



A REVIEW OF INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY AND EMERGENCE OF ACT EAST POLICY

Dr Navin Varma

Dept of Defence Studies, Meerut College, Meerut.

Ashwini Sharma*

Research Scholar, Meerut College, Meerut, UP *Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT India's foreign policy had a strategic and major shift in 1990s with the advent of Look East Policy (LEP). As any Foreign policy of a country is designed to protect and promote its national interests by appropriately responding to the developments that occur in its region, LEP aimed at addressing the changing dynamics in South East Asia. Although the opportunity was ever present, India then, in the past could not harness much and was deeply stuck with its own domestic issues and economic considerations. In a bid to capture the lost opportunity of the past, India in the early 1990s embarked on Look East Policy (LEP). The policy marked a strategic shift in the Indian perspectives towards the Southeast Asian region. The LEP has evolved into a multi-pronged strategy of India in advancing its interests in Southeast Asia. LEP eventually evolved as Act East Policy (AEP). This article aims at reviewing the tenets of India's LEP and the founding pillars for it Act East Policy (AEP).

KEYWORDS : Look East Policy, Act East Policy, North East Region, ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy of a country is designed to protect and promote national interests in a particular region of the world by appropriately responding to the developments that occur in that region. For which it requires continuous assessment of the situation in the region and developing policy responses tailored towards dynamics in the region. In a bid to capture the lost opportunity of the past, India in the early 1990s embarked on Look East Policy (LEP). The policy marked a strategic shift in the Indian perspectives towards the Southeast Asian region. The LEP has evolved into a multi-pronged strategy of India in advancing its interests in Southeast Asia. LEP eventually evolved as Act East Policy (AEP). The LEP represents India's efforts to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia in order to bolster her standing as a regional power. It marked a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world. The policy offers ample opportunity for India to grow at par with other major powers of the world at the political, economic and strategic level. The policy no doubt would bridge the gap between India and Southeast Asia thereby serving their national interests.

FORMULATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF LEP

Several factors contributed to the launch of the LEP, a policy directed towards Southeast Asia. The policy was not officially articulated by way of any official document or pronouncement. The significant feature of the LEP lies in the fact that there is a domestic political and public-consensus on it and no party has ever questioned the desirability of closer engagement with Southeast-Asia.

DIMENSIONS OF LEP

The LEP as such has multi-faceted dimensions encompassing political, economic, cultural, security and strategic. An economic dimension was given the utmost priority in the early stage of the LEP but as the years progressed and the engagement with the ASEAN nations got closer, the policy gained security and strategic significance. The policy is now slowly paying significant dividends to our country at political, economic and strategic level. The LEP was a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach which caters to the development and establishment of strategic linkages with the countries of Southeast Asia, involvement of closer political links with ASEAN and the development of stronger economic bonds and ties with the countries of the region. The policy was also seen as an attempt at carving a significant place and position for India in the larger Asian-Pacific region.

STRATEGIC RATIONALE BEHIND THE LEP

The LEP was evolved with an attempt to rediscover Asia, restore and strengthen its past historical, cultural and economic relations with the region of Southeast Asia that had for many decades been neglected. The chief drivers of the LEP are its large and growing population and the need to sustain economic development in order to keep up with the population, the need for natural resources and the potential regional or global security threats. India's current foreign policy especially as

enunciated in the LEP is driven primarily by its desire to maintain, sustain or increase its security.

Other than political and economic considerations, strategic factors have also contributed to the foreign policy shifts towards Southeast Asia. The common security concerns relating to transnational crimes and maritime security have brought India to closely engaging with the countries of Southeast Asia. India's strategic interests demanded a close defence and security partnership with the countries of the region, both in facing external threats and in meeting its aspirations to be a global power. By closely engaging strategically with ASEAN, India seeks to erode the vulnerability to an attack from the eastern sectors. China's expanding footprint in Southeast Asia and in particular to Myanmar is a case of concern for India. Besides, India seeks to prevent the insurgent groups operating in Northeast region of our country from gaining shelter and support from the Myanmar.

PRESENT STATUS OF ACT EAST POLICY

With a comprehensive shift in India's foreign policy post change in government in India in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India is interested and committed to do more in its LEP and declared that it will be Act East Policy henceforth, in 2014. The Objective of "Act East Policy" is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the States of North Eastern Region including Arunachal Pradesh with other countries in our neighbourhood. Although, right since the beginning many critics tended to be cynical and apprehensive about the outcome, India, so far had done reasonably well in LEP and AEP. AEP also shows tremendous potential and promise for more to come.

