

## **Act East Policy of India**

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### **Introduction:**

In the rapidly evolving landscape of international relations, India's Act East Policy has emerged as a pivotal framework, signalling a strategic reorientation towards the dynamic Asia-Pacific region. Stemming from the earlier Look East Policy, this initiative reflects India's proactive approach to harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges in a globally interconnected world. The Act East Policy, introduced to enhance economic cooperation, cultural ties, and geopolitical partnerships, embodies a transformative shift in India's foreign policy.

As we navigate through the intricacies of this policy, it becomes imperative to unravel its historical underpinnings, discern its objectives, and dissect its multifaceted components. By exploring the motivations behind the Act East Policy and its profound implications on regional dynamics, trade networks, and India's global standing, this research endeavours to provide a nuanced understanding of India's strategic recalibration.

This paper endeavours to trace the trajectory of the Act East Policy, highlighting its evolution, key principles, and the driving forces shaping its implementation. Through a comprehensive examination, we aim to shed light on the multifaceted aspects of this policy, deciphering its impact on India's geopolitical manoeuvring and economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region. As we delve into the intricate tapestry of India's Act East Policy, the ensuing analysis promises insights into the transformative nature of this diplomatic initiative and its role in defining India's position in the evolving global order.

### **Look East to Act East Policy -**

The "Look East Policy" was initially introduced by India in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. It aimed to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asian nations and promote regional cooperation. However, over time, the policy evolved into the "Act East Policy" under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, which commenced in 2014.

The transition from "Look East" to "Act East" signifies a more proactive approach, emphasizing action-oriented engagement rather than mere observation. The Act East Policy seeks to deepen economic integration, enhance strategic partnerships, and foster cultural exchanges with countries in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Under the Act East Policy, India has been actively involved in various initiatives such as the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and increased defense cooperation through joint exercises and strategic dialogues.

Overall, the Act East Policy represents India's commitment to becoming a key player in the dynamic Asia-Pacific region, leveraging economic opportunities and addressing strategic challenges through proactive engagement with neighbouring countries.

### **Objectives & Significance of 'Act East Policy'**

The "Act East policy" is India's response to China's rising power and expanding influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The objective is to enhance India's relationship with all countries in the region while fostering global economic cooperation and security integration.

The Act East Policy, initiated by India, has several key objectives:

- Economic Engagement: Foster economic ties and enhance trade and investment relations with countries in East Asia, especially the ASEAN nations. This involves promoting economic cooperation, identifying new markets, and encouraging two-way investments.
- Connectivity: Strengthen physical and digital connectivity by improving infrastructure such as roads, ports, and communication networks. This aims to facilitate smoother trade and people-to-people exchanges, contributing to regional integration.
- Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges: Promote cultural ties and enhance people-to-people contacts to build mutual understanding and goodwill. This involves facilitating educational and cultural exchanges, promoting tourism, and encouraging collaborative initiatives in art, education, and other fields.
- Strategic Partnerships: Develop strategic partnerships with East Asian countries to address shared security concerns and challenges. Strengthening defence ties and fostering security cooperation contribute to regional stability and address common threats.
- Regional Integration: Actively participate in regional forums and organizations to contribute to the overall economic and political integration of the Asia-Pacific region. This includes engaging with ASEAN and other multilateral platforms to address regional issues collectively.
- Maritime Cooperation: Enhance maritime cooperation to ensure secure and efficient sea routes. This involves collaborative efforts in areas such as maritime security, safety, and sustainable resource management.
- Technology and Innovation Collaboration: Encourage collaboration in science, technology, and innovation to leverage the strengths of East Asian countries. This can lead to mutual benefits in research, development, and the application of advanced technologies.
- Diplomatic Influence: Increase India's diplomatic influence in the Asia-Pacific region by actively participating in regional dialogues and diplomatic initiatives. This helps shape regional policies and contributes to India's standing on the global stage.

By pursuing these objectives, the Act East Policy aims to position India as a key player in the dynamic and economically vibrant Asia-Pacific region while fostering cooperation and stability.

#### **Initiatives under Act East Policy-**

A number of Initiatives were undertaken under the Act East Policy. Some of them are mentioned below.

- The Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link is a significant infrastructure project connecting India and Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh serves as a crucial hub for intermodal transport links and inland waterways.
- Projects like the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport play a vital role in connecting North East India with Thailand and Myanmar.
- The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project in Myanmar's Rakhine state is pivotal for enhancing connectivity with India's northeastern states.
- The India-Japan Act East Forum oversees various initiatives such as road and bridge construction and the modernization of hydroelectric power projects.
- A resettlement agreement, signed in January 2020, resolves the longstanding Bru refugee crisis involving the governments of India, Tripura, and Mizoram, along with the Bru community representatives.

