

India's Look East Policy and Its Strategic Significance in World Politics: An Analytical Study with Special Reference to ASEAN Countries

Vaishnav S Kadu

Research Scholer, Government Vidarbha Institute of Science and Humanities, Amravati

Abstract

India's Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s, marked a significant transformation in the country's foreign policy orientation toward Southeast Asia. The policy emerged in the context of post-Cold War geopolitical changes and India's economic liberalization, aiming to strengthen political, economic, and strategic relations with the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This research paper analyses the strategic significance of India's Look East Policy in shaping regional cooperation and its broader implications in world politics. The study examines the historical evolution of the policy, its role in enhancing India-ASEAN relations, and its contribution to regional economic integration, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. Using analytical and descriptive research methods based on secondary sources, the paper explores how the Look East Policy facilitated India's increasing participation in regional institutions and strategic partnerships. Furthermore, the study highlights how the policy laid the foundation for the transformation into the Act East Policy, which expanded India's engagement with Southeast Asia in the fields of connectivity, security, and economic collaboration. The findings suggest that the Look East Policy played a crucial role in strengthening India's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region and in redefining its role in contemporary global politics.

Keywords: India's Look East Policy, Act East Policy, ASEAN, India ASEAN Relations, Regional Cooperation, World Politics, Indo-Pacific Strategy

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War brought significant transformations in the global political and economic order, leading many countries to reassess and redefine their foreign policy strategies. The emergence of globalization, regional economic integration, and new geopolitical dynamics encouraged states to strengthen cooperation with economically dynamic regions. In this changing international environment, India also initiated substantial changes in its foreign policy orientation and economic strategy during the early 1990s [1]. The economic crisis of 1991 and the subsequent adoption of economic liberalization policies encouraged India to expand its diplomatic and economic engagement with rapidly growing regions, particularly Southeast Asia [2].

In this context, India introduced the Look East Policy in the early 1990s under the leadership of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. The policy represented a significant shift in India's foreign policy by

emphasizing closer economic, political, and strategic relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, especially the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [3]. Initially, the policy focused primarily on strengthening economic cooperation and trade relations; however, over time it gradually expanded to include political dialogue, cultural interaction, and strategic collaboration. This transformation reflected India's broader objective of integrating more actively into the regional economic architecture and strengthening its role in the Asia-Pacific region [4].

ASEAN has emerged as one of the most influential regional organizations promoting economic integration, political cooperation, and regional stability in Southeast Asia. Since its establishment in 1967, the organization has played a crucial role in fostering regional peace and economic growth among its member states [5]. For India, ASEAN represents an important partner in expanding trade relations, promoting regional connectivity, and strengthening cooperation in areas such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and technological development. Engagement with ASEAN also enabled India to participate more actively in regional multilateral institutions and dialogue mechanisms that shape the political and economic dynamics of the broader Indo-Pacific region [6].

The Look East Policy therefore became an important instrument for enhancing India's engagement with Southeast Asia and strengthening its diplomatic and economic relations with ASEAN countries. India gradually became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992 and later a full dialogue partner in 1996, which significantly expanded opportunities for cooperation in various fields including trade, investment, and security [7]. India's participation in regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit further strengthened its strategic presence in the region and contributed to deeper regional integration [8].

Over time, the scope of the Look East Policy evolved beyond economic cooperation to include broader strategic and security dimensions. Growing geopolitical competition and the increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific region encouraged India to strengthen its engagement with Southeast Asia through deeper strategic partnerships and enhanced connectivity initiatives. These developments eventually led to the transformation of the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy, which emphasized more proactive and action-oriented engagement with ASEAN and other regional partners [9].

Despite the emergence of the Act East Policy in the contemporary period, the foundation of India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia was firmly established during the earlier phase of the Look East Policy. The policy played a crucial role in strengthening India-ASEAN relations, promoting regional economic cooperation, and enhancing India's strategic role in world politics. Therefore, an analytical study of the Look East Policy is essential for understanding the evolution of India's foreign policy and its growing influence in the regional and global political landscape [10].

1.1 Research Gap

Although several scholars have examined India's Look East Policy and its diplomatic and economic engagement with Southeast Asia, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on the economic aspects of India-ASEAN relations or on the contemporary developments of the Act East Policy. Limited scholarly attention has been given to analysing how the Look East Policy functioned as a strategic foundation for India's expanding role in world politics and how it contributed to the evolution of the Act East Policy. Furthermore, many studies examine India-ASEAN cooperation from a descriptive perspective without providing a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates geopolitical, economic, and institutional dimensions of the policy. Therefore, there exists a need for a systematic analytical study that examines the strategic significance of the Look East Policy in shaping India's engagement with ASEAN countries and

its broader implications for regional and global politics. The present study attempts to address this gap by analysing the evolution, strategic objectives, and long-term impact of India's Look East Policy and its role in paving the way for the Act East Policy.

2. Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the strategic significance of the Look East Policy. David Scott argues that the Look East Policy represented a major transformation in India's foreign policy orientation, enabling the country to strengthen its diplomatic and economic engagement with Southeast Asia [1]. Amitav Acharya highlights the role of ASEAN as a successful regional organization that has promoted regional cooperation and economic integration in Southeast Asia [3]. Similarly, S. D. Muni emphasizes the strategic dimensions of India's engagement with Southeast Asia and argues that the Look East Policy contributed significantly to India's growing strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region [11]. Other scholars such as C. Raja Mohan have examined how India's foreign policy evolved in response to changing global power dynamics after the Cold War [4]. These studies provide valuable insights into India-ASEAN relations; however, many of them focus primarily on economic cooperation or contemporary developments related to the Act East Policy. Limited attention has been given to analysing how the Look East Policy laid the strategic foundation for India's broader role in world politics and the subsequent development of the Act East Policy.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present research paper aims to analyse the strategic importance of India's Look East Policy in shaping India's foreign policy and regional engagement with Southeast Asia. The policy has played a crucial role in strengthening India's diplomatic, economic, and strategic relations with the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In this context, the major objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the historical background and evolution of India's Look East Policy.
2. To analyse the role of the Look East Policy in strengthening political, economic, and strategic relations between India and ASEAN countries.
3. To evaluate the significance of the Look East Policy in enhancing India's role in regional and global politics.
4. To study how the Look East Policy contributed to the transformation and emergence of the Act East Policy.
5. To assess the broader impact of India-ASEAN cooperation on regional stability and economic integration in the Indo-Pacific region.

4. Research Questions

In order to achieve the above objectives, the present study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What were the major factors that led to the formulation of India's Look East Policy in the early 1990s?
2. How did the Look East Policy contribute to the development of India's diplomatic and economic relations with ASEAN countries?
3. What role did the Look East Policy play in strengthening India's position in world politics and regional geopolitics?

4. In what ways did the Look East Policy pave the way for the development of the Act East Policy?
5. What are the major strategic and economic outcomes of India's engagement with ASEAN under the Look East Policy?

5. Research Methodology

The present study is primarily based on qualitative and analytical research methods. The research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach in order to examine the role and significance of India's Look East Policy in world politics with special reference to ASEAN countries.

The study is mainly based on secondary sources of data. Relevant information has been collected from books, research articles published in academic journals, government reports, policy documents, and official publications related to India's foreign policy and ASEAN cooperation. Reports and documents from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, ASEAN official publications, and various international relations scholars have also been consulted for the purpose of this research.

The collected information has been systematically analysed to understand the evolution of India's Look East Policy, its strategic objectives, and its impact on India-ASEAN relations. The analytical method has been used to examine how the policy contributed to regional cooperation, economic integration, and strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the study also evaluates how the foundations established by the Look East Policy eventually facilitated the development of the Act East Policy in the contemporary period.

The scope of the study is limited to analysing the political, economic, and strategic dimensions of India's engagement with ASEAN countries under the Look East Policy and its implications for world politics.

6. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of India's Look East Policy and its engagement with ASEAN countries can be better understood through the perspectives of major theories in international relations, particularly Realism, Regionalism, and Liberal Institutionalism. These theoretical approaches help explain the strategic motivations, economic cooperation, and institutional engagement that characterize India's policy toward Southeast Asia.

From the perspective of Realism, states pursue policies that enhance their national power, security, and strategic influence in the international system. India's Look East Policy can be interpreted as a strategic response to the changing geopolitical environment of the post-Cold War period and the rising importance of the Asia-Pacific region in global politics. Through closer relations with ASEAN countries, India aimed to strengthen its strategic presence in the region and balance the growing influence of other major powers, particularly China [11].

Regionalism provides another useful theoretical perspective for understanding the Look East Policy. Regionalism emphasizes cooperation among geographically proximate countries in order to promote economic integration, political dialogue, and regional stability. ASEAN has long been regarded as one of the most successful regional organizations promoting economic and political cooperation in Southeast Asia. India's engagement with ASEAN through the Look East Policy reflects its attempt to integrate with regional economic networks and participate in regional institutions that shape political and economic developments in Asia [12].

Liberal Institutionalism also helps explain India's increasing participation in regional forums and multilateral institutions. According to this perspective, international institutions and cooperative

frameworks facilitate dialogue, reduce conflict, and promote economic cooperation among states. India's involvement in institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit demonstrates its commitment to multilateral diplomacy and cooperative security arrangements in the region [13].