INDIA'S LEP: RESPONSE FROM THE ASEAN NATIONS

The LEP of India had evoked positive response from the countries of Southeast Asia as the policy would bring tremendous benefit for the latter from the economic and strategic point of view. There emerged sound convergence on the need to closely engage in economic terms between India and ASEAN countries so as to remain competitive. For the countries of Southeast Asia, access to Indian markets and raw materials was the key priority. Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Singapore and Thailand welcomed India's LEP with the greatest enthusiasm. Both countries were very quick in sensing the need to diversify their investment destinations. Thailand in particular introduced 'Look West' policy which is a reorientation of its external relations toward India and Africa.

With expanding relations under the banner of LEP, ASEAN perception about India and its role in the region has changed significantly. There is an emerging consensus among the ASEAN members about the fact that India is not only an important partner but has a key role to play in the region. The ASEAN members have called upon India to become a

more active player in the economic, security and strategic arena. India remain committed to working closely with the ASEAN in bringing lasting peace, security and stability in the region, including the fight against terrorism, piracy, arms and drug trafficking and the security of the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean for smooth flow of raw materials, merchandise and energy supplies. Besides, there is a growing recognition in the Southeast Asian region security problems and the concerns the ASEAN members are likely to face in the near future will be shared by India.

LOOPHOLES IN THE LEP

One of the key loopholes in the formulation of LEP is that it was never officially documented nor is there any roadmap about the strategy to be adopted for the future which would bring tremendous benefit for our country. Secondly, the policy when implemented lacked coordination and cooperation among the different ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the one hand found it very difficult to integrate with the government's economic activities; while on the other hand, the Ministries of Commerce and Finance did not recognize its legitimacy in this matter. Although India has introduced economic reform process in the post Cold War, but was quite behind the expectation of Southeast Asia. Besides, when the policy was formulated, it did not take into consideration our domestic imperatives. The northeast region of our country despite sharing a close cultural, historical, linguistic, economic and ethnic links with Myanmar and Northern Thailand was not able to find a place in India's LEP. The North-East region because of its favorable geographic location acts as a gateway to South-East Asia. There are ample opportunities for the Northeast region of our country from India's thriving relations with South East Asia. Northeast region also has a crucial role to play in bridging and further cementing the strategic partnership with the Southeast Asian neighbours. Despite this fact, the LEP was unable to find a lasting solution to the problem of underdevelopment and insecurity in the region. India's LEP has so far been unsuccessful in its attempt to usher in a new era of development for the North-Eastern region. The future development and stability in North-East India could be possible with the successful implementation of the LEP through the North-East.

Besides, another setback to LEP is the absence of India's deep engagement with Myanmar which not only share borders with the Northeastern region of our country but also offers the gateway to ASEAN. Another major setback has been the inability of the Indian system both public and private to establish the instruments of economic and business developments that would add real substance to the strategic and security components of the policy.

CONCLUSION

Without any doubt, the LEP marked a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and seeks to find a suitable place in the evolving global order and in particular to Southeast Asia. The LEP as such has been developed keeping in mind the changes that took place in the whole of Asia and in particular to Southeast Asia in the post Cold War scenario. Despite the fact that the LEP has not been pursued by India in a well-planned and structured manner but notable progress has been made so far. But still a long way to go and tremendous potential remains to be harnessed. The LEP took India on the path to sustainable development. India seems to realize the fact that the comprehensive engagement with the ASEAN region is vital for India's economic progress and security needs. Act East Policy, further bolstered the initiative of Look East Policy and laid foundation for various proactive initiatives in three dimensions, namely; Commerce, Connectivity and Culture, that are mutually complementing. The continued and re-energised focus on AEP and North East India, is of tremendous benefits to India and ASEAN in economic, security, cultural and strategic dimensions.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Baladas Ghosal, "China's Perception of 'India's LEP' and Its Implications", IDSA Monograph Series, No. 26, October 2013, p. 27.
- [2] GVC Naidu, "Whither the LEP : India and Southeast Asia", Strategic Analysis, Vol. 28, No. 2, April-June 2004, pp. 337-46.
- [3] Lakshmana Chetty, "Two Decades Old LEP : An Expression of India's Diplomacy to ASEAN", FPRC Journal, No. 17, 2014.
- [4] Lalit Mansingh, "The LEP and Its Implications for Eastern India", in Amar Nath Ram (ed.), Two Decades of India's LEP : Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2012),.
- [5] Muni S D, "LEP : Beyond Myths", in Amar Nath Ram (ed.), Two Decades of India's LEP : Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2012)
- [6] Pankaj Jha, "India's LEP: Transforming Rhetoric into Substance", in Nalinikant Jha and Subhash Shukla (eds.), India's Foreign Policy: Emerging Challenges (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).
- [7] Parameswaran, Prashanth. "Modi Unveils India's 'Act East Policy' to ASEAN in

Myanmar." The Diplomat 17 (2014).

- [8] Preet Malik, "India's LEP : Genesis", in Amar Nath Ram (ed.), Two Decades of India's LEP : Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2012).