

International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization)

Vol. 2, Issue 12, December 2013

Relevance of India's Look East Policy

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ABSTRACT: India's Look East policy is an effort to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia to bolster its standing as a regional power and a counterweight to the strategic influence of the People's Republic of China. Initiated in 1991, it marked a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world. It was developed and enacted during the government of Prime Minister Narsimha Rao (1991–1996) and rigorously pursued by the successive administrations of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004–2014). The success of Look East policy enthused the Mandarins of South-Block to develop the policy into more action oriented, project and outcome based policy. After a couple of decades, India's Act-East Policy, which was announced in 2014 by the Prime minister Narendra Modi's administration, became a successor to the Look-East Policy.

Ever since the Sino-Indian War of 1962, China and India have been strategic competitors in South and East Asia. China has cultivated close commercial and military relations with India's neighbour Pakistan and competed for influence in Nepal and Bangladesh. After Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in China in 1979 and the subsequent Chinese economic reform, China began reducing threats of expansionism and in turn cultivated extensive trade and economic relations with Asian nations. China became the closest partner and supporter of the military junta of Burma, which had been ostracised from the international community following the violent suppression of pro-democracy activities in 1988. In contrast, during the Cold War, India had a relatively hesitant relationship with many states in Southeast Asia as such diplomatic relations were given relatively low priority.

India's "Look East" policy was developed and enacted during the governments of prime ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991–1996) and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004). Along with economic liberalisation and moving away from Cold War-era policies and activities, India's strategy has focused on forging close economic and commercial ties, increasing strategic and security cooperation and the emphasis of historic cultural and ideological links. India sought to create and expand regional markets for trade, investments and industrial development. It also began strategic and military cooperation with nations concerned by the expansion of China's economic and strategic influence.

KEYWORDS: Look East Policy, South, Asia, War, China, Strategic, nations, relationship, India

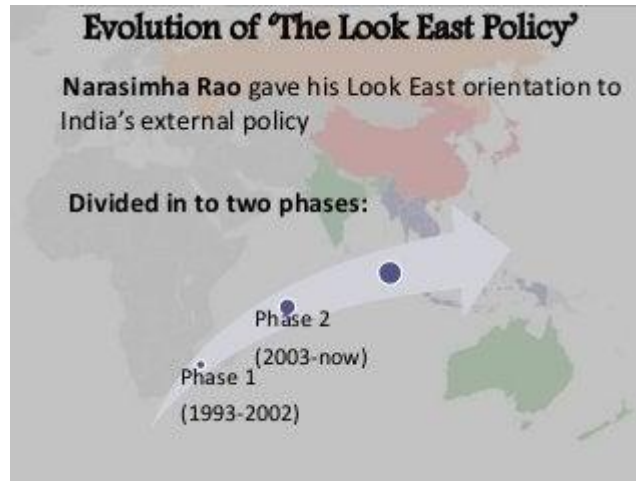
I. INTRODUCTION

Look East Policy of India was launched in 1991 by the Government of India led by the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. The objective was to develop political, economic and security co-operation with countries in Southeast Asia. After the cold war, India wanted to act as a counterweight to China in Southeast Asia.[1]

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India's 'Act East' policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels. The country's eastward drive since 1992 has underscored the importance of this region in its contemporary international relations. 'Act East' and its early avatar, 'Look East' are not different; rather, they are two sides of the same coin, representing two different, but continuing phases in the evolution of India's policy towards the Asia-Pacific region. When India launched the Look East policy in 1991, its own economic strength, its global status and the external environment were not what they are at present. At the time of its launch, India was struggling to transition from a state-controlled economic regime to a more liberalised one. It took many years for the country to get adjusted to the newly emerging economic environment.

Relations between Japan and South Korea have undergone a similar trajectory, aligning with Seoul's Southern Policy, which seeks to enhance South Korea's regional economic ties. The foreign ministers of both countries have been meeting regularly since 1996, and a free trade agreement was signed in 2009, and although this agreement has not significantly boosted trade, South Korean FDI into India has steadily increased. Again, the growing trade imbalances are hereby an issue that Indian policy-makers will need to address in the coming years.[2]

II. DISCUSSION

As nations do not exist in isolation, the domestic and external environment have an impact on their foreign policy. The linkage between external elements and foreign policy cannot be wished away. Foreign policy constitutes a set of responses to external challenges and opportunities. Consequently, any change in the environment requires change in the behaviour of nations. Hence, political developments from 1989 to 1991 affected all nations. India was no exception to all these external developments. They had a significant impact on India's domestic and foreign policy. The beginning of the 1990s was a turbulent period for India. [3]

