
The Role of Diplomacy in the Transition from Look East to Act East Policy: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

The pivotal role of diplomacy in the transition from India's Look East Policy to the Act East Policy offers a comparative study of the two strategic frameworks. The Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s, marked India's proactive engagement with Southeast Asia to enhance economic and strategic ties. In 2014, the policy evolved into the Act East Policy, reflecting a more dynamic and assertive approach to the region. This study delves into the historical background of both policies, highlighting the factors that necessitated this strategic shift.

Through an in-depth analysis of diplomatic strategies, this paper compares the approaches used during the Look East and Act East periods. Specific case studies of diplomatic engagements with key Southeast Asian nations and regional organizations, such as ASEAN, illustrate the changes and continuities in India's foreign policy. The study also examines India's role in regional and multilateral forums, assessing how its participation and influence have evolved.

Economic diplomacy is a crucial aspect of this analysis, focusing on trade agreements, investment flows, and economic partnerships that have shaped India's relations with Southeast Asia. Additionally, the paper investigates the role of security and strategic diplomacy in addressing India's interests in the region.

Cultural diplomacy, encompassing people-to-people exchanges, educational collaborations, and cultural events, is explored to understand its impact on strengthening India's ties with Southeast Asia. The overall impact of diplomatic efforts under both policies is evaluated, providing insights into India's foreign relations, regional influence, and strategic goals.

This paper suggests potential future directions for India's diplomatic strategies within the context of the Act East Policy, considering current geopolitical and economic trends. This comprehensive study aims to contribute to the understanding of India's evolving diplomatic landscape and its implications for regional and global politics.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Indian foreign policy, Multilateral Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, Economic Diplomacy, Security and Strategic Diplomacy.

Introduction:

India's foreign policy has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, with the Look East Policy and its successor, the Act East Policy, representing key strategic initiatives aimed at strengthening ties with Southeast Asia. These policies reflect India's evolving

geopolitical and economic aspirations in the post-Cold War era and its response to the dynamic changes in the regional and global order.

The Look East Policy, introduced in the early 1990s under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, marked a strategic shift in India's foreign policy. Faced with a balance of payments crisis and the need for economic reform, India sought to diversify its international relationships and enhance economic cooperation with the rapidly growing economies of Southeast Asia. The policy aimed to integrate India's economy with those of Southeast Asian countries, boost trade, attract investment, and build strategic partnerships.

This policy was also a response to the changing geopolitical landscape. With the end of the Cold War, India's traditional alliances were in flux, and there was a pressing need to recalibrate its foreign policy to align with new global realities. Southeast Asia, with its economic dynamism and strategic importance, emerged as a crucial region for India to engage with. The Look East Policy was thus conceived as a means to forge closer economic, political, and cultural ties with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its member states.

By 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Look East Policy evolved into the Act East Policy. This evolution was not merely a change in nomenclature but reflected a more assertive and proactive approach to India's engagement with Southeast Asia and beyond. The Act East Policy aimed to expand India's strategic and economic reach further into the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive and multi-dimensional engagement.

The Act East Policy places a stronger emphasis on security and strategic dimensions, recognizing the Indo-Pacific as a critical region for India's strategic interests. This policy seeks to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region and to ensure a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. It underscores the importance of maritime security, defence cooperation, and regional connectivity.

Cultural diplomacy has also been a significant aspect of both policies, promoting people-to-people connections, educational exchanges, and cultural collaborations. These efforts have helped to strengthen mutual understanding and goodwill between India and Southeast Asia, contributing to the broader goals of economic and strategic partnership.

The pivotal role of diplomacy in the transition from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy offers a comparative analysis of the two strategic frameworks. By examining the historical background, diplomatic strategies, and specific case studies of India's engagements with Southeast Asian countries, this study aims to highlight the differences and continuities in India's foreign policy. It also assesses India's role in regional and multilateral forums, the impact of economic diplomacy, and the significance of cultural and strategic diplomacy in shaping India's relations with Southeast Asia.

