



Reviewing Act East Policy

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.

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