especially with regard to China, India's Act East Policy seeks to address the needs of the Southeast Asian Nations. This policy shift seeks economic, cultural and security cooperation but does so in consideration of the specific politics of the regions. The study takes a qualitative approach, drawing on secondary sources including scholarly articles, government publications and international legal instruments. Qualitative case studies of some countries in southeast Asia were undertaken to determine the impact of the policy on regional sovereignty. The results show that while there are prospects for gaining the upper hand in the region with the rise of India's East Policy, there are bottlenecks in the aspects of local respect and historical elements. In order to increase the effectiveness of the Act East Policy, India should place greater emphasis on the local level, avoid secretive practices, and customize the approach to Southeast countries.

Keywords Act East Policy, India, Southeast Asia, Sovereignty, Diplomatic Relations, Regional Autonomy.



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Introduction

The evolution as well as the geopolitical implications of the developments, is one of the vital matters of concern East India's Policy, among others like regional stability, or the rising challenge of China as a competitor, for it is important to engage aggressively with the nations in that region. It is possible to increase trade, cross-cultural exchange, and cooperation on security matters. It ends by endorse that India take a more active role in the region. It so illustrates the importance of the country's active involvement in regional affairs. It gives its economic growth and influence a healthy boost by putting the Look East Policy into practice. This has been achieved by prioritizing collaboration, which addresses contemporary concerns and increases the likelihood of mutual benefit gain (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021).

However, the Act East Policy is still largely facing significant challenges mainly with regard to the sovereignty and hegemony of Southeast Asian nations. Historical colonialism and current regional politics make it often complicated for bilateral relations between nations. The Southeast Asian nations are interested in engaging with India, but they have their internal diversity and external pressures as well. Such complexities raise very pertinent questions as to how far the initiatives taken by India respect the sovereignty of these nations and how far they go to address the local political, economic, and cultural contexts.

India's Act East Policy is that it finds it hard to push its strategic interests in Southeast Asia without hurting the sovereignty and political diversities of the countries of the region. Colonial legacies in the past and contemporary geopolitical dynamics further complicate this task and bilateral relations. However, the issue India faces with regard to Southeast Asia-while it endeavors to push forward its influence against mighty world players such as China and the United States-is the level of internal diversity and pressure that Southeast Asian countries put up, raising certain crucial questions regarding its practical effectiveness in regard to developing real partnerships that could support local interests and autonomy.

Literature review

India's strategic pivot towards enhancing its relationships in the Asia-Pacific focused on strengthening economic ties and security cooperation with key nations like Japan and Australia. the historical foundations and policy shifts that supported the importance of regional stability and collaboration strategy (Sukhia, 2024). Need to understand the long-term impacts of India's "Act East" strategy on regional dynamics and the influence of historical relationships on contemporary cooperation and stability in the Asia-Pacific. the critical role those historical relationships played in shaping current dynamics. Understanding these influences was essential for assessing the effectiveness of India's "Act East" strategy.

The enhancements in economic connectivity, security cooperation, and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. Northeast India served as a strategic gateway to ASEAN countries. Infrastructural development and cross-border trade promoted regional integration. Insights emerged regarding the socio-economic transformation in Northeast India due to this policy (Farooqi & Teckchandani, 2024). Needed to address the challenges and barriers to achieving the intended socio-economic transformation. It is essential to understand the real-world implications of the Act East Policy on local communities to evaluate its effectiveness. Additionally, identifying challenges would provide a clearer picture of the obstacles to achieving the desired socio-economic transformation.

India's perspective towards the Indo-Pacific region is that of the balancing of power and enhancing interaction with the regional actors. The former is rooted in India's historical connections to Southeast Asia and the latter, in its relations with the USA, Japan, and Australia. Indian naval

strategy vis-a-vis maritime trade and other forms of threat perception. The role of inter-regional organizations like ASEAN. For this reason, India came up with relevant strategies in order to deal with such external changes. Aimed in particular at the rise and aspirations and ambitions of India in Japanese Asia (Jaishankar, 2019). The real issues that are related to Indo Pacific strategy which India managed to do. Moreover, there was also a need for resolving more holistically regional order that allowed for dominance of India and moreover, status inequality among others. because without comprehending the challenges encountered in implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy it would also be futile to assess the feasibility of the strategy. Also, cross-sectional comparison of processes of regional integration would clarify factors that incite India's urge for greater agency and security within the order.

