

From Look East to Act East : An Assessment

*Yuvaraj Gogoi

Abstract

India initiated its Look East Policy in early 1990s with a vision to give boost to its economy by engaging in trade relations with the East Asian countries. In spite of immense possibilities, the policy has not yielded desired results. The current government has elevated this policy to adapt to the changing circumstances and has termed it as 'Act East' which can be basically seen as Look East 1.0. This paper would analyse the trajectory of Look East Policy of India and its transition to Act East. The paper also attempts to figure out the tasks ahead for the successful implementation of Act East Policy. It argues that mere changing the nomenclature of a policy would not produce desired results. It must be backed by adequate steps to transform the vision of the plan into reality.

Key words : Look East, Act East, East Asian countries, Word Economy, India, ASEAN

Introduction :

The late 1980s and more significantly early 1990s were quite significant decades in the realm of International Relations. The cold war between the US and the former USSR came to an end. Some viewed it as a triumphant moment for liberalism. Francis Fukuyama called it as the 'end of history moment'. Samuel P. Huntington envisioned new forms of conflicts and put forwarded his 'clash of civilisation' thesis (However, the veracity of such claims has been questioned by many. It is not the purpose of this paper to dwell extensively on them. Rather, the analysis of this paper is limited to the Look East and Act East Policy of India.). At the same time, the drivers of globalisation got a new fillip in the post cold war era. Integration of the world economy became more visible and pertinent than ever before. Visible changes could also be seen in the dynamics of Indian foreign and domestic policy. For example India formally established its diplomatic

*Assistant Professor of Political Science, Gargaon College, Simaluguri.

relations with Israel for the first time since independence. It also adopted the new economic policy of LPG (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) to overcome its domestic economic bottleneck and meet new realities of the global economy. In this very decade, India also initiated its 'Look East Policy' during the Prime Ministership of P.V. Narashimha Rao with a vision to give boost to the Indian economy by integrating it with the East Asian economies. In spite of immense potentialities, the policy has not yielded desired results for a variety of reasons. Much of the promises of the Look East Policy remained empty rhetoric of foreign policy. This Look East Policy has been elevated to Act East Policy recently by the Modi government.

The objectives of this paper are two fold:

1. To analyse the trajectory of the Look East Policy and its transition to Act East Policy.
2. To figure out the road ahead for the Look East/Act East Policy.

The paper adopts an analytical approach to fulfil its objectives. It has basically relied on secondary sources. The paper has also looked into the distinguished lectures made by diplomats at various institutions.

I

What is Looking East ?

There is no denying of the fact that since ancient times India had had some kind of relations with Asian countries. The Hindu temples found in Cambodia and Indonesia among others amply reflect the civilisational and cultural ties that India had with these countries. Seen in this way, Look East Policy cannot be said to be an entirely new policy. Baladas Ghosal rightly says, "The LEP is not new, but a continuation of its earlier policy toward Southeast Asia. The Asia-Pacific region had always attracted the attention of India's foreign policy makers." (Ghosal, 2013) However, sight should not be lost of the fact that in the post independent period India's policy makers gave more importance to a bunch of economic powerhouses only. A perusal of the history of India's economic diplomacy reveals that in the post independent period particularly till 1990s, the western countries formed the pivot of India's trade relations. India's trade relation with its Asian neighbours was not vibrant in comparison to the Western countries. The post-cold war era brought a plethora of opportunities and challenges for the developing economies of

the world. At this juncture, in order to adapt to the changing circumstances, India adopted its Look East Policy. While, P.V. Narashima Rao's government initiated this policy, '[a]ll subsequent governments have supported the policy and have built on it.' (Baruah, 2013) and efforts have been made to renew relationship with countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore etc.

It is pertinent to mention here that the term 'Look East' was used for the first time only in the 1995-96 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (Saikia & Phukan, 2013). Former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh has reportedly mentioned that

India's Look East Policy is not merely an external economic policy, it is also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. Most of all it is about reaching out to our civilisational neighbours in South East Asia and East Asia (Ibid).

