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Article

From 'Look East' to 'Act East': Broadened Horizon of India-Southeast Asia Relations

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Abstract:

The early years of the 1990s were a remarkable period for India, as it witnessed not only the New Economic Reforms but also a set of revamped foreign policies. It was during this time that policymakers realised the gradual establishment of a new world order and the need for countries to engage with one another on the global stage. The 'Look East Policy' was one such initiative that highlighted a shift regarding India's international relations and foreign policies. It was the success of the LEP that motivated Indian policymakers to further develop it into a more action- and outcome-based policy. As a result, the Act East Policy was announced in 2014 with a broader scope covering security, strategic, and cultural dimensions along with the previously existing focus on trade and economics. In the present geopolitical context, the Southeast Asian region is of great significance, and both India and ASEAN nations play central roles in the larger Indo-Pacific framework. The year 2024 marked the completion of a decade of India's Act East Policy, and India-ASEAN relations have not only advanced but also entered a new phase following the launch of the policy. Therefore, the paper aims to identify the expanded vision under the current Act East Policy compared to the earlier Look East Policy, focus on the key achievements of the AEP, and explore possible avenues for ongoing cooperation between India and ASEAN. The methodology used is qualitative, relying on analytical and descriptive methods. The research primarily depends on secondary sources such as books, articles, and journals, along with primary sources like government reports and press releases.

Keywords: India-ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Act East Policy, Look East Policy, Foreign Policy, Commerce, Culture, Connectivity, Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's relations with the countries of Southeast Asia dates back to the ancient era when a few kingdoms from South India had initiated a naval presence in the region lying east of it. Being a highly resource-rich region, Southeast Asia was given names such as Swarnabhumi (the land of gold), Narikeldeep (land of coconuts), and Kapuradweepa (island of camphor) by the Indian merchants for whom it was an attractive destination for trade (Sengupta, 2017). For instance, there existed a flourishing maritime trade between the Kalinga Empire of Odisha and the Javanese state in Indonesia (Patra, 2013). The eastward expansion of the Chola Empire in the 10th century further led to increased maritime voyages from India to Southeast Asia. It was these historical and maritime trade ties between the two civilisations that led to a mass exchange of ideas and culture that eventually made way for a greater connection, which is visible in the societies even today.

These historical linkages and friendly relations between India and the Southeast Asian countries were somewhat disrupted during the colonial period, as they were both subject to the colonial rule and were administered as per the commercial interests of the colonisers. This resulted in a distanced relation between the two sides. However, despite different pathways and a lost connection, India and Southeast Asia had converging interests when it came

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to the Asian and Southeast Asian neighbourhood. At the same time, the two also wanted to prevent any other external power from being influential in the region, such as the Chinese. Asserting their power and dominance was a matter of concern for both India and ASEAN.

The decolonisation and the nationalism in the mid-20th century phase further brought the Asian colonies, including those of Southeast Asia and India, together. In a way, independent India and present-day Southeast Asia's association can also be traced back to the Bandung Conference when India's Jawahar Lal Nehru and Indonesia's Sukarno had joined hands in the light of Non-Alignment (Kundu, 2022). The 1st Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947 and the first Asia-African Conference that took place in Bandung in Indonesia in 1955 are some of the early initiatives in harnessing India-Southeast Asia friendship. V. Suryanarayan (1996) remarked that:

> *"India's policy towards Southeast Asia in the early years of independence, from 1947 to mid-1958, was not only dynamic and forward-looking, it was also in complete empathy and solidarity with the hopes and aspirations of Southeast Asian people."*

However, for much of the period post-independence up till India revamped its economic and foreign policies, India's relations with Southeast Asia were restricted, majorly because of diverging interests leading to fewer collaborations. While there have been frequent visits from both sides, there were limited attempts at further harnessing their relations. This was mostly because their concerns lay elsewhere and perceptions of development were different. While India had an inclination towards the USSR, Southeast Asia was more closely associated with the U.S. Former Indian diplomat Ambassador Rajiv Sikri stated that India missed an opportunity in the 1980s to build ties with Southeast Asia, and the advantage of that was utilised by China.

