

Analyzing The Implementation of India's Act East Policy: Fostering Indo-Pacific Cooperation through Asean Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the most important geopolitical regions of the twenty-first century, and is the subject of much debate today regarding regional security, economic integration, maritime governance, and strategic cooperation. The Act East Policy (AEP) is a critical component of India's foreign policy strategy within the context of this dynamic regional architecture, highlighting India's commitment to deepening ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and fostering greater connectivity, economic engagement and a rules-based Indo-Pacific order. The paper critically analyzes the implementation of India's Act East policy and how it could enhance Indo-Pacific cooperation through the engagement with ASEAN. It discusses the policy shift from the previous Look East policy, the policy documents, the policy perspectives on diplomacy, economy, connectivity and maritime policy and the capabilities of ASEAN as the foundation of the Indo-Pacific policy for India. The study adopts a qualitative research method, with the use of secondary data analysis using the technique of literature search, government reports, institutional publications and policy documents. It also looks at the policy's opportunities and challenges, like infrastructure constraints, geopolitical competition, regional security issues and India's changing strategic alliances with Japan, Australia and the United States. The paper argues that while the Act East Policy has contributed positively to the regional partnership of India and ASEAN and has also ensured the center stage of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific in the medium term, there is a need for greater institutional cooperation, timely implementation of connectivity projects and economic integration in the long run to achieve the policy objectives. The study adds to the growing discourse on India's foreign policy by offering a detailed evaluation of the Act East Policy's impacts on promoting sustainable regional cooperation, strategic stability, and inclusive development in Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Act East Policy, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security, Regional Connectivity

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region in recent years has emerged as one of the key areas of the world's geopolitics, trade and security. It is the area around the vast Indian and Pacific Oceans that contains vital seaways, flourishing economies and vibrant politics. As India gained economic influence and geographic prominence, it is become increasingly important to strengthen relations with its eastern neighbours for regional stability and development. One pillar of this has been the Act East Policy (AEP) that was announced in 2014, which is a reformed and action-oriented version of the original Look East Policy

launched in the early 1990s. Act East Policy (AEP) places emphasis on economic, strategic and cultural relations with ASEAN and beyond, to bring India's foreign policy in line with the dynamism of Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Indian Act East Policy aims to leverage ASEAN's position at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region to enable regional connectivity, economic integration and security cooperation. The 10-member ASEAN group has long been a core component of India's foreign policy, serve as both a gateway and a source for its eastward engagement. AEP targets maritime security, trade and investment, digital connectivity and infrastructure to make India a significant player in the Indo-Pacific region (Mishra, 2016). As India joins ASEAN initiatives and models like the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership, it tries to match its developmental priorities with those of Southeast Asia while opposing strategic competition from global powers like China and the USA.

With the active participation in the ASEAN and entire Indo Pacific region, India's "Look East" policy is moving towards "Act East". This shift reflects India's understanding of the importance of ASEAN in promoting connectivity and order in the region via rules-based order amid ongoing geopolitical tensions (Pant & Rajan, 2020). AEP also highlights connectivity schemes like India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and efforts to develop maritime connectivity between India and ASEAN countries. The policy also reaches into strategic fields, including defence cooperation, naval exercises and capacity building to boost Indo-Pacific security, especially given common fears about freedom of navigation and China's aggressive moves in the South China Sea (Dutta, 2019).

In the Indo-Pacific, there is increased competition and collaboration from key players of the global system, including the United States and China, both of which are working towards their respective goals, Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's Act East Policy becomes a middle-power policy in this sense which encourages inclusivity, transparency and compliance with international norms and fosters India's strategic sovereignty and economic goals. In contrast to China's aggressive political posture or the United States' military-first policy, India's AEP engagement with ASEAN revolves around capacity-building, development-based collaborations and cultural relations.

India's Act East Policy also aligns closely with the Indo-Pacific frameworks championed by Japan and Australia, underscoring the shared vision of a free, open and rules-based regional order. In addition to this, cooperation efforts like the Quad (India, Japan, the United States and Australia) provide other opportunities to involve the ASEAN countries and promote regional security. In this multilateral framework, India's participation in various meetings and forums within the ASEAN framework such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) reflects its dedication to the common goals of security and development.