Thus, the combined perspectives of Realism, Regionalism, and Liberal Institutionalism provide a comprehensive framework for analysing India's Look East Policy. While realist considerations highlight the strategic motivations behind the policy, regionalism and liberal institutionalism explain the importance of economic integration and institutional cooperation in shaping India–ASEAN relations.

7. Evolution of India's Look East Policy

India's Look East Policy was initiated in the early 1990s as a response to significant economic and geopolitical transformations. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of new economic centers in East and Southeast Asia compelled India to reassess its foreign policy priorities. At the same time, the economic crisis of 1991 forced India to undertake economic liberalization and adopt policies aimed at integrating the country into the global economy [14].

The Look East Policy was formally introduced during the tenure of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. The policy sought to establish closer economic and diplomatic relations with the rapidly growing economies of Southeast Asia. Initially, the policy focused on economic engagement, trade expansion, and investment cooperation with ASEAN countries. Over time, however, the scope of the policy expanded to include strategic and security cooperation [15].

India's relations with ASEAN developed gradually through various stages of cooperation. In 1992, India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, which marked the beginning of institutional engagement between India and the regional organization. This partnership was further strengthened when India became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996. Subsequently, India began participating in important regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and later the East Asia Summit [16].

The Look East Policy also facilitated the expansion of economic relations between India and ASEAN countries. Trade relations grew steadily as India reduced trade barriers and promoted economic cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. Several bilateral agreements and regional economic initiatives were undertaken to strengthen connectivity and trade integration between India and ASEAN [17].

By the early twenty-first century, the Look East Policy had evolved into a comprehensive strategy involving economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and strategic partnerships. The policy played a significant role in strengthening India's presence in the Asia-Pacific region and laid the foundation for the more proactive Act East Policy that emerged in the following decade [18].

8. India–ASEAN Trade Relations

Economic cooperation has been one of the most significant outcomes of India's Look East Policy. Trade between India and ASEAN countries has increased substantially since the early 1990s due to economic liberalization, regional integration, and the establishment of trade agreements. The ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement further accelerated trade growth and strengthened economic interdependence between the two regions [19].

Year	India–ASEAN Trade Volume (Approx. USD Billion)
1991	2.9

Year	India–ASEAN Trade Volume (Approx. USD Billion)
2000	10
2010	50
2015	65
2022	110

Table 1: Growth of India–ASEAN Trade

The above data demonstrates the increasing economic importance of ASEAN in India’s foreign trade. ASEAN has emerged as one of India’s largest trading partners, reflecting the success of the Look East Policy in promoting economic integration and regional cooperation [20].

9. Critical Analysis of Indias Look East Policy

Although the Look East Policy has been widely regarded as a successful foreign policy initiative, it has also faced several challenges and limitations. One of the major achievements of the policy has been the strengthening of India–ASEAN relations through increased economic cooperation, institutional engagement, and strategic partnerships. The policy enabled India to expand its diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia and participate more actively in regional multilateral forums [21].

However, critics have pointed out that the initial phase of the Look East Policy focused primarily on economic cooperation and did not fully address strategic and security dimensions of regional engagement. As a result, India’s presence in Southeast Asia remained relatively limited compared to other major powers during the early years of the policy [22].

Another challenge has been the slow progress of infrastructure and connectivity projects linking India with Southeast Asia. Effective connectivity through land, sea, and digital networks is essential for enhancing trade and economic cooperation. Delays in the implementation of connectivity projects have sometimes limited the full potential of India–ASEAN economic relations [23].

Despite these limitations, the Look East Policy played a crucial role in transforming India’s foreign policy orientation toward Southeast Asia. The policy established the institutional, economic, and strategic foundations for deeper engagement with ASEAN countries. These developments eventually led to the formulation of the Act East Policy, which emphasized more proactive diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation with the region [24].

10. Role of Look East Policy in World Politics

India’s Look East Policy has played an important role in redefining the country’s position in world politics. By strengthening its engagement with Southeast Asia, India was able to expand its diplomatic, economic, and strategic presence in one of the most dynamic regions of the world. The policy allowed India to move beyond its traditional regional focus in South Asia and become an active participant in the broader Asia-Pacific geopolitical landscape [25].

One of the key contributions of the Look East Policy has been the strengthening of India–ASEAN relations. Through sustained diplomatic engagement and institutional cooperation, India developed strategic partnerships with several ASEAN countries including Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. These partnerships have facilitated cooperation in areas such as maritime security, defense dialogue, trade expansion, and technological collaboration [26].