It was only during the Cold War period that policymakers and international relations experts felt the need for India to have a firm foot in its neighbourhood. It was realised that in order to further grow and establish itself as a fully developed nation in the region, India needed to have the support of its neighbours, both immediate and extended. This gradually led to India upgrading its relations to the level of strategic partnership with the ASEAN bloc along with a few other neighbouring countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Australia. Another reason behind the gradual reshaping of India's foreign policies during the 1990s was the territorial disputes faced by India with both China and Pakistan. The increased Sino-Pak closeness also caused the Indian leaders to worry. At this time, not only India but also the countries of Southeast Asia were seeking neighbourhood support, as few of them had been facing problems with China.

In Southeast Asia too, there was a period of gradual transition post the end of the Cold War. It faced a set of opportunities and challenges, and ASEAN played an active role in addressing the newly developed situation and at the same time focused on yielding more benefits for the region. After the disintegration of the Soviet regime, the U.S. had shifted its interests and put Southeast Asia as a low-priority area and gradually started withdrawing from the region. At the same time, China aspired to play a key role in the politics and security of the ASEAN countries; however, its interests in Southeast Asia were subject to certain limitations. China's growing blue water naval capability in the South China Sea, its conflicting claims over Spratlys and Paracels, and its support for the tyrannical regime in Myanmar all indicated that China would take advantage of the vulnerability of Southeast Asia and could even resort to force to establish its territorial claims (Suryanarayan, 1996).

In such a scenario, it was comparatively easy for India to revive its somewhat faded relationship with the ASEAN grouping and for the two sides to reconnect as compared to other countries in the region such as China, Japan, the US or the UK, as India did not have any territorial claims in Southeast Asia. Another positive aspect of India and Southeast Asia's relations is that neither of them has any contention with regard to land or maritime borders, even though India shares maritime borders with Indonesia and Thailand and both land and maritime borders with Myanmar. The Indian foreign policy makers hence believed that harnessing healthy neighbourhood relations with Southeast Asia would be mutually beneficial. It was also felt that India's strategic concerns would be best taken care of with close cooperation with Southeast Asia (Naidu, 1996). This was also the time when countries of Southeast Asia too were hoping to expand and modernise their military equipment and the defence sector at large. This was looked at by India as yet another opportunity to export its indigenous arms and upscale economic collaborations with the region. The beginning of cooperation between academic institutions and scholars from both sides further highlighted their willingness to reunite.

Therefore, the early years of the 1990s were a remarkable period for India as it witnessed not only the New Economic Reforms but also a set of revamped foreign policies. The 'Look East Policy' was one such initiative which highlighted a shift with regard to India's international relations and foreign policies. Man Mohini Kaul (2019) has stated that:

> *"The Indian political elite had taken note of the drawbacks in the policy framework towards Southeast Asia and realised that a distinctive approach was needed to keep pace with the economic and strategic developments in the region."*

Thus, by making amends for the lost opportunities, India advocated a rigorous policy of engaging with the ASEAN by laying out the conceptual framework of the Look East Policy in 1992 (Kaul, 2019). This paper gives a glimpse into this notable journey of India from adamantly following the non-aligned policy to being flexible and wanting to harness its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

2. ROLLING OUT THE 'LOOK EAST POLICY'

The Look East Policy was launched in 1991, under the government of Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao (1991-1996). It is said that the Singapore lecture by PM Rao was the official launching of the LEP (Rao, 1994). The policy was further pursued under the government of P.M Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) and then continued under the Prime Ministership of Dr. Manmohan Singh (2004-2014). LEP being successfully pursued under differing governments indicates its significance as a foreign policy. It also indicates how the preceding leaders believed in strengthening India-Southeast Asia ties after witnessing a long period of stagnation in their relations.