India's Act East Policy also closely follows the Indo-Pacific oriented approaches championed by Japan and Australia, reflecting their common aspiration for a free, open and rules-governed regional order. Cooperative activities like the Quad (India, Japan, US and Australia) provide more opportunities to bring ASEAN countries into the fold and strengthen regional stability. Within this multilateral space, India's engagement with ASEAN-focused institutions such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) also reflects a commitment to shared security and development priorities.

In spite of these efforts, there are challenges to implementing the Act East Policy in the context of ASEAN. India has structural, institutional and geopolitical challenges that need to be addressed to unlock its

potential as a regional partner. Some challenges are infrastructure gaps, bureaucratic inertia, and insufficient funds to rival China's huge investment projects under the BRI. Also, the withdrawal from RCEP has created reservations on India's economic relationship with ASEAN and doubts in the mind of the Indian leaders about the economic integration with the bloc for comprehensive free trade. India needs to strengthen its institutional frameworks, as well as build public-private partnerships and put greater focus on innovative financial models to address these challenges and drive regional connectivity.

Furthermore, the cultural and historical linkages between India and ASEAN can be used to give a boost to people-to-people relations, a less talked about, yet important aspect of the Act East Policy. Academic exchange, tourism and other cultural and heritage programs can be used as soft power tools to deepen bilateral relations. Given the rich maritime traditions and historical connections to India in the ASEAN nations, this offers a good opportunity for developing trust and mutual understanding.

This study is designed to analyze the Indo-Pacific cooperation under the Act East Policy in India's perspective of ASEAN cooperation. It unpacks the essential aspects of AEP, assesses its achievements and constraints and compares its function with other key actors in supporting regional peace and development. The study will also highlight the challenges to be addressed and provide policy suggestion to make AEP more effective to realize India's vision in Indo-Pacific region. This study is important in the context of the emerging scholarship on India's foreign policy and its implications for the future of Indo-Pacific studies, as it emphasizes connectivity, trade and strategic partnerships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Strategic Context of India's Act East Policy (AEP)

The Act East Policy launched by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi in 2014, is a continuation of the Look East Policy of the 1990s, which prioritized the deeper involvement with countries in the Indo-Pacific region including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The policy addresses India's need to balance against China's rising influence in the region, with the objective of economic development and connectivity. India has, traditionally, strong cultural and trade relations with the countries of the Southeast Asia region and this was highlighted during the Look East period. But the Act East Policy is about action on these linkages regarding trade, defense and connectivity (Brahma, 2018).

Roger Liu (2018) notes that India has now turned its attention more towards multilateralism and security cooperation in the region through the Quad, thus making its AEP more coherent with the Indo-Pacific agenda. This is reflected in India's expanding navy diplomacy and construction of infrastructure projects with ASEAN-NAM countries to maintain a peaceful and stable order in the region. Similarly, the Indo Pacific strategic framework with emphasis on ASEAN centrality in the region is a reflection of India's aspiration for playing a peaceful role in the Indo Pacific region (The Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

ASEAN as the Pivot of India's AEP

The region is at the heart of India's Act East Policy and is integral to its trade and strategic connectivity with the region. The importance of ASEAN in shaping Indo-Pacific cooperation should not be underestimated, given that ASEAN's multilateral organizations like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum have been created. The political aspect of ASEAN-India relations is important, but the relationship still needs to be fully developed as India has not been fully committed in the relationship, and limited economic integration as shown in India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Nazia Hussain & Tan Ming Hui, 2024).

The joint statement (2022) from ASEAN and India emphasized the following as areas of cooperation: maritime security, digital connectivity and economic cooperation. Although physical connectivity is crucial, some projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway emphasize on the importance of it, but there are political tensions in Myanmar that stand in the way of achieving that (MEA, 2024).

Northeast India as a Gateway to ASEAN

The northeastern states of India serve as a physical and cultural link to the Southeast region, and are key to the success of the AEP. The development in the area is important to encourage cross border connectivity and trade. Ashok Brahma (2018) has pinpointed the three C's of commerce, culture and connectivity as the fundamentals for the Northeast region to become part of a greater ASEAN engagement. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and Trilateral Highway are two such schemes to enhance connectivity and trade in the Northeast, but they are facing several challenges, such as geopolitical tensions delaying the projects (Hussain & Ming Hui, 2024).