- The Digital North East Vision 2022 aims to leverage digital technologies for enhancing the quality of life in the northeast region.
- The NITI Forum for North East focuses on the region's growth, evaluating proposals at both central and state levels to devise plans for rapid development. The forum emphasizes the "HIRA" concept, highlighting Highways, Inland Waterways, Railways, and Airways for development projects in the North Eastern Region.

**Latest projects for the Act East policy -**

For a period of five years, from 2020–2021 to 2024–2025, the Government of India sanctioned projects for inland water transport (IWT) infrastructure on national waterways in the North–Eastern Region (NER).

- **Comprehensive Project for the development of National Waterway (NW)-2:** The government is undertaking the development of projects related to Inland Water Transport (IWT) along National Waterway-2, which stretches from Dhubri to Sadiya, covering a distance of 891 kilometers, with an allocated budget of Rs.461 Crore over a period of 5 years (2020-25). The key aspects of these projects involve enhancing navigability by establishing both day and night navigation aids along with terminals. The development of NW-2 aims to establish waterway connectivity between the North East region and the ports of Kolkata/Haldia via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route. The main components of this initiative include: (i) Constructing the Jogighopa Terminal, (ii) Providing an alternative road to Pandu Port, (iii) Establishing a ship repair facility at Pandu, and (iv) Building Tourist Jetties at Biswanathghat, Jogighopa, Pandu & Neamati.
- **Comprehensive Project for the development of NW-16 & IBP route:** The government is executing the development of Inland Water Transport (IWT) projects on National Waterway-16 and the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route, with an allocated budget of Rs.145 Crore over a period of 5 years (2020-25). This endeavor primarily focuses on maintaining the fairway and ensuring Least Available Depth (LAD) in addition to installing navigation aids. Efforts have been initiated to upgrade the Badarpur and Karimganj terminals, including the incorporation of customs and immigration facilities at the Karimganj terminal. The key initiatives under this project comprise: (i) Constructing a terminal at Sonamura on the Gumti river, (ii) Establishing a terminal at Maia on the Ganga River, and (iii) Upgrading the Badarpur and Karimganj terminals.

**Progress of Act East Policy –**

New Delhi's Act Asia strategy currently relies on three main pillars: establishing extensive institutional engagement mechanisms, advancing economic interests through initiatives such as infrastructure development and connectivity, and pursuing shared strategic objectives.

When examining India's relationships with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, it becomes evident how a robust network of institutional frameworks has facilitated the expansion of bilateral interactions. India's active participation in ASEAN's various forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asian Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus underscores its commitment as a full-fledged member. Similarly, with Japan and South Korea, strong institutional ties through annual summits, strategic dialogues, and sector-specific forums like those on counter-terrorism and energy cooperation reinforce their partnership. Notably, India and Japan have formalized a 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, reflecting a deepening of their engagement. Additionally, India's involvement in trilateral dialogues with the US and Japan, as well as

participation in QUAD meetings with the US, Japan, and Australia, highlights its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

The economic aspect of India's relations with ASEAN has witnessed substantial growth, exemplified by the signing of trade agreements in goods and services and the subsequent increase in bilateral trade to over \$131 billion in 2022-23. Significant ASEAN private investments in India and reciprocal Indian investments in ASEAN further solidify this economic partnership. Moreover, India's ties with ASEAN serve as a cornerstone of its Act East Policy, as evidenced by the participation of ASEAN leaders in India's Republic Day Parade, symbolizing diplomatic achievements.

India's economic ties with Japan and South Korea have also flourished, with bilateral trade reaching record highs. India has actively sought Japanese investment for various projects, with Prime Minister Modi highlighting Japan's crucial role in India's modernization efforts. The successful realization of targets set during summit meetings, such as doubling Japanese investment in India, underscores the strength of this partnership. Similarly, South Korean investment in India has grown steadily, particularly in sectors like electronics and automobiles, with companies like Hyundai, Samsung, and LG making significant contributions to India's economy.

#### **Conclusion-**

The Act East policy advocates for enhanced cooperation with ASEAN nations, providing India with a strategic balance against China's assertiveness and its pursuit of dominance in the region. Unlike India's previous focus on industrial and regional development, the Act East Policy prioritizes bilateral relations and connectivity across various realms such as culture, history, infrastructure, and digital initiatives. This approach fosters deeper people-to-people relations and facilitates two-way trade, offering significant opportunities for improving economic ties with all involved parties.

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