A major achievement in India-ASEAN relations during the 1990s was when India became a "sectoral" dialogue partner of ASEAN. After successful cooperation in sectors such as trade and tourism, India was also elevated to the status of a full-fledged dialogue partner in the year 1996 (Naidu, 1996). India had initiated joint ventures with ASEAN and our economy witnessed positive growth in FDI from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Philippines (Kundu, 2022). Such increased India-ASEAN economic collaboration during the period of the 1990s resulted in a growth in their bilateral trade. This was the time when India not only opened its economy to the ASEAN nations but also keenly pursued all round relations with them. Multiple defence collaborations took place between India and countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam (in the form of joint naval exercises, signing of MoU on defence cooperation, providing military equipment and defence training). Thus, both India and ASEAN wanted to comprehensively engage with each other and collectively develop positive relations over the time to come. In this context, the Look East Policy was thus seen as a perfect medium for India to take its traditional role in the East Asian region.

A steady stream of visits to and fro between India and ASEAN nations was another hallmark of this period, such as by cabinet ministers and high level officials and would encompass meetings at the highest levels (Sharma, 2012). Their intent was to establish higher security and trade ties. This new strategy by India towards Southeast Asia had immediate positive outcomes in ways that ASEAN accepted India as its sectoral dialogue partner in the year 1992 and as a full-dialogue partner in 1996, thereby acknowledging India-ASEAN relationship and elevating their engagement to a higher level (Kaul, 2019). The Look East Policy thus successfully resulted in establishing institutional dialogue mechanisms between India-ASEAN and thereby strengthening the confidence building measures (Marnaji, 2023).

Table 1: *India-ASEAN Bilateral Relations*

Year	Events
1992	A sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN
1995	A full dialogue partner
1996	A member of ASEAN regional forum
2002	First India-ASEAN summit
2004	India and Thailand signed FTA
2009	India-ASEAN signed FTA

(**Source:** *Doley, Shankar Jyoti. India's Look East Policy:Relationship with ASEAN and Opportunities for North East India. 2017. Semantic Scholar. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Look-East-Policy%3A-Southeast-Asian-Economic-of-India-Saikia/0ade8a8b02749752b90cda2a02fb6c50279cd217*)

LEP was thus seen by observers as an attempt by India to revive its age-old existing historical links with the Southeast Asian countries. The two regions have historically shared progressive relations in the fields of commerce and culture which this policy then aimed to revamp. Its focus lay on kick-starting India's economic engagement in Southeast Asia while also addressing certain domestic concerns in India's Northeast (Alam, 2014).

Some scholars have also stated that the policy was primarily aimed at balancing China's fast growing expansion. It has been widely suggested that the problems faced because of China's geopolitical dominance in the region have acted as a major booster for both India and Southeast Asian countries to realise the need to warm up their bilateral relations. Another major reason behind India being willing to collaborate with the ASEAN grouping was the slow and stagnated progress of the SAARC. There were internal rivalries and a tense environment in the Asian neighbourhood, largely due to India's border wars with its east and west neighbours, that is Pakistan and China. These were the reasons which further motivated Indian leaders to reinvigorate relations with the countries of Southeast Asia.

However, despite the success of the Look East Policy in helping India realign with ASEAN countries, it was subject to certain limitations. Kundu (2019) has commented that:

> *"The Look East Policy was not well articulated in the beginning. Furthermore, in the decade of 1990s, ASEAN was also not a well prepared institution leading to a slow journey of partnership between India and ASEAN."*

Therefore, the 'Look' in the policy here underwent a certain transition and was upgraded to become 'Act' under the leadership of PM Modi. Since 2014, policymakers are rigorously working to manifest the vision that is the 'Act East Policy'.