Comparative Analysis: India, China, and the US in the Indo-Pacific

The Act East Policy (AEP) is a development-centric policy in India, which does not have a debt-laden on it, unlike Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in China. It is about capacity building and ASEAN centrality, which provides a more collaborative approach to the ASEAN region. However, the financial and institutional limitations limit India's ability to increase infrastructure investments to the level of China. The United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy has similar goals to India's AEP, especially regarding maritime security and multilateral cooperation and both countries are cooperating in the Quad group. But India's strategic autonomy has dampened its ties with U.S.-led projects, reflecting its foreign policy stance of strategic independence (Liu, 2018).

Cultural and People-to-People Linkages

The establishment of cultural linkages and people-to-people contacts are part of the main feature of India's AEP. India and Southeast Asia have a rich historical and civilizational ties which can serve as a foundation for mutual understanding and collaboration. Academic exchanges, tourism projects and collaborative work on cultural heritage projects help to enhance the soft power aspect of the policy (Brahma, 2018). The Ministry of External Affairs (2024), also points out that culture plays a role in deepening regional integration.

Challenges and Recommendations

The AEP in India is challenged by slow pace of development in their infrastructure projects, political and social unrest in their neighboring countries, including Myanmar, and the shortage of funds. However, regional stability is very much a possibility with the policy, despite the obstacles. Solutions suggested for overcoming these challenges include greater cooperation between countries such as Japan, better public-private investment schemes and the resolution of endogenous infrastructure constraints (MEA, 2024).

RESEARCH GAP

A large body of literature has touched upon the Act East Policy (AEP) of India, its emergence, significance and its growing relevance to the Indo Pacific region in great detail. The transition of Indian foreign policy from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy, which has emphasized on building closer relations with the ASEAN and other Indo Pacific nations, have been noted by Mishra (2016), Pant and Rajan (2020), Brahma (2018) and Baruah (2022). Similarly, the maritime security cooperation, connectivity in the region, and India's role in the multilateral platforms such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional

Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) have been discussed.

These are useful suggestions but gaps in knowledge need to be covered. Current research focuses on specific aspects of the Act East Policy, like connectivity, security policy cooperation or economic diplomacy and fails to offer a comprehensive analysis of the implementation of the Act East Policy under ASEAN engagement. Second, most of literature cited on the subject is descriptive or policy-oriented in nature and lacks analytical discussions on the long-term objectives of the Indo Pacific set by India through its measures.

Other important factors are the absence of a focus on recent geopolitical developments, such as the growing strategic rivalry between China and the United States, the increased importance of supply chain resilience, the security issues in the South China Sea, political instability in Myanmar and new regional projects in the context of the Indo-Pacific. These developments have been a significant change in India's strategic priorities, a subject that has received little attention in previous studies.

In addition, there are relatively few studies that analyze the Act East Policy in comparison with other regional policies of competing countries, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy of the United States and Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) of Japan. Comparative analysis is vital to the understanding of India's special diplomacy and its focus on ASEAN centrality, strategic autonomy and inclusive regional cooperation.

This study aims at filling these gaps by conducting a detailed study on Act East Policy in the context of India's engagement with ASEAN. It reviews the policy's implementation in terms of connectivity, economic cooperation, maritime security, strategic partnerships, institutional mechanism, examines the opportunities, challenges and policy implications to enhance India's role in the evolving Indo Pacific order.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the development and relevance of the Act East Policy in the Indo pacific region.
2. To examine the ASEAN as the core of Act East Policy and ASEAN's role in region cooperation.
3. To assess India's Act East Policy and its efforts towards connectivity, economic integration, maritime security and strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.
4. To understand the Act East Policy and compare it with other major Indo Pacific strategies like the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) Policy by the United States and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China.
5. To highlight the key issues which are impeding the effective implementation of the Act East Policy and suggest policy recommendations to strengthen Indo-Pacific partnership with ASEAN.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The key theoretical frameworks employed in the analysis of this study are Complex Interdependence Theory and Neoliberal Institutionalism, which offer a suitable theory for the analysis of the Indo Pacific region in relation to India's Act East Policy. Complex Interdependence Theory, proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, suggests that today's international relations are not solely about military power but encompass various forms of relationships between the states, including economic cooperation, institutional engagement, technology transfers and people-to-people relations. These are embodied in the Indo Pacific region through India's Act East Policy, which underscores the priority of trade, regional connectivity, maritime cooperation, digital and cultural cooperation with the ASEAN member states. The

theory is centered on the interdependence to foster cooperation, reduce conflict and enhance regional stability.

