

FROM “LOOK EAST” TO “ACT EAST” : ANALYSIS OF MODI GOVERNMENT'S POLICY CHANGES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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Abstract

The policies and guidelines that the Indian government implemented in the Northeast are strongly tied to problems with Tibet or China. India's strategic objectives in southern Tibet are usually reflected in the policies it adopts and alters. After gaining office in 2014, Modi enacted the "Act East Policy" to replace the "Look East Policy," which had been in place for more than 20 years. The Indian government has paid more attention to the Northeast, and improved its governance for the Northeast. This study found that India's "Act East Policy" was developed under the historical background of "Two Long-term Isolation" between the northeast region and the main body of India, between plain residents and mountain tribes, and the strategic background of India's ASEAN diplomacy and implementation of "Eastward Expansion". It aims to break the isolation, close the gap and bolster control. In essence, it plays a significant role for India to seek its alleged "Great Power Dream". In contrast, the policy prioritizes infrastructure, security, and cross-cultural interactions more heavily in order to achieve economic goals. As a crucial intersection, Northeast India has received unprecedented attention in the new policy. The northeast region now has more prospects for

overall growth, but it also faces challenges from insufficient internal funding, poor governance, and external territorial disputes.

Keywords: Northeast India; Look East Policy; Act East Policy; India

The Northeast issue has been a challenging subject for succeeding Indian governments since India's independence. For the northeastern region, the central government has developed a number of policies over time. For instance, the "Nehru Elwin Policy Framework" was put into effect in the early years of independence. They started to pay attention to the security defense of the northeast frontier after the "Sino-Indian Border War" in 1962. In 1971, North-Eastern Areas Reorganization Act was promulgated to begin the political reorganization process in the northeast border area. The "Look East Policy" was put into practice by the Indian government following the end of the Cold War. The "Act East Policy" was introduced shortly after Modi entered office in 2014, replacing the "Look East Policy" that had been in place for more than 20 years. He made an effort to address the Northeast issue, which has long been a difficulty for succeeding administrations. What is the history of India's "Act East Policy"? What distinguishes the two main governing strategies in northeastern India? What are the main chances and obstacles for this policy's implementation in the future? What impacts might this have on China? An analysis of the aforementioned challenges will be aided to understand the changes in the Modi government's governance policies in northeast India and its strategic tendencies there as well as in the Indo-Pacific region.

1 The History of India's "Act East Policy"

1.1 The Northeast region brought into India's jurisdiction

Before the British colonial invasion, the northeast region of India and the main body of India were isolated from each other for a long time, and were separated into the Ahom kingdom¹ and some small kingdoms and tribes around it.

¹ The Ahom kingdom was a late medieval kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. It maintained its sovereignty for nearly 600 years having successfully resisted Mughal expansion in Northeast India. Established by Sukaphaa, a Tai prince from Mong Mao (present-day Yunnan Province, China), it began as a Mong in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra based on wet rice agriculture. It expanded suddenly under Suhungmung in the 16th century and became multi-ethnic in character, casting a profound effect on the political and social life of the entire Brahmaputra valley. The kingdom became weaker with the rise of the Moamoria rebellion, and subsequently fell to repeated Burmese invasions of Assam. With the defeat of the Burmese after the First

The British colonists built the British Indian colonial authority in a wide region that included modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar in the second part of the 18th century. In February 1826, Britain signed the Treaty of Yangdabo with Myanmar. Over the next 60 years, the British first annexed the Ahom Kingdom through the Treaty of Yangdabo, and then gradually forced other kingdoms and tribal areas to merge into British India by force. By 1895, the entire northeast of India had been colonized by the British. The British colonists carried out the policy of "Divide and Rule" in northeast India. As a result, the Northeast region and the main body of India were deliberately isolated from each other and lack of contact. The so-called "Inner Line" was specifically drawn by the 1873 Inner Line Regulations between the Northeast Plain and the mountainous regions where the tribal people had resided. Since that time, Northeast India has been completely cut off from the rest of India and has also prevented communication between the mountain tribes and people living in the interior plains. All tribes continue to practice their original ways of life and political customs. They are not closely related, despite the fact that they both fall under the control of the British colonial administration, along with the majority of India.

The Mountbatten Plan, which was announced in June 1947, brought Partition of India. Following the passage of the Independence of India Act by Britain, India proclaimed its independence two months later. Britain transferred its power in India to the Dominion of India². Aside from Sylhet³, Assam Province has officially become a state-level administrative region in India from a former British Indian province. The Congress Party of India organizes the state government and sets up a state governor. At this time, Assam also includes today's Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. The situation of the states in northeastern India is similar. From 1947 to 1949, Tripura, Khasi, Ramblai, Nongstoin, Manipur, and other states successively signed the Instrument of Accession⁴ to merge into India. So far, the

Anglo-Burmese War and the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, control of the kingdom passed into East India Company hands. Though it came to be called the Ahom kingdom in the colonial and subsequent times, it was largely multi-ethnic, with the ethnic Tai-Ahom people constituting less than 10% of the population toward the end.