This research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of India's foreign policy in the context of the Look East and Act East policies and to suggest potential future directions for India's diplomatic strategies in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Multilateral diplomacy:

Multilateral diplomacy plays a pivotal role in India's foreign policy, reflecting the country's commitment to engaging with multiple nations and international organizations to address global challenges and pursue its national interests. This approach allows India to collaborate with a diverse array of partners on various global issues, ranging from economic development and security to environmental sustainability and cultural exchange.

India's engagement in multilateral diplomacy is evident in its active participation in organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, ASEAN, and the BRICS group. By engaging in these platforms, India can contribute to and shape international norms and policies, advocate for the interests of developing countries, and work towards a more equitable global order.

A significant aspect of India's multilateral diplomacy is its focus on regional cooperation. India is a key member of regional groupings like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Through these organizations, India seeks to foster regional stability, economic integration, and people-to-people connectivity, which are crucial for the overall development and security of the region.

Furthermore, India's multilateral diplomacy extends to issue-based coalitions, such as climate change negotiations and counter-terrorism efforts. India's proactive stance in these areas highlights its commitment to addressing global challenges that require collective action and cooperation.

In essence, multilateral diplomacy is a cornerstone of India's foreign policy, enabling the country to navigate the complexities of international relations, assert its voice on the global stage, and work towards a more just and inclusive world order.

Cultural Diplomacy:

Cultural diplomacy is a significant component of India's foreign policy, serving as a means to enhance its soft power and strengthen ties with other nations. It involves the promotion of Indian culture, values, and heritage abroad, fostering mutual understanding and goodwill. India's rich and diverse cultural traditions provide a unique avenue for building positive international relations and showcasing the country's identity on the global stage.

In the context of the LEP and its successor, the AEP, cultural diplomacy has been instrumental in deepening India's engagement with countries in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. The LEP, initiated in the early 1990s, aimed to strengthen economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations. However, cultural diplomacy also played a crucial role in this policy, as it helped India connect with the region on a more personal and societal level.

Under the LEP, India actively promoted cultural exchanges, such as performing arts, academic exchanges, and tourism, to build a sense of shared heritage and history with Southeast Asian countries. This approach highlighted the historical connections, such as those established through the spread of Buddhism and the maritime Silk Route, which linked India with many countries in the region.

With the launch of the Act East Policy in 2014, India's focus on cultural diplomacy intensified. The AEP expanded the scope of engagement beyond Southeast Asia to include East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. It emphasized not only economic and strategic cooperation but also cultural and people-to-people ties. Initiatives like the International Day of Yoga, which has gained global recognition, and the establishment of Indian Cultural Centres in various countries have been significant in promoting Indian culture and values.

Additionally, India has used cultural diplomacy to celebrate shared cultural festivals and commemorate historical events, reinforcing the cultural bonds between India and the Asia-Pacific countries. These efforts have not only fostered goodwill but also opened up new avenues for collaboration in education, tourism, and cultural industries.

In summary, cultural diplomacy is a vital aspect of India's Look East and Act East Policies, facilitating a deeper and more comprehensive engagement with the region. By leveraging its cultural heritage, India has been able to strengthen its soft power, build lasting relationships, and enhance its influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Economic Diplomacy:

Economic diplomacy is a key element of India's foreign policy, focusing on the use of economic tools to achieve diplomatic goals, enhance national security, and promote economic growth. This approach involves leveraging trade, investment, and economic cooperation to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships, address global challenges, and support India's development agenda.

In the framework of the Look East Policy (LEP) and the Act East Policy (AEP), economic diplomacy has been crucial in deepening India's ties with Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. The Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s, was primarily driven by the desire to integrate India more closely with the economically dynamic Southeast Asian countries. The policy aimed to enhance economic links, boost trade, and attract investment to spur India's economic growth.

Under the Look East Policy, India prioritized the establishment of free trade agreements (FTAs) and comprehensive economic partnerships with key Southeast Asian nations and regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These agreements facilitated increased trade flows, reduced tariff barriers, and created new opportunities for Indian businesses in the region. India's economic engagement also extended to infrastructure development projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which aimed to improve connectivity and promote economic integration.