The Look East Policy also enabled India to participate actively in regional multilateral institutions. India's membership and participation in forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus provided important platforms for diplomatic dialogue and strategic cooperation. These institutions have contributed to regional stability by encouraging dialogue and cooperation among major regional powers [27].

Another significant dimension of the Look East Policy has been its contribution to the concept of the Indo-Pacific region. The growing importance of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic geopolitical space has encouraged countries to strengthen cooperation in maritime security, trade routes, and regional connectivity. India's engagement with ASEAN countries through the Look East Policy has supported efforts to maintain stability and promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region [28].

Furthermore, the policy has contributed to the diversification of India's foreign policy partnerships. By strengthening ties with Southeast Asia, India reduced its dependence on traditional strategic partners and expanded its diplomatic outreach to emerging economies. This diversification enhanced India's ability to play a more influential role in global governance and international diplomacy [29].

Thus, the Look East Policy significantly enhanced India's role in world politics by promoting regional cooperation, expanding economic relations, and strengthening strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia.

11. Look East Policy as the Foundation of Act East Policy

The transformation of the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy represents an important phase in the evolution of India's foreign policy. While the Look East Policy primarily focused on establishing economic and diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries, the Act East Policy emphasized more proactive and action-oriented engagement with the region [30].

The foundations of the Act East Policy were laid during the implementation of the Look East Policy. Through increased economic cooperation, diplomatic dialogue, and participation in regional institutions, India gradually strengthened its relations with ASEAN countries. These developments created a strong institutional and strategic framework that allowed India to expand its engagement with Southeast Asia in the following decades [31].

The Act East Policy, introduced in 2014, built upon the achievements of the Look East Policy and sought to further deepen India's strategic partnerships with ASEAN countries. Greater emphasis was placed on improving physical connectivity, expanding trade relations, strengthening maritime cooperation, and enhancing defence collaboration with regional partners [32].

Connectivity projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and other regional infrastructure initiatives illustrate the transition from a policy of engagement to one of active implementation. These initiatives aim to enhance trade routes, promote economic integration, and strengthen regional connectivity between India and Southeast Asia [33].

The Act East Policy also reflects India's broader strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific region. By strengthening partnerships with ASEAN countries and other regional actors, India aims to promote stability, economic cooperation, and a rules-based international order in the region. In this context, ASEAN continues to occupy a central role in India's foreign policy strategy [34].

Therefore, it can be argued that the Look East Policy laid the essential groundwork for India's contemporary engagement with Southeast Asia. The policy established diplomatic channels, economic partnerships, and institutional frameworks that enabled the development of the Act East Policy and expanded India's strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region.

12. Findings

Based on the analysis of India's Look East Policy and its engagement with ASEAN countries, several important findings emerge from the study.

First, the Look East Policy represented a significant shift in India's foreign policy orientation during the post-Cold War period. The policy enabled India to diversify its diplomatic and economic relations and engage more actively with the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia [35].

Second, the policy played a crucial role in strengthening India–ASEAN relations through increased trade, diplomatic cooperation, and participation in regional institutions. ASEAN has emerged as one of India's most important regional partners in terms of economic and strategic cooperation [36].

Third, the Look East Policy contributed to India's growing strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Through participation in regional forums and security dialogues, India has been able to promote regional stability and strengthen its role in international politics [37].

Finally, the policy provided the foundation for the development of the Act East Policy, which expanded India's engagement with Southeast Asia through greater emphasis on connectivity, strategic cooperation, and economic integration [38].

13. Conclusion

The Look East Policy represents one of the most important developments in India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Introduced in the early 1990s, the policy aimed to strengthen India's economic, political, and strategic engagement with Southeast Asia, particularly the member countries of ASEAN. Over time, the policy evolved from a primarily economic initiative into a comprehensive strategy involving diplomatic dialogue, institutional cooperation, and regional security engagement.

Through the implementation of the Look East Policy, India successfully expanded its trade relations with ASEAN countries, increased its participation in regional institutions, and strengthened strategic partnerships with key Southeast Asian nations. These developments enhanced India's presence in the Asia-Pacific region and contributed to the country's growing role in world politics.

The policy also played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of India's contemporary foreign policy strategy. By establishing strong diplomatic and economic foundations, the Look East Policy paved the way for the emergence of the Act East Policy, which emphasizes more proactive engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

In conclusion, India's Look East Policy has significantly contributed to strengthening India–ASEAN relations and enhancing India's strategic role in global politics. The policy continues to influence India's foreign policy approach and remains an important component of its efforts to promote regional cooperation, economic integration, and geopolitical stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

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