Concerning the policy act that corresponds to the look east primarily policy of India, the purpose was to increase the strategic importance of northeastern states of India as an entry point to South East Asia. It was inclined towards the economic and trade related dimensions and also aims at appreciating the sociocultural aspects between the two regions concerned. Some of the initiatives undertaken are spotlighted in terms of the projects geared towards improving the connectivity of the region as well as the initiatives of the countries engaged in the overall integration of the region. Swargiary (2024) Sheba enumerates several past efforts related to the strategy of these states, which is regarded as one of the important components of the geo-economics strategy of which India is also a part. This concern put into perspective the importance of the northeastern states especially in the context of India and Southeast Asia. Assignments of stretches of land are usually understood as entailing advantages to the states – it is but a question by how much these measures are effective as to the net gains of this policy herself.

The crazy speed of the changes in foreign policy in India, and especially regarding its eastern strategy, has also affected the phraseology of the policymakers by changing Look East policy to Act East policy. This entire episode was replete with elements of strategic re-orientation that started in the early 1990s with the onset of the 'Look East' paradigm which was further divide into Act East Policy which came into year in 2014 (Khatik & Bhandari, 2021). India's look east policy oxford bibliographies which in this case already took place with African strategy played which concerned strategic depth and involved operational launching of economic engagement with southeast Asia regions. Further, it was also related to strengthening of economic ties and security, and cultural ties as a part of the reasserting India in the Indo-Pacific.

Research Methodology

Qualitative approach adapted to explore the effects of India's Act East policy on the sovereignty of Southeast Asia. The research was conducted almost exclusively from secondary sources. In addition to many academic articles, policy papers and treaties were assessed which provided both context as well as additional insight into present day relations. Case study analysis of a few selected countries within Southeast Asia was also conducted to highlight their differing political, economic and cultural contexts. Hence, this assisted in analyzing the impact of the policy in a more regional perspective by using categorical analysis on issues that relate to regional autonomy and sovereignty.

Discussion and Results

Launched in 2014, India's Act East Policy represents a paradigm shift of its foreign policies in focus towards increased participation with the Southeast Asia countries. This geographical socialization is not simply an attachment of diplomatic courtesy, but rather astrology of India becoming an actor in the political affairs of this geography. The likes of China and the United

States, and indeed other empires, had already started etching out their influences on regions across the world. While the Act East Policy seeks to enhance relations through social, economic, and political spheres, the question of the sovereignty of Southeast Asian countries becomes salient.



In order to find out the effect that India's Act East policy has on sovereignty, I have to operate in the temporal zone and consider the fact that nations have a history of colonization and how it influences relations between them after colonization has ended. Generally speaking, it is common knowledge that Southeast Asia is rich by virtue of its cultures that have been shaped and influenced by the colonial system because it created strong national aspirations filled with a zeal for independence among the countries. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia have managed to engage larger powers while maintaining their independence. One must then consider the Indian expansion in the context of the hard-won sovereignty that these nations today enjoy.

Then, there is the geo-political situation in modern times. With the emergence of China as a hegemonic regional player, Southeast Asia has had to review foreign policies and alliances. Therefore, India's Act East Policy becomes an alternative source with the rising influence of a hegemonic China, an ideology that is neo-colonial in nature, if one goes by some school of thought. But again, this alternative comes with its own bundle of problems. In order to gain engagements from Indian interests, for example infrastructure investment and defense partnerships may unintentionally draw Southeast Asia towards India's interest against sovereignty (Bajpaee, 2017).

Another crucial feature of the Act East Policy is economic cooperation. Programs for mutual trade agreements, investments in infrastructure, and other projects aim at improved regional connectivity and economic integration. Such initiatives may bring a great deal of positive impacts upon economic growth, but might be an issue for sovereignty at the same time. For instance, deep investments by India could result in dependence where Southeast Asian countries are held hostage to Indian economic interests. This dependence may then take the form of political pressures that undermine their sovereignty in decision-making.

Integration of the Indian economies with the economies of Southeast Asia may cause watering down of local industries and undermining traditional practices. An agricultural-based economy or one based on local crafts might face problems from the influx of Indian products, which would attract local resentment. Such an outcome will lead to tensions in which sovereignty, which the Act East Policy seeks to preserve, is compromised by economic entanglements (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021).