So suffice it to say that the trend of India's relation with East Asian countries has changed in the post cold war period. India has become a full dialogue partner of ASEAN Regional Forum since 1995, a founding member of East Asian Summit to name a few. India-ASEAN relationship became twenty year old in 2012. This Indo-ASEAN relationship is a core of India's Look East Policy. Commenting on this Pant said:

The significance that the ASEAN members are increasingly according India can be gauged from the presence of the prime ministers of Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, the presidents of Myanmar and Indonesia and the vice president of Philippines in India for the India-ASEAN summit, the first of its kind. The highlight of the summit was the conclusion of talks on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on services and investment which is expected to increase bilateral trade to \$200 billion by 2022 and lead to talks on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership which also includes Australia, China, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand (Pant, 2013).

An Indo-ASEAN car rally started Guwahati covering multiple East Asian countries in 2004 created awareness among the people about the importance of this policy.

Some scholars (Sikri, 2009) also point out that there is a strategic dimension involved in the Look East Policy in the sense that India as a rising power can play a useful role in creating a balance in the South-East and East Asian region.

It is unfortunate that much of goals envisioned in the Look East Policy remained in paper only. Its metamorphosis to Act East Policy bears an ample testimony of this fact. However, it needs to be mentioned that Look East Policy despite its pitfalls was a commendable foreign policy mission of the Rao's government. It created a congenial atmosphere for cooperation East Asian nations with India in various sectors.

What is new in Act East ?

As already stated, the Look East Policy of India has been changed to 'Act East Policy' by the current Narendra Modi led NDA government. At the ASEAN-India summit on November 12, 2015 at Naypyidaw Modi said that 'a new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become 'Act East Policy,' (Parameswarn, 2014) Parameswaran writes:

The term "Act East" was first popularized by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a speech during her visit to India in July 2011, where she encouraged New Delhi "not just to look East, but to engage East and act East (Ibid)."

Thus, it is clear that the Act East Policy is a take-off from Look East Policy and more specifically from Clinton's argument. At the risk of oversimplification, it can be seen as Look East 1.0. The central idea behind the initiation of Act East Policy is the belief that has grown over time that it is not sufficient to 'look' east, there have to be engagement with the countries of the East. Thus the thrust has been on the activism part. Act East Policy can be seen as a pillar of Indian foreign policy in that it is giving an opportunity to India to play its role as an emerging great power (Chakravarty, 2015). As far as the range of this policy is concerned, it covers the Region from Bangladesh to the Western seaboard of USA and countries in between these geographical strips (Sajjanhar, 2015).

So far, so good. But, it remains to be seen how much of this is translated into reality. Modi government has shown concern to take this policy further. In the oath-taking ceremony itself, as a sign of goodwill Modi invited the leaders of SAARC nations.

This reflects that India is interested in building stronger ties with its neighbours. Projects like 'make-in-India' may give a fillip to India's trade relations with the East Asian economies. Modi's recent tour to Singapore and Malaysia in November 2015 could be expected to bolster India's economic ties with these countries. It may create a congenial atmosphere for foreign investment from these countries. However criticisms have also come from some quarters. The editor of a regional English newspaper comments,

While the Act East Policy professes to facilitate enhanced ties between India's North-east and South-east Asian nations, in practice little has been done to turn the vision into reality...For the North-east, the policy has more or less remained in paper only, as the expected bilateral interaction between the region and South-east Asia is far from visible as yet (The Assam Tribune, Guwahati, January 2, 2016).

Sanjoy Hazarika, a noted expert on North Eastern politics, reportedly questioned "If by our own definition the Northeast is a 'disturbed area' under AFSPA, then how can you ask everyone to look at east under the 'Act East' policy? How will you improve connectivity? (http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-27/news/60553785_1_act-east-disturbed-areas-act-east-policy – – accessed on 19.01.16)"

II

Act East – The Road Ahead :

Strengthening Indo-ASEAN Relations :

As already stated above, Indo-ASEAN relations have been the bedrock of India's Look East/ Act East Policy, efforts must be taken to increase trade with ASEAN members. Some of the major ASEAN trading partners of India are Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Singapore is the largest ASEAN trading partner of India. Bilateral trade between the two nations stood at 16.1 billion USD in 2008-09 (Daimari in Phukan, 2013). Indonesia is another major ASEAN trading partner of India. It may be noted here that India-Indonesia bilateral trade stood at 15 billion USD in 2012. In 1992 it was 286 million USD. Apart from trade benefits, as Yuvaraj Gogoi and Junuguru Srinivas (Jha and Kuswadi 2015) have stated, India and Indonesia together can be a profound voice of the global South in various world forums and tackle problems like terrorism, corruption, and illegal drugs.