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The country witnessed an unstable domestic environment characterised by increasing terrorism and insurgency, political instability, economic doldrums and financial crisis. The unstable domestic environment was compounded by an unfavourable regional environment. Although insurgency in Punjab had declined by the end of 1992, there was an increase in the number of violent incidents perpetrated by insurgents in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and Northeast India. The militant outfits in J&K became violent and acquired a radical religious ideology in order to legitimise their actions. Most of these militants managed to get logistical support from Pakistan in terms of training, sophisticated arms and ammunition and even finance, which, 'in a way gave them some clout to demonstrate their power' . Since the early 1990s, Pakistan adopted a more vociferous anti-India stance, which was reflected in encouraging and aiding militants in J&K and in its attempt to internationalise developments in J&K . The resurgence of Sindhi and Baluchi movements in Pakistan, Nepalis in Bhutan, Terai versus hill people in Nepal, Chakmas in Bangladesh, Tamils in Sri Lanka and various tribal communities in Northeast India, all representing sub-nationalist or ethno-centric tendencies, threatened the existing state structure throughout South Asia . The problem was compounded by the emergence of Sagiang Division of Myanmar as a safe haven for the insurgent groups of Northeast India, the underground smugglers market of Cambodia as an important source of arms and ammunition and the drug smugglers market in the Golden Triangle, a border area comprising Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia. This highlighted the threats to India's national security, which could rise from the East and the consequent need to seek cooperation from the governments of these countries in dealing with such threats.[4]

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SCHOLAR SEMINAR
(MJASS) 2012**

Look East Policy: For and Beyond Human Capital Development



**PROF DR KHAIRUDDIN AB HAMID
DR AZHAM ZULKHARNAIN
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In spite of reforms during the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government in the mid-1980s and throughout the latter part of the decade, the percentage of trade in relation to Gross National Product had actually fallen from 12.4 per cent in 1984–1985 to 11 per cent in 1988–1989 . Since there was a low level of trade and as a small percentage of the economy was involved in it, there was little scope for adjusting any rise in the prices of oil within the overall trade balance. The small rise in the price of oil, due to the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis, was translated into a 21.9 per cent increase in the import bill in rupee term . The extent of the emerging problem is discernible from the fact that in 1965 India's energy import constituted only about 8 per cent of the value of its merchandise exports, whereas by 1990 energy imports constituted nearly 25 per cent of the value of exports .[5]

The 1990 Gulf crisis had a deep impact on India's economy as it depended much on the West Asian countries for oil and trade. It was followed by economic recession and political turmoil in India. In the Gulf crisis, India lost remittances of US\$ 205 million from Indians employed in Iraq and Kuwait; it lost an amount of US\$ 500 million owing to it from Iraq at the start of the crisis; and it lost about US\$ 112 million in trade with Iraq and Kuwait . At the same time, trade with the Eastern European countries had suffered severely with the end of communist rule and the collapse of that system. Consequently, by mid-1991, foreign exchange reserves had fallen to barely enough to cover two weeks imports and India was forced to seek the help of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). An agreement was reached by the Indian government with the IMF in January 1991 on a loan for US\$ 1.8 billion, partly out of the Compensatory Financing Facility (to offset increased oil imports) and partly as a first credit tranche standby .[6]

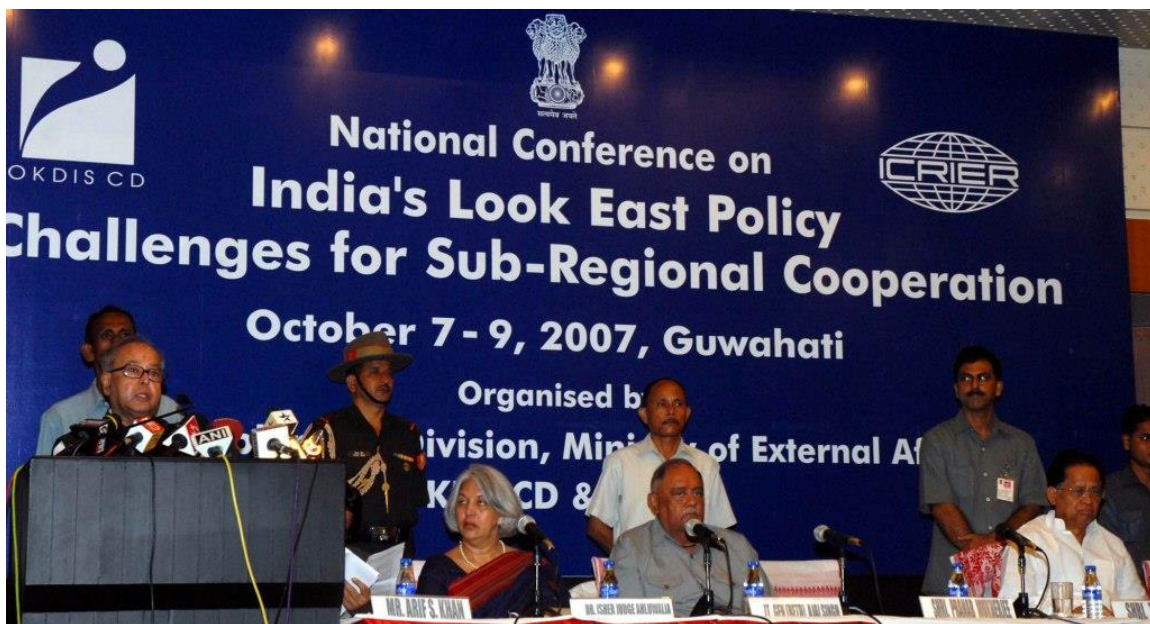
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III. RESULTS