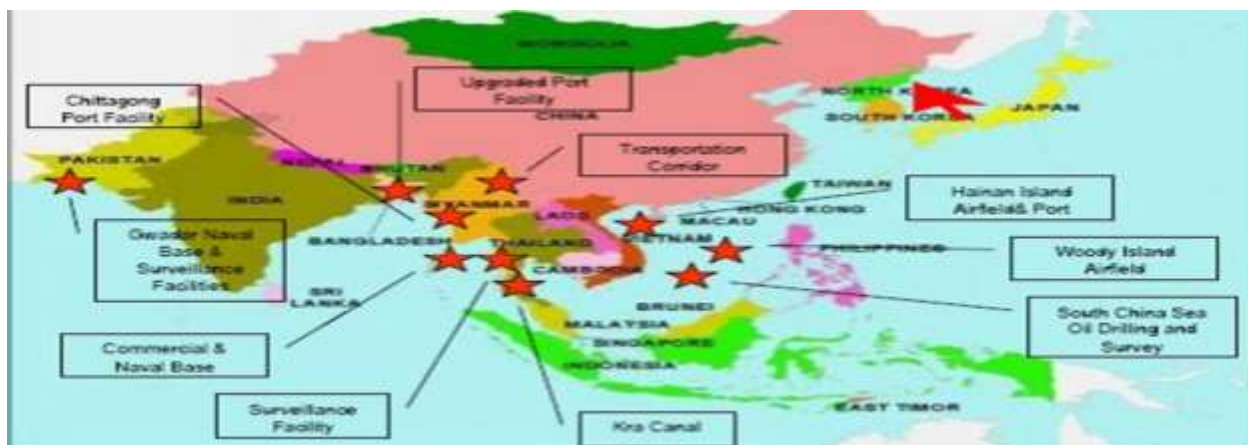
From a cultural perspective, the Act East Policy has aimed to augment people-to-people connectivity's through fostering cultural interactions, educational projects, and tourism promotion. Even though it is helpful in developing mutual appreciation, cultural exchange can simultaneously

impose Indian culture on regional customs and practices. This soft power exercised through the medium of cultural diplomacy calls for caution so as not to become cultural hegemony, as this is construed as violating national identities.

Politically, strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian nations are framed in India as cooperative efforts toward common challenges like maritime security and counter-terrorism. These may end up in alignment of military strategies that don't fully represent the interests of all the countries in Southeast Asia. It might put pressure on some countries to agree to Indian-led initiatives even when these don't support their national priorities, a sovereignty issue in defense and security matters (Magunna, 2024).

Acknowledging the sovereignty of the countries of Southeast Asia while finding strategic objectives. This could only be achieved through frank dialogue respecting the political, economic, and cultural realities of each country. In this case, local initiatives attuned to empower local communities instead of external solutions will then promote more sustainable partnership.

Moreover, the transparency of agreements and the involvement of local people in decision-making processes will reduce the feeling of imposition. A collaborative framework that respects mutualism and shared benefits will help India strengthen its relations without compromising the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations. The circumstances of a given period are essential in explaining the current relations between countries, and how these relations are formed. The progression of time, that is often linear, helps understand the reasons, issues as well as the groups that influence the current course of actions. This paper will discuss how the historical legacies of colonialism, wars, treaties, and other events of the past affect the present-day diplomacy, formation of identities, and intricacies of international relations.



The legacies of colonialism remain the single most significant historical factors that shape the contemporary diplomatic environment. Over a number of Southeast Asian countries, national history is dissected into pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era with nearly each of them bearing some 'direct' influence on national inter-ethnic cleavages and foreign relations. Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia are nations that endured elongated periods of foreign subjugation, thus instilling in them very powerful nationalist tendencies coupled with the aspiration for self-governance. Such sentiments still affect their diplomatic relations as aggressive external involvements or perceptions are treated with caution in most countries while a few even adopt aggressive postures from their ex-masters.

Such is the situation or dilemma in relationships between Indonesia and the Netherlands, complicated by history as it is. Appropriately, the relationships engineered by both countries in as

far as diplomacy is concerned are quite cordial but age-old issues related to the vicissitudes of colonization remain etched in some citizens' sentiments and the policies of the state. This history complicates contemporary discussions on trade agreements, military partnerships, and cultural exchanges since the shadow of colonialism often stretches over any attempt at reconciliation or collaboration.

In addition, national identity construction in post-colonial settings is often based on stories of resistance to imperialism. This shared historical consciousness shapes the way that states relate to the international order, as they pursue common cause with other newly freed states and form regional unions such as ASEAN. Such relationships are usually built upon a common historical heritage, which creates a collective solidarity that supersedes a state's particular interests (Bagchi, 2011).