3. FROM 'LOOK EAST' TO 'ACT EAST'

The magnitude of positive growth in India-ASEAN relations since the inception of the Look East Policy enthused the Indian foreign ministry officials to develop the policy into a more action oriented and an outcome based policy (Jha, 2019). India therefore unleashed the Act East Policy at the 12th India ASEAN-Summit in 2014 in order to further strengthen its relations with its extended Eastern

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neighbourhood. While the focus under the earlier LEP was on economic and security cooperation with ASEAN, the vision under the present AEP has been broadened to also engage with the grouping in terms of cultural, political, regional and strategic dimensions. Former EAM, Ms. Sushma Swaraj while on her visits to Singapore in 2014 emphasised on not just 'Looking East' but also 'Acting East' said that "Look East is no longer adequate, now we need to Act East" (Chand, 2014). AEP thus became popularly known as 'continuity with change' of the earlier Look East Policy. Sebastian, Varghese and Shalini (2022) explain that the key difference between the 'Act East' and the 'Look East' is the broadened perspective of the former:

> *"The Act East Asia Policy (AEP) aims to expand the previous Look East Policy (LEP) along the three dimensions of space while deepening its interaction with the ASEAN member states. First, it expands the LEP beyond Southeast Asia to include Asia-Pacific. Act East Policy intends to intensify its engagement with Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands as a broader strategy for engaging Asia-Pacific.*
>
> *Second, India aims to expand its strategic depth in the region that hitherto had been limited. India aspires to play a more active role in the region by extending its operations from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to maritime cooperation and joint naval drills.*
>
> *Third, it places India's Northeast at the centre of the development and connectivity projects, including road and railways, enhancing trade and commerce, and people-to-people exchanges with the Southeast Asian states".*

The upgradation from 'Look East' to 'Act East' indicates the evolution of India-ASEAN relationship from an economic alliance to a strategic partnership. According to analysts, the AEP marks the third phase of the earlier LEP and focuses on enhanced cooperation in security and connectivity with Southeast Asia. (Bajpayee, 2017). At the 12th ASEAN-India Summit held in Myanmar in 2014, PM Modi emphasised upon the importance of this action-oriented collaboration between India and ASEAN. Kaul (2019) describes that in the Act East Policy, the emphasis was laid on speeding up the connectivity with the ASEAN countries based on the initiatives that were taken earlier under the LEP. This signifies that though the Look East Policy had come up with significant initiatives for an improved India-ASEAN connect, it however lacked in the overall implementation of those ideas and a delay in the ones that were started. According to Kaul 2019:

> *Although the Act East policy was no different from the earlier one, the intent was to convey to the ASEAN countries that the Indian government attached great importance to the pursuit of active and result-oriented policy.*

Over the last two decades, India-ASEAN dialogues have resulted in their deepened cooperation across several key domains. AEP offers a broad range of avenues for India-ASEAN cooperation, including trade, manufacturing, infrastructure and connectivity projects, smart cities, science and technology, among others. According to the ASEAN-India Plan of Action for 2016-2020, 'economic', 'political-security', and 'socio-cultural' are identified as three key areas of cooperation between the two sides. India's AEP has been developed in a similar format to strengthen cultural ties, enhance economic cooperation with Southeast Asia, and establish a geographically strategic relationship with countries in the Indo-Pacific. Many of these objectives have been, and continue to be, pursued through ongoing engagements at bilateral, regional, and trilateral levels.

In 2024, the Act East Policy marked a decade since its launch. Over the past ten years, their relations have advanced and entered a new paradigm centered around the 3 C's: 'Culture,' 'Connectivity,' and 'Commerce.' These three C's also form the core pillars of the India-ASEAN partnership and were originally proposed as a key policy initiative by Ms. Sushma Swaraj. There has also been a proposal to include the 5 Ts—Tradition, Talent, Tourism, Trade, and Technology—in their relations. Additionally, this relationship shares a deepened connection with the three pillars of the ASEAN community-building exercise: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural aspects.

4. BROADENED HORIZON OF INDIA-ASEAN RELATIONS OVER THE LAST DECADE

The progress made under India's Act East Policy and the subsequent improvement in India-ASEAN relations has been analysed through the prism of the '3Cs' that consists of Commerce, Culture and Connectivity:

4.1. Commerce

Trade and investment between India and ASEAN has expanded since the inception of the Act East Policy. At present, ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner. The total trade between India-ASEAN accounts for five trillion which is the third largest after China and the USA. 11.3% of India' global trade in 2022-2023 was with the ASEAN grouping. The two sides also witnessed a bilateral trade of USD 131.5 billion in the year 2022-2023 (PIB, 2023). Furthermore, markets were opened and duties were reduced as per the India-ASEAN FTA signed in 2010 which FTAs in goods, services as well as in investments. ASEAN-India FTA also covers tariff liberalisation of more than 90% of products that are traded between India and ASEAN.