In contrast, Neoliberal Institutionalism places emphasis on the role of international institutions and multilateral organizations in promoting cooperation between states in spite of divergent national interests. India pursues its diplomatic, economic and security agenda at the institutional level via ASEAN-led platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and various ASEAN-India dialogue mechanisms. These institutions decrease uncertainty, increase trust and encourage regional solutions.

All these theoretical frameworks provide an understanding on how the Act East policy in India is based on institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, strategic partnership, multilateral diplomacy to enhance the centrality of ASEAN, its role in establishing a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific order. The framework also enables a review of opportunities and challenges to the policy during the tightening of the geopolitical competition and changing regional dynamics.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the present study illustrates the linkages between India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific cooperation with the help of ASEAN cooperation. It believes that the implementation of the Act East Policy must be based on several interdependent areas such as diplomacy, connectivity, economic cooperation, maritime security, strategic partnership and institutional cooperation. Together, these parameters help increase the capacity of India's regional reach and support the development of a peaceful, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

The framework also acknowledges that ASEAN serves as the main institutional mechanism to implement the Act east policy on the ground. Better cooperation in infrastructure building, trade, defense dialogue, digital connectivity and people to people ties facilitates regional integration, deepens strategic trust and helps to foster sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region. But the intervening variables to be taken into account are external geopolitical competition, infrastructure bottlenecks, financial constraints and political instability, which affect the effectiveness of the policy implementation.

Thus, the study conceptualizes the Act East Policy as an integrated foreign policy framework in which ASEAN engagement functions as the primary mechanism for advancing India's strategic, economic and diplomatic objectives in the Indo-Pacific.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the implementation of India's Act East Policy in fostering Indo-Pacific cooperation through ASEAN engagement. The study is descriptive as well as interpretative in nature, aiming to analyse policy initiatives, institutional developments and strategic outcomes within the broader geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific.

The research is based entirely on secondary sources of data. Relevant information has been collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, edited volumes, government reports, policy documents, publications of the Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), ASEAN declarations, reports published by international organizations, think tanks such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Research Institute of Strategic and International Studies (RSIS) and other credible academic databases including JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar.

Thematic content analysis method is used to analyze key themes on India's Act East Policy, ASEAN centrality, regional connectivity, maritime security, strategic partnerships, economic cooperation, Indo Pacific governance. Comparative analysis has also been done to evaluate India's policy towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy of the USA and Japan's regional connectivity program. Select case studies, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the involvement of India in the ASEAN-related institutional mechanisms are also covered to analyze policy implementation and challenges.

There are some limitations to the study that are acknowledged. It is based solely on secondary information, so that it lacks primary information obtained through interviews or field surveys. Moreover, the changing geopolitical context in the Indo-Pacific also means that policy is in constant flux and must be constantly reviewed. However, the adoption of a variety of and authoritative academic and policy documents increases the credibility, validity and analytical rigor of the findings of the research.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway

India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway is among the key projects of India's Act East Policy and plays a significant role in the region's connectivity efforts in the Indo-Pacific. The project is planned to span about 1,360 kilometers from Manipur's Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The highway will enhance trade, travel, logistics and people-to-people relations between India and the Southeast Asian markets and connect the Northeastern part of India with SE Asia.

On a strategic level, the IMT Highway enhances the connectivity of India with the ASEAN countries and supports the other projects of the region to strengthen supply chains and facilitate economic integration in the region. The project will also be expected to further India's strategic footprint in the mainland part of the Southeast Asian region by minimizing transportation costs and promoting cross-border investment.

But the implementation has been significantly delayed because of the political instability in Myanmar, geographical difficulties, security problems, bureaucratic delays and financial limitations. In 2021, the military regime in Myanmar also made it more difficult to carry out projects due to the disruption of construction activities and the reduced ability to cooperate across the border. Despite the difficulties, the project remains a high priority for India due to its long-term strategic goals in terms of Indo-Pacific connectivity and regional development.

While timely implementation and enhanced institutional coordination are crucial to unlocking the potential of the Act East Policy, the IMT Highway proves that it is still a key element of India's collaboration with the East.

Case Study 2: Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) is another key connectivity project aimed at bolstering India's ties with ASEAN through Myanmar. The project involves inter-modal transport, where Kolkata Port is linked to Sittwe Port, Myanmar, by sea and is connected with Mizoram, India, via Kaladan River and road transport.