On the other hand, historical conflict has a huge role to play in today's state diplomacy. Such long conflicts over territorial and regional problems or civil wars may forever impact the dynamics of country-to-country interactions. Consider India and Pakistan; such an age-old conflict they share over the Kashmir land remains the centerpiece of state relations between these two contemporary states. Mass migrations and communal violence in the partition of British India in 1947 created deep-seated animosities which last to this day. The peace talks have been affected by these long-standing issues, they shape warfare approaches, and neither country dares to trust the other's intentions. The impact that the war in Vietnam has on the relations between the United States and Vietnam can be referred to as a millstone.

While relations between the two countries have developed especially regarding trade and security, the legacy of war is simply too much for diplomacy. Other controversial matters such as human rights violations, the legacy of Agent Orange, and other lingering issues from the war bring forward challenges concerning further engagement. For these reasons, historical narratives serve not simply as context but shape attitudes, policies, and processes of bargaining. Old friendships and hostilities influence relationships today. The bipolar system of the Cold War made possible the formation of such systems; as a result, the contemporary relations of states are affected by such systems.

In the case of nations once aligned with the Soviet Union or the United States, they face complicated legacies as they seek new alliances in a multipolar world. This is based on the geopolitical climate, but so are expectations and reservations that shape diplomatic discourse. Economic relationships are even more deeply intertwined with historical contexts. Wherever it is a question of trade agreements or investment flows, there is always a flow in one layer of economic partnership-also reflecting historical ties or past grievances. Such is the case here presented: the economic relationship of Japan with its neighboring countries, which is very influential by its imperial past in East Asia. Like South Korea and China, issues date from World War II with its forced labor and other barbarities, which is what makes them so careful on the economic front.

These historical grievances, despite supposed mutual economic benefits, are to be very significant impediments to further integration. The effort in diplomatic and policy circles at promoting the development of greater economic cooperation often finds opposition because the mistrust from history remains very much in place today. Economic diplomacy is then in the precarious position of needing to navigate through an intricate network of stories about what has been, in hopes of laying out new directions of cooperation.

Moreover, past economic relations on the basis of ancient trade routes play a major role in the present economic diplomacy. For instance, the ancient Silk Road united several countries through

trade and now similar contemporary efforts, like China's Belt and Road Initiative, are also seeking to reconnect and enhance those links between the same countries. Perception of colonialism and experience of economic exploitation, among other factors, make historic contexts complicated. A reluctance to fully participate in projects that they deem neocolonial will prevent nations from participating fully in broader economic agreements. (Mai, et.al., 2021). Thus, historical background plays a major role in the making of today's diplomatic relations. Colonialism legacies, historical wars, and previous economic relations shape a complicated tapestry that influences present-day relationships between nations. Understanding the historical background is crucial for policymakers because it provides crucial insights into what drives the current diplomatic behavior through motivations and sensitivities.

Historical dialogues need to be undertaken in order to acknowledge past grievances but promote forward-looking partnerships. While history may poison present relations, it offers nations a basis for working toward more robust, equitable, and cooperative international relationships that pay respect to the complexities of their common past. After all, successful diplomacy requires a delicate balance between the honoring of historical narratives and embracing the possibilities of future collaboration.

India's Act East policy aims at an improvement in its leverage in the Southeast Asian region by combining strategic imperatives with considerations for the sovereignty and regional autonomy of regional nations. This balance is expected to be particularly sharp since these countries have quite varied political topographies, historical and socio-economic contexts that have influenced regional responses to Indian initiatives. Whether India is able to achieve its strategic aims in the region while also earning respect, is indeed a very complex question all diplomatic, economic, cultural, and otherwise.

In Southeast Asia, India has a set of strategic objectives encompassing enhancement of trade, containment of China's influence and security cooperation. For Indian national interest, progression to regional leadership within the limits of the Asia Pacific becoming more and more dominated by China is essential. Economic relations are further promoted through such initiatives as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and through individual measures aimed at penetrating crucial markets.

But it is easier said than done to attain these objectives on the other side of the equation without trampling on the sovereignty of Southeast Asia. Take for instance the case of both Vietnam and Indonesia, who wish to have an ever-growing partnership with India, but at the same time, try to avoid the impression that they are leaning towards India too much as they borrow India and the US's help. These are weighted considerations that India cannot ignore as it seeks to pursue policy that will not be viewed as aggressive but rather constructive.