Over the years, India and ASEAN have expressed strong will to advance their economic engagements, for example at the Commemorative India-ASEAN Summit in 2028. In FY23, bilateral trade reached US$122 billion and aimed to surpass US$150 billion by the end of 2024 (Sharma, Basu, 2024). Besides, India has also signed separate FTAs with some individual ASEAN countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, hence boosting the overall economy. There has also been a significant increase in India's exports and foreign direct investment from ASEAN countries (Pant and Basu, 2024). Therefore a key vision under the AEP has been to uplift India-ASEAN's economic ties that would further yield growth in trade, investments and services between the two (Marjani, 2023).

Another prime target of the AEP was to increase the movement of goods, people and services between the borders as well as aim for more job creation in the market. According to Amb. Navrekha Sharma, the 'Act East' and 'Make in India' are two campaigns that have been launched by PM Modi in an attempt to reduce the rising income inequality and increase employment in the country (Sharma, 2017). The AEP compliments the vision of Make In India as it promotes job creation and manufacturing, for instance some of the successful and ongoing infrastructural ventures under policy include the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project. These projects which have been estimated to yield high and mutual benefits.

With a boost in economic opportunities globally, India and ASEAN have also broadened their investment zones. Over the last few decades India's investment in ASEAN crossed over US$40 billion investment from ASEAN region to India has crossed US$70 in the same period (Chakravarty, 2018). A substantial amount of ASEAN private investment has flowed into various sectors in India, including port construction, highways, food processing, shipping, and auto components (Kesavan, 2020). Likewise, India's investments in ASEAN have increased significantly in recent years, with Singapore emerging as its key hub for trade and investment. Such remarkable economic growth owes its success to the policies and trade conducted since the launch of the Act East Policy (Kesavan, 2020).

4.2. Culture

In the last ten years of the Act East Policy, policy experts and historians have revisited ancient Hindu-Buddhist links and have realised its potential advancing Indo-Southeast Asia ties. The Nalanda University situated in Bihar was opened in 2010 is a significant effort in enhancing India's cultural relations with the region. The East Asian Summits have also emphasised on recovering lost connections that existed in Asia. An important project in further promoting Buddhist heritage is the International Buddhist Confederation which focuses on strengthening the spiritual and cultural ties with countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia and highlights India's active role in revitalizing the Buddhist circuits (Sharma and Basu, 2014).

The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) is another medium of cultural interaction between India and ASEAN. The ICCR is India's premier institution in terms of promoting India's culture and heritage abroad. In the recent few years, the institution has regularly conducted seminars and organises events to highlight India cultural linkages with Southeast Asia. For example, Jakarta and ICCR organised several events to showcase India's cultural footprints in the Southeast Asian region. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has also been involved in the restoration and conservation related projects of important heritage and cultural sites in Southeast Asia. For example, India has offered to help in the restoration of the ancient temple of Preah Vihear in Cambodia. Similarly, ASI is also working in restoration of the ancient Shiva temple Vat Phou in Laos which is also a UNESCO world heritage site. ASI has also preserved and restored stone inscriptions and temples of King Mindon and King Bagyidaw of Myanmar in Bodh Gaya.