The project is very economically and strategically important. It offers an alternative corridor between the Northeastern states and Southeast Asia, and will go a long way in easing the reliance on the Siliguri Corridor. The initiative also helps to develop the region by enhancing trade links, cutting down on transportation expenses and encouraging socio-economic development in border areas of India.

Although significant efforts have been made in the port development and development of inland water infrastructure, the implementation of the projects has been delayed time and again due to the difficult terrain, security threats, administrative delays and political instability in Myanmar. However, the Kaladan Project is an example of India's efforts to advance sustainable regional connectivity initiatives through collaboration and the development of infrastructure opportunities. The project showcases the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of India's infrastructure diplomacy under the Act East Policy.

Case Study 3: ASEAN–India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The elevation of ASEAN–India relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was a major leap in India's Indo-Pacific policy. The partnership goes beyond traditional trade relations to focus on maritime security, digital transformation, climate change, disaster management, healthcare, education, cybersecurity, renewable energy and resilient supply chains.

Both sides have further consolidated political goodwill and enhanced cooperation in various fields through the regular ASEAN-India Summits, ministerial and business forums, as well as institutional dialogues. India's commitment to the concept of ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific has also contributed to boosting mutual confidence and putting the spotlight on inclusive multilateralism in the region. India's backing for the concept of ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific has further strengthened mutual trust and elevated the preference for inclusive multilateralism in the region.

The partnership has also helped to increase cooperation in other areas, such as capacity building, digital public infrastructure, maritime domain awareness and human resource development. Yet, the economic potential of the partnership remains limited due to the fact of trade imbalance, India's decision to opt out of RCEP and connectivity project delays. Overall, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership reflects India's enduring engagement with the region's architecture being led by ASEAN and its surrounding countries and an inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

While India's Act East policy has firmly established the country's presence in ASEAN and Indo-Pacific, it still has several structural, institutional and geopolitical challenges in its implementation.

The major restriction is the slow pace of connectivity project implementation. Projects like the Trilateral Highway between India, Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project (MMTP) have been delayed multiple times by complex topography, administrative red tape, insecurity and political instability in Myanmar. The impact of such delays is that India becomes less credible as a development partner and the economic gains of regional integration are curtailed.

There are also challenges associated with geopolitical competition. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific has risen to the fore since China has started asserting itself in the Indian Ocean Region, building up its naval presence in the South China Sea and through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ideology of 'one belt, one road' is a diplomatic puzzle for India, which purports to be a supporter of an open regional order, while maintaining strategic autonomy and balancing strategic competition.

Insufficient cross-border cooperation and infrastructure implementation is still impacted by political instability in neighboring countries, especially Myanmar. The numerous shifts in domestic political environment make coordination between the two difficult and slow the project completion process.

Other institutional issues, such as the slow pace of response from bureaucratic procedures, problems in coordination between the different ministries, regulatory complexity and poor project monitoring systems

also decrease the efficiency of implementation. Further, the underdevelopment of the northeastern region of India continues to constrain the capability of the region as the gateway to Southeast Asia. More concerted institutional reforms, better governance, better public-private partnerships and better coordination with ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific partners are needed to tackle these multi-dimensional challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that India's Act East Policy is a major shift in the country's foreign policy from just economic cooperation to full-fledged strategic partnership with the Southeast Asian countries. India's Indo-Pacific vision has become the mainstay for the region, and ASEAN is playing a pivotal role in establishing an institutional framework for political engagement, economic integration, maritime cooperation and regional governance.

The analysis shows that the policy has been quite successful in expanding overall diplomatic engagement of ASEAN by means of its institutions, boosting defense cooperation, advancing maritime security and improving India's engagement with regional strategic initiatives like the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. India's focus on ASEAN Centrality, strategic autonomy and rules-based international order has boosted its credibility as a responsible regional player. The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project offer significant possibilities for reshaping regional trade and economic integration. But their effectiveness and strategic impact remain curtailed by implementation delays.

The other key discovery is that when it comes to development, India is different from other major players in the Indo Pacific. India integrates economic cooperation with culture diplomacy, institutional engagement and capacity building, unlike China's infrastructure-driven or the United States' security-driven approach. This is because of a balanced approach that has enhanced India's acceptance among members of the ASEAN.