² On January 26, 1950, the Constitution was promulgated, the Republic of India was formally established, and the Dominion of India completed its phased functions, was terminated, and was replaced by the Republic of India.

³ Sylhet District is a district in the Sylhet Region of Bangladesh, located in the northeastern part of the country, bordering India to the east and north.

⁴ Among them: Signed by the Manija family of Tripura in September 1947, and signed by most of the Kassi chiefs in December of the same year. Rambrai and Nongstoin were forced to join in March 1948 and Manipur finally signed in 1949.

administrative provinces, tribes, and native states in northeast India were formally taken over and merged by India after independence, becoming the northeast frontier of India. India has also started the process of border governance in this region.

1.2 The Background of India's "Act East Policy"

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the political landscape of the world changed dramatically. India lost its "big brother" the Soviet Union in diplomacy. Its main sources of support, foreign aid, and export market are no longer available. The market economic system of "marketization, liberalization, and privatization" has an impact on it concurrently. In addition, it is affected by inadequate domestic energy supply, outdated infrastructure, capital shortage, low labor efficiency, and other factors. India's economy has suffered greatly. To escape the current economic situation, India has begun to concentrate on developing diplomatic, economic, and trade cooperation with ASEAN, as well as regional and security cooperation.

The "Look East Policy" was proposed by the government of Narasimha Rao, Prime Minister of India, who took office in 1991. In 1994, Rao delivered a speech in Singapore. He publicly stated for the first time that India wanted to strengthen its relationship with its "eastern neighbors"⁵, which was regarded as a sign of the birth of the "Look East Policy". From 1991 to 1997, Rao visited Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, and normalized relations with ASEAN⁶ countries. India's ASEAN trade volume also increased from 2.9 billion US dollars in 1993 to 10 billion US dollars in 2001, accounting for about 12% of India's total foreign trade. In addition, before the 1990s, India was skeptical of regional multilateralism. However, the "Look East Policy" represents a clear change⁷ in the way India has conducted its diplomacy in the past. Security cooperation has also been put on the agenda, including personnel training, joint military exercises, and maritime security⁸.

In 2003, the Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha said that the "Look East Policy" had entered a new stage. He pointed out that the past policy has been

⁵ Muni S D. Indi's "Look East" Policy: The Strategic Dimension[M]. Perspectives on South Asian Security. 2013: 67-99.

⁶ Jayanth V. Narasimha Rao and the "Look East Policy" [N]. The Hindu, 2004-12-24.

⁷ Naidu G V C. India and Southeast Asia: An analysis of the look east policy[J]. India and ASEAN, 2004: 141.

⁸ Rao P V. India and ASEAN: Summit partnership[J]. India and ASEAN: Partners at Summit. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011: 1-63.

ASEAN-centric and mainly focused on trade and investment. The current policy has expanded the definition of "East". It covers a vast area from Australia to East Asia, and ASEAN is its core⁹. With the transition from the original ASEAN diplomacy to East Asian diplomacy, this signified a significant change in India's "Look East Policy". India has improved relations with East Asian countries, especially Japan and South Korea, through the signing of a series of agreements. For instance, in 2008, India and Japan signed the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation; in 2009, India and South Korea signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.

In this context, in November 2014, Indian Prime Minister Modi officially announced at the 9th East Asia Summit that he would upgrade the "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy". The "Act East Policy" has rarely been publicly interpreted by the Modi administration. However, analysts and scholars have discussed the issue extensively. Among them, India's strategic objectives in the Asia Pacific region¹⁰, in-depth cooperation between India and ASEAN^{11,12}, and India's active participation in the construction of regional order¹³ are the main themes. The discussion perspective is from a macro- and multinational perspective. The "Act East Policy" of India, however, also places a lot of importance on the northeastern area of the country, which is a region that directly under Indian government control and policies can be carried out effectively. What distinguishes the current "Act East Policy" from the earlier "Look East Policy" in this region? What are the main chances and obstacles for the Northeast's implementation of this policy in the future? The academic community should pay more attention to these challenges.

2 Comparisons of "Look East Policy" and "Act East Policy"

"Look East Policy" and "Act East Policy" have the same origin but different emphasis. The following table lists the differences between the two policies.

⁹ Nayyar D. *Resurgent Asia: Diversity in Development*[M]. Oxford University Press, 2019.

¹⁰ Singh S. From a sub-continental power to an Asia-Pacific player: India's changing identity[J]. *India Review*, 2014, 13(3): 187-211.

¹¹ Bhogal P. India-ASEAN economic relations: Examining future possibilities[J]. *ORF Issue Brief*, 2018, 221: 1-8.

¹² Pant H V, Deb A. India-ASEAN partnership at 25[J]. *ORF Issue Brief*, 2017, 189: 1-8.

¹³ NGA L E T H I H, Thuong N L T. India-China Competition in South Asia Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Administration[J]. *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, 2021, 2(01): 21-50.