Invigorating Indo-Myanmar ties :

The Act East Policy like the Look East Policy will not work if the trade relations with countries like Myanmar are not increased. But unfortunately when it comes to trade, India happens to be the 11th largest trading partner of Myanmar despite the fact the two countries shares around 1700km as borders (Chakravarty, 2015). Furthermore, Myanmar is itself gruelling under its internal problems. Full-fledged transition to democracy has not taken place yet. But the world has witnessed some positive democratic developments under the leadership of Aung San Shu Kyi. Sanjib Baruah argues,

It is essential to think beyond the present military regime in Myanmar. There is good opportunity for India to take a leadership role in coordinating international policy towards Myanmar....India is in a good position to play a leadership role in facilitating a political transition in Myanmar in cooperation with other international actors. [Baruah 2013: 230]

North East and Act East :

Act East policy would not be successful if North East India is left out of its purview. If one looks into the geographical terrain of North East India, it becomes clear that it is literally the gateway to India's East. It is noteworthy that around 98 % of the region shares border with other countries, while 2 % of it is connected with 'mainland' India. So leaving out North East would be counter-productive. North East India itself is undergoing various troubles like underdevelopment, insurgency, border disputes with neighbouring countries, ethnic unrest to name a few. The government should earnestly try to resolve these issues. Priority must be given to the infrastructure development in the North eastern region. The industrial base of the North Eastern region must be upgraded to reap benefits from economic integration. Apart from air transport, road and rail connectivity in the region must be improved at the earliest. Draconian acts like AFSPA should be removed from Manipur. Furthermore India should reap harvest from its North East cross cultural linkages with countries like Thailand. Highlighting the importance of North East India in the scheme of Act East Policy, former Ambassador Yogendra Kumar says,

Ever since the launch of the 'Look East Policy' but, most importantly, in recent times especially since the opening up of Myanmar, the success of

this policy hinges on the full involvement of the north-eastern states. The reason for that is that India's influence with South-East Asia cannot be tangible unless it takes advantage of the opening of the neighbouring economies with the help of various connectivity projects. Equally, this is critical to the growth of the north-eastern states themselves who suffered the adverse consequences of partition in 1947 due to the disruption of road, rail and port links. It is here that a major effort is required so that the north-eastern states can feel a sense of ownership of the LEAP and of being major stakeholders in this policy (<http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?299> – - accessed on 18.01.16.).

A vision document for the North Eastern region entitled NER Vision 2020 was published in 2008. It remains to be seen how much of it is translated into reality.

Need for Substance over Form and Complementary Policies :

Mere changing the nomenclature of a policy does not guarantee its success. This policy must be implemented with vigorous planning. Act East Policy after all is just one of the foreign policy initiatives of the Indian government to boost up its economic development. So it cannot be expected to be the panacea of all problems. To quote Baladas Ghosal, it is "only a part of India's overall and broader foreign policy approaches where multiple factors and determinants work in the making of the policy (Ghosal, 2013)." It has to be complemented by other policies too. The policy makers need to take into account what went wrong with the Look East Policy and devise strategies to correct those anomalies. Some observers have talked about the need for an Act West Policy to forge economic ties with the West Asian countries (Aziz, 2014; Tiwari and Das, 2015). In a similar vein, Happymon Jacob has pointed out the need for a 'Look Northwest Policy' to develop relations with countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan etc. (Jacob, 2015). He argues, "It is worrisome that while the most formidable challenges to India's national security invariably originate from its northwestern frontiers, New Delhi's focus has been on the global stage and its southern and eastern neighbours (Ibid)."