This is particularly so in the case of addressing the regional diversity issue. For any nation, such as Indonesia with Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam, the concerns might include historical grievances and political problems, which they may harbor toward India's expectations from these nations as they deal within the region. For example, regarding a country, which has had extreme imperialism or a past score to settle war, then it would take offense to a high degree over anything which can be construed as India interfering in their internal politics. As a result, New Delhi will have to adjust the Southeast Asia bound policy initiatives in a way that carries local approval, without undermining the politics of productive engagement with the partners in the region.

Affirming respect for regional self-regulation includes more than simply refraining from violent action. India's diplomacy needs to be assertive and genuinely cooperative, and participation in

ASEAN by India must also be of such a nature: discussion, consideration and co-deciding. Also, capacity building, cultural exchanges and people-to-people contact form part of this strategy. Education, infrastructure and soft power investments engender warmth and trust between members of Southeast Asia. By the same logic, they bear expectation of regional enhancement and peace, further promoting the Indian image as a dignified player.

To begin with, India should understand the internal angiogenesis of geopolitics in the Southeast Asian countries. Engaging local stakeholders, be they civil society, business groups or other political actors, would also ensure that India's missions and programmes are aligned with the local interests and priorities. This not only makes most of the policies implemented by India efficient but also minimizes opposition owing to the feeling of imposition from a foreign entity (Secretariat, 2019). Despite these opportunities, there remain challenges. The foreign policy of India, if one were to put it in a nutshell, has always been viewed in the narrow parameters of the country's national interest, even jeopardizing its relations with other regional powers. The desire to contain China may result in some of the Southeast Asian countries feeling a threat to their territorial integrity. For the sake of long-term stability of India's influence in Southeast Asia, it is important to strike a careful balance between aggressive pursuit of national interest and encroachment on regional partners' sovereignty.

Conclusion

India's Act East Policy with its multidimensional nature is also aimed at outreach towards Southeast Asia. There are however, complex historical and regional autonomy patterns which are also entrenched into the regional and Global governance structures. Truly engagement policy requires mutual respect and appreciation to other players which will on the contrary bring together favorable coalitions that do not marginalize actors within the region in pursuit of India's interests in the region. In this regard, upholding this balance of force implies that India will have to come to terms with the reality of history as well as with the current uncomfortable realities within her various peoples and societies if interdependence that seeks to bring people together does not invite aggression that seeks to destroy individual states. The level of India's ambitions will depend on her ability to make her case; to be a net gain for all her stakeholders rather than remain their burden, while championing a development model that benefits every stakeholder.

Recommendation

The study offers some helpful strategies and recommendations:

Sensitize Local Participation: India must involve stakeholders from all sectors-government, civil societies, and businesses-in planning and its implementation processes. This involves local perspectives being considered, and needs placed within; thus, acceptance and cooperation are increased.

Transparency of Agreement: Build mutual trust by making all agreements transparently clear and requiring wide consultation and consensus building among the affected people, keeping in check the kind of feeling of imposition and promoting mutual respect.

Focus on Capacity Building: It is high time that India invests in the capacities of local communities and governments in Southeast Asia by developing educational initiatives, skill development, and technology transfer, which will make the relationship more equitable and hence support regional autonomy.

Cultural Sensitivity in Diplomacy: In that cultural exchange programs should not be in a dominant form but of mutual respect and understanding to promote cross-cultural relations as well

as preservation of regional culture. Further integration efforts as well as preservation of regional culture may be achieved through locally observed events.

Adapt strategies to local contexts: India should adapt and be flexible; in other words, taking cognizance of the fact that there are varied historical and political contexts in Southeast Asia as a whole. The contextualization of strategies within the local context would galvanize successful diplomatic endeavors.

Strengthen Economic Cooperation: India should strengthen economic cooperation with the South Asian countries on a principle of mutual benefit rather than dependency. This would involve strengthening local industries and supporting regional supply chains to help the sovereignty of Southeast Asian economies.

Cooperative Agenda: India should strive to develop a cooperative agenda by respecting the sovereignty of these southeast Asian nations by working and establishing a regional security regime that would enhance cooperation as well as accommodate their distinct sovereignty.

Continuous Assessment and Feedback: Regular assessment of the impact that the Act East Policy brings to regional relationships and sovereignty is very important. India should create feedback mechanisms from local populations so its policies will evolve regarding aspirations and concerns in the area.

If these recommendations are implemented, it would be a concrete step in strengthening the Act East Policy toward the benefit of India, fusing its strategic interests with the sovereign identity of Southeast Asian nations worthy of respect and empowerment.

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