India's Look East Policy was unveiled in early 1990s before the concept of 'string of pearls' gained currency.



In fact, India's Look East Policy is a resurrection and rejuvenation of India's traditional, cultural, historical and political ties with the countries in the South East Asian region. India's deep cultural interaction is particularly evident in Bali in Indonesia and the Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia. There is also an Indonesian version of Ramayana. In modern times, India extended moral and political support to the liberation struggles in Vietnam and Indonesia. India played a key role in the Geneva Conference of 1954, which brought peace to the Indo-China region after the French withdrawal. Similarly, India played an important role in the Indonesian fight against the Dutch imperialism. Thus, India's engagement in the region has its own imperatives. [7]

When India's Look East Policy was unveiled in early 1990s, it also coincided with India's economic reforms and liberalisation, and as such, the policy has much to do with India's economic engagement with the region rather than to counter the 'string of pearls' strategy attributed to China.

The 'string of pearls' strategy refers to China's building of ports in Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Sittwe in Myanmar. China has claimed that these ports have commercial purposes, but these ports have security and strategic implications for India. India has taken cognisance of such future possibilities and has deepened its comprehensive engagement with the countries of the region, particularly Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand.

The import of India's strategic engagement with the region can be understood from a statement by India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, made during a discussion at Carnegie Endowment in September 2010, when he stated: "We have global interest, the Chinese have global interest, all of us do. And all the major powers, as I said, are not only interdependent on each other, but also are dealing with each other across a whole range of issues, none of which recognise some artificial geographical construct like South Asia or East Asia. These are interlocking circles of security and prosperity, whichever way you look at it." [8]

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IV. CONCLUSION

India under Indira Gandhi also associated itself with the process of the formation of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) during 1966-67. It worked intensely for evolving a broad-based regional organisation of cooperation, which did not identify itself with any of the superpowers' strategic and Cold War oriented interests. This however, was not acceptable to the powers involved in establishing ASEAN against a strategic backdrop of the messy Vietnam War. The result was an ASEAN representing an ideologically and strategically divided Southeast Asia in which India had no place. There is considerable scope to activate India's cultural diplomacy to provide necessary backup to its economic initiatives and strategic moves in the region. India's rich cultural heritage can ring many sympathetic cords in the region and its multi-religious, secular and democratic ethos, as well as rich music, arts and architecture, theatre and cinema have huge responsive constituencies in all the near and extended eastern neighbours. In fact Bollywood (cinema) and cultural exchanges, like that of the Ramayana troupes can work wonders in pursuing cultural diplomacy.

Bollywood presence is extensively evident in Southeast Asian countries, but that is mostly commercially motivated and privately provided without any systematic and planned encouragement from the state.[9] These areas have no conflicting edges. A carefully planned and sustained cultural diplomacy can speed up economic engagement and yield impressive results in the field of people to people relations and mutual political understanding. This cultural diplomacy can also be backed up by promoting cooperation in the field of education, science and technology, where India has notable assets and strengths. In many Southeast Asian countries, Indian diplomacy has not adequately reached educational and cultural establishments and ignored mobilising civil societies in pursuance of India's perceived interests. It is hoped that the projects like the revival of Nalanda University in collaboration with East Asian countries, for which Indian Parliament adopted a Bill in August 2010, will fill some of this gap. Educational links can provide a lasting and powerful stimulus to regional cooperation and integration.[10]

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