Cooperation in Non-Economic Areas :

India can extend cooperation with the East Asian countries in sectors like traditional

and non-traditional security. India should urge these countries for investments in India's defence sector. These countries can jointly combat the spurt of international terrorism in the region, illegal arms trafficking, narcotics business, climate change etc. Cultural exchanges may be promoted and people to people contact in the region encouraged for strengthening civilisation ties in the South East and East Asian region.

Need to think beyond ASEAN :

Efforts must be taken to rejuvenate others wings of Look East/Act East Policy like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation. India should also think beyond ASEAN to expand the base of Act East Policy. It should strengthen ties with countries like Bangladesh, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Efforts must be taken by New Delhi to convince the Chinese side that Act East Policy is not a counter-measure against the increasing economic activities of China in the region. Act East policy should not be depicted or converted to a policy driven by the logic of zero-sum game. Goal must be on win-win situation.

Conclusion :

The above discussion reveals that the Look East Policy initiated in early 1990s was an important development in the dynamics of Indian foreign policy. It was an attempt to redefine India's economic relations with its East Asian neighbours. The policy in spite of its immense possibilities did not yield desired results; especially North East India could not reap any spectacular benefits from this policy despite the fact that much of North East India is bound by foreign boundaries. Thus revamping the Look East Policy was the need of the hour. So, the recent step by New Delhi to change Look East Policy to Act East Policy is a welcome move. But a caveat is due here that such a move should be backed by adequate steps to implement it into reality. It should not be mere cosmetic changes. Lessons must be drawn from the failures of Look East Policy. Policymakers and academics should devise suitable strategies for successful implementation of the Act East Policy.

References :

- Aziz, Amb (Retd) I. (2014): "Need for Look West Policy", lecture delivered in Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh on October 27, 2014, <http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?154> – accessed on 19.01.16.
- Baruah, S. (2013): *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North East India*, sixth impression, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Chakravarty, Amb (Retd) P.R. (2015): "India's Act East Policy", lecture delivered in Jadavpur Association of International Relations (JAIR) on February 28, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?227> – accessed on 18.01.16.
- Daimari, P. (2013): "India's Post LEP International Trade Structure with ASEAN countries through North Eastern Region" in D. Phukan (ed) *Look East Policy and North East India*, SSDN Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi.
- Ghosal, B. (2013): *China's Perception of India's 'Look East Policy' and Its Implications*, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.
- Gogoi, Y. and J. Srinivas (2015): "India-Indonesia Relations in a Changing World", in G.K. Jha and S. Kuswadi (eds.) *India-Indonesia Bilateral Ties-An Introspection*, Suryodaya Books, New Delhi.
- Jacob, H. (2015): "For a 'Look Northwest' Policy", *The Hindu*, May 13.
- Kumar, Amb (Retd.) Y. (2015): "Look East and Act East Policy", lecture delivered in Nagaland University, Kohima on May 26, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?299> – accessed on 18.01.16.
- Pant, H. V. (2013): "China on the Horizon: India's 'Look East' Policy Gathers Momentum", *Orbis*, Volume: Summer 2013. pp 453-466.
- Parameswaran, P. (2014): "Modi Unveils India's 'Act East Policy' to ASEAN in Myanmar", <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/modi-unveils-indias-act-east-policy-to-asean-in-myanmar/> – accessed on 17.11.2014.
- Saikia, S.K. (2013): "India's Look East Policy: Opportunities and Challenges for North Eastern Region" in Devojit Phukan (ed) *Look East Policy and North East India*, SSDN Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi.
- Sajjanhar, Amb (Retd) A., (2015): "From Look East to Act East: Semantics or Substance", lecture delivered in Central University of Kerela, Kasargod, on February 11, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?213> – accessed on 18.01.16.
- Sikri, R. (2009): "India's Look East Policy", *Asia-Pacific Review*, Volume 16, No. 1, pp 131-145.
- Tiwari, S. and I. Das (2015): "It's time now to Act West", *The Statesman*, August 17.