Despite the undeniable successes, financial pressures, bureaucratic inefficiencies, geopolitical rivalry and regional instability remain a big hurdle to the implementation of the Act East Policy. The study, therefore, concludes that India's strategic vision has strong regional backing, but needs to be better institutionalized, projects need to be executed on time, trade needs to be further integrated and investments need to be increased in regional connectivity. In total, the results underscore the significance of India's Act East Policy as a key strategy for fostering stability, economic cooperation and strategic balance in the evolving Indo-Pacific framework.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Based upon these observations this study makes the following policy recommendations to improve the effectiveness of India's Act East Policy:

1. **Accelerate Connectivity Projects:** There is a need for improved Project monitoring and inter-agency coordination for timely completion of flagship connectivity projects like the India – Myanmar – Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project by the Government of India.
2. **Strengthen ASEAN Economic Engagement:** India should deepen bilateral and multilateral trade relationships with the ASEAN members states and look at setting up sectoral economic agreements on resilient supply chain, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy and digital trade.

3. **Enhance Maritime Cooperation:** Maritime domain awareness, joint exercises between the naval forces, maritime humanitarian assistance, maritime disaster relief, cyber security and blue economy activities with ASEAN and Quad partners should be accorded greater focus.
4. **Develop Northeast India as a Regional Gateway:** A robust investment in the infrastructure, logistics, border trade related facilities, digital connectivity and industrial development of the Northeastern region should enable it to become the gateway to the Southeast Asia for India.
5. **Expand Digital and Technological Cooperation:** India should encourage cooperation with ASEAN countries in digital public infrastructures, fintech, AI, smart cities, cybersecurity as well as innovation ecosystems.
6. **Strengthen People-to-People Connectivity:** Academic exchanges, tourism, cultural diplomacy, youth engagement programs and research collaborations should be accorded more policy focus to bolster India's soft power in the Southeast Asian region.
7. **Promote Sustainable Infrastructure Financing:** India needs to strengthen ties with Japan, Australia, multilateral development banks and private sector to unlock more funds for regional infrastructure development.

CONCLUSION

India's Act East policy is one such monumental shift in the country's modern foreign policy, with its vision of becoming one of the key players in the Indo-Pacific region. The Act East Policy has been a departure from the earlier Look East Policy which was mainly economic in nature and has now developed a broad policy spectrum that includes diplomacy, connectivity, economic cooperation, maritime security, strategic partnerships and people-to-people engagement. In the entire effort, ASEAN has continued to be the guiding force and the institutional backbone for India's regional policy, which aims to build peace, stability and inclusive development in the Indo-Pacific region.

The study shows that the Act East Policy has helped significantly boost India's ties with Southeast Asia, including the increased level of diplomatic dialogue, defense cooperation, regional connectivity projects and India's membership in multilateral institutions under the leadership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Trilateral Highway (India–Myanmar–Thailand) and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project are among the most significant infrastructure initiatives spearheaded by India to strengthen regional connectivity, though their progress has been hindered by delays. Likewise, India has strengthened its cooperation with Japan, Australia, the United States and the ASEAN member countries, further cementing its commitment to a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region in accordance with international law and ASEAN Centrality.

The analysis also shows that India's policy is distinct from other regional policies as it is based on strategic autonomy, partnership-based development, institutional cooperation and capacity building and not based exclusively on coercive or security driven engagement. This equilibrium has strengthened India's reputation as a responsible regional player but also allowed it to sustain positive ties with various stakeholders in the face of growing geopolitical rivalry. Meanwhile, there are a number of structural and geopolitical issues that remain to limit the implementation of the policy effectively. There is a need for constant policy focus due to financial constraints, bureaucratic red tape, poor infrastructure, political unrest in neighboring countries and growing strategic competition between the major powers. This will require increased institutional coordination, better governance, increased public-private sector investment, closer cooperation with the ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific partners to address these.

To sum up, the Act East Policy has grown to be a holistic policy framework that is not merely a tool for regional diplomacy but has also become an integral part of India's broader Indo-Pacific policy. Its longevity will rely on not only diplomatic activity but also on the timely realization of connectivity projects, improved economic integration, cooperation in the maritime domain and commitment to ASEAN-led multilateralism. As the Indo-Pacific region continues to play a crucial role in the future of global politics and economics, the successful implementation of the Act East Policy will have a significant impact on India's role as a responsible regional power and its efforts to contribute to the region's stability, prosperity and sustainable development in the twenty first century.

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