The transition to the Act East Policy in 2014 marked a significant expansion of India's economic diplomacy efforts. The AEP broadened the scope of engagement to include East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, reflecting India's growing strategic and economic interests. The policy emphasizes not only trade and investment but also cooperation in areas like technology, innovation, and sustainable development.

Through the Act East Policy, India has sought to enhance its economic ties with countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, among others. This includes forging strategic partnerships,

engaging in regional trade agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and collaborating on projects related to infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity. Additionally, India's engagement in regional economic forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), underscores its commitment to fostering economic integration and cooperation in the region.

In brief, economic diplomacy under the Look East and Act East Policies has been instrumental in advancing India's economic interests, strengthening regional cooperation, and enhancing India's role as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region. By leveraging economic ties, India aims to build a more prosperous and interconnected regional economy, benefiting both itself and its partners.

Security and Strategic Diplomacy:

Security and strategic diplomacy are integral components of India's foreign policy, aimed at safeguarding national interests, maintaining regional stability, and promoting a rules-based international order. This aspect of diplomacy involves cooperation with other countries on defence, counter-terrorism, maritime security, and other strategic issues, reflecting India's broader security concerns and geopolitical objectives.

In the context of the LEP and the AEP, security, and strategic diplomacy have played pivotal roles in enhancing India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. The Look East Policy, launched in the early 1990s, was initially focused on economic and trade relations but soon evolved to include security and strategic dimensions. This shift was driven by the recognition that economic growth and regional stability are interdependent and that strategic partnerships are essential for addressing common security challenges.

Under the Look East Policy, India began to establish security dialogues and defense cooperation agreements with key Southeast Asian countries and regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These initiatives aimed to address issues like maritime security, transnational crime, and disaster management. For instance, India participated in joint naval exercises and expanded its defense exchanges, thereby enhancing its strategic presence in the region and contributing to regional security.

The transition to the Act East Policy in 2014 marked a significant deepening and broadening of India's strategic and security engagements. The AEP reflects India's growing concerns over regional security dynamics, including the rise of China's influence, the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, and the need for a stable and secure regional environment. The policy emphasizes a more proactive and assertive approach to security cooperation with countries in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

Under the Act East Policy, India has strengthened its defense and strategic partnerships with countries such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, which share similar concerns about regional security. This has included enhanced maritime cooperation, such as joint naval exercises and information sharing to ensure the security of sea lanes, which are vital for international trade. Additionally, India has engaged in dialogues and collaborations on issues like cyber security, space security, and counter-terrorism, recognizing the evolving nature of security threats.

Furthermore, India's participation in regional security forums and initiatives, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), underscores its commitment to promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. These platforms allow India to engage with like-minded countries, coordinate responses to security challenges, and contribute to shaping the regional security architecture.

In brief, security and strategic diplomacy under the Look East and Act East Policies have been critical in advancing India's security interests, enhancing its strategic partnerships, and ensuring a stable and secure regional environment. Through these policies, India aims to play a constructive role in regional security affairs, counterbalance strategic threats, and promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Summary:

India's foreign policy, particularly through the Look East Policy (LEP) and Act East Policy (AEP), strategically integrates cultural, economic, security, and strategic diplomacy to enhance its engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Cultural diplomacy leverages India's rich heritage to build positive international relations, fostering mutual understanding through initiatives like the International Day of Yoga and Indian Cultural Centres. Economic diplomacy under these policies has prioritized trade, investment, and infrastructure projects, aiming to boost economic ties and regional connectivity. The transition from LEP to AEP has broadened India's focus to include East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing strategic partnerships and cooperation in areas such as technology and sustainable development. On the security front, India has deepened its defence ties and strategic dialogues, particularly concerning maritime security and counter-terrorism, collaborating with countries like Japan, Australia, and the United States. These efforts are underscored by India's active participation in regional security forums, demonstrating its commitment to maintaining regional stability and promoting a rules-based international order. Overall, these policies reflect India's comprehensive approach to diplomacy, seeking to strengthen its regional influence and contribute to global peace and stability.

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