



Reviewing Act East Policy

drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/26-05-2021/print

This article is based on **“What’s going wrong with India’s Act East policy?”** which was published in The Indian Express on 26/05/2021. It talks about the recent developments that are testing Indian diplomacy in the Southeast Asia region.

Recently, the relation between Singapore and India got a little bit tense due to New Delhi Chief Minister's recent remarks about a Singapore variant of Covid reaction.

Although the External Affairs ministry was quick to disown the critical comments, many Indian policymakers and foreign policy analysts presented a wider and larger challenge to India’s standing in Southeast Asia as a whole.

Three developments over the past five years are testing Indian diplomacy in the region. First, the rising profile of China combined with growing China-India tensions; second, disappointment in the region with India’s economic under-performance; and, third, rising concern in the region with India’s approach towards its minorities, especially Muslims and Christians.

These developments warrant a review of domestic politics and how it impacts the **Act East policy of India.**

Evolution of Act East Policy

- Ever since 1992 when Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao enunciated a “Look East Policy” reaching out to Southeast Asia, India has engaged the region on all fronts — diplomatic and security, economic and people-to-people.
- Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh built on Narasimha Rao’s foundation and constructed a robust relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), so much so that in 2007 Singapore’s founder-mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, a longstanding India sceptic, went to the extent of naming China and India as the two engines of Asian economic growth.
- Continuing this approach, present Prime Minister Narendra Modi graduated Look East into an Act East policy.

Recent Challenges to Act East Policy

- **India's Economic Underperformance:** China's accelerated rise since the trans-Atlantic financial crisis 2008-09 and the growing assertiveness initially generated a strong pro-India sentiment in the region with many ASEAN countries wanting India to balance China's enhanced power.

However, India's economic slowdown and inward orientation, expressed through the decision to stay out of the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement**, has disappointed regional business.
- **Concerns About Hindu Majoritarianism:** In most ASEAN countries, ethnic Chinese practise Islam, Buddhism or Christianity.
 - The growing concern about Hindu majoritarianism in India has impacted civil society attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.
 - Further, India deployed the soft power of "Buddhist diplomacy" but that too has not gained much traction as inter-religious tensions in the region grow.
- **Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic:** Regarding handling of pandemic, China has handled the challenge efficiently while India is seen to have bungled.

This has generated a pro-China sentiment among the region's ethnic Chinese communities and development of ASEAN's increasingly accommodative approach towards China.
- **Combine Effect:** Taken together, all these developments weakened the business-to-business (B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) connection between India and ASEAN despite the best efforts of hard-pressed diplomats to maintain good government-to-government (G2G) relations.

Way Forward

- **Reviewing RCEP Decision:** Acknowledging India's economic power and value as a market, the RCEP members have left the door open for India to invite it to be an observer member.

Given the global economic scenario in present times and the near future, it would be in India's interest to dispassionately review its position on RCEP and carry out structural reforms.
- **Leveraging Soft power:** Cultural and civilizational linkages are India's niche advantage while pursuing Act East Policy.

Thus, policymakers should refrain from such policies that appears to be majoritarian in nature.

- **Tackling China:** Just like China is showing its assertiveness in the Indian Ocean, India must increase its engagement in the South China Sea.
 - In this context, India's engagement with **Quad** and ASEAN countries is a step in the right direction.
 - Recently, the Indian prime minister proposed an “**SAGAR (Security & Growth For ALL in the Region) Initiative**” for the safe, secure and stable maritime domain. It focuses on creating partnerships among interested states in enhancing maritime security, sustainably using marine resources, disaster prevention & management.

Conclusion

Recent trends suggest that despite the best intentions of an Act East Policy, India's standing and image in Southeast Asia have suffered. Therefore, Indian diplomacy must take a fresh look at its Act East policy.

Drishti Mains Question

Recent developments are testing Indian diplomacy and Act East Policy in the Southeast Asian region. Discuss.