The year 2022 was celebrated as the ASEAN-India year of Friendship on completion of thirty years of their dialogue relations. The 5th International Buddhist Conclave was hosted by India in 2016 and saw attendees in large amounts from several Buddhist monasteries and organisations in Southeast Asia. Recently, with yoga diplomacy gaining prominence, countries of Southeast Asia too have embraced the International Yoga Day thereby promoting India's cultural outreach (Sharma and Basu, 2024). Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is another major linkage between the two sides. The Indian diaspora in Malaysia and Singapore serves as a cultural bridge thereby enhancing bilateral relations. Several cultural exchange programmes under the Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas have been regularly conducted in countries in Southeast Asia. Similarly, former Indian EAM, Ms. Sushma Swaraj while addressing the ASEAN-India Youth Awards, stated:

> *"the cultural bonds between India and ASEAN are centuries old and the onus is on us to propagate this special relationship amongst the youth in the region".*

Therefore, the magnitude of cultural interactions between India and Southeast Asian nations has increased since the rolling out of the Act East Policy. For example, India's Ministry of Culture has launched initiatives to boost India-ASEAN's cultural engagements and interactions both at bilateral level and at multilateral levels. Several schemes under the GOI have been launched to strengthen and enhance the cultural connectivity between India and ASEAN such as the Global Engagement scheme by the Ministry of Culture consisting of stronger India and Southeast Asia ties. Other initiatives to promote people to people connectivity between India and ASEAN include Delhi Dialogue, student exchange programmes, special course for ASEAN diplomats, India-ASEAN Youth Summit and the ASEAN-India PhD fellowship Programme which was launched by India in 2019 for students from ASEAN. Such reconnection and harnessing of India and Southeast Asia's cultural ties are therefore an extension of their historical and civilisational links.

4.3. Connectivity

A key and defining feature of the Act East Policy is its increased emphasis on 'Connectivity' which forms one of the 3 'C's. Enhanced connectivity has been an important priority in India-ASEAN relations. The main reason why 'Connectivity' amongst the 3 'C's occupies such an important place and acts as a major pillar of the Act East Policy is because India and Southeast Asia are connected through both land as well as sea. It is through connectivity that the other two 'C's, that is culture and commerce will be functional and prosper as desired. Connectivity includes road, air, rail and sea connectivity as well as digital. I proved connectivity between India and Southeast Asia will provide them with better trade and investment opportunities and also give a major boost to their tourism and education sectors. Enhanced connectivity will also hugely benefit

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India's Northeastern region which also is another key priority under the Act East Policy. Another reason behind India actively engaging with ASEAN on the connectivity aspect is because of China's presence in the region and its heavy investments in projects involving ASEAN such as the BRI.

In the last few years, both India and ASEAN have collaborated on several occasions and organised multiple meetings and summits to discuss the same issues. India has committed to a US$ 1 billion Line of Credit for ASEAN's connectivity projects which will also help to narrow the developmental gaps within ASEAN (ASEAN, 2016). According to a study by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), increased India-ASEAN connectivity will yield cumulative gains of more than 5% of GDP for Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and over 2.5% of GDP for India (De, 2018). To achieve these goals, India is actively enhancing regional connectivity with ASEAN countries such as with Myanmar through key initiatives such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMP) and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project (IMTTP) (Yumlembam, 2024).

Some of the important connectivity projects between India-ASEAN are:

- ***Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project***: KMMTT between India and Myanmar was announced in 2008. It links India's Kolkata to Myanmar's Sitwe and Paletwa aims to increase land and water connectivity between them. The construction of the port aims to facilitate the movement of cargo vessels through the Bay of Bengal. The maritime and road connectivity will thereby provide an alternate transit to the landlocked states of India's Northeast. This will ensure easier transportation of goods between the Northeast and mainland India.

- ***India-Thailand-Myanmar Trilateral Highway***: The Trilateral highway inaugurated in 2002 is one of the earliest connectivity projects between India and ASEAN. It has been visualised as the "highway of opportunity and friendship" to facilitate the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas." India's PM further proposed extending the IMT highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam at the 14th India-ASEAN summit in 2016.

- ***Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC)***: The project aims to connect India with Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It aims at strengthening links between South and Southeast Asia by reducing travel distances. At the same time it also promotes greater investment and trade opportunities across the region.

- ***ASEAN-India Maritime Connectivity***: India has also been a part of MGC Working Group since 2016 which focuses on enhancing maritime cargo transportation. It will directly benefit the connectivity between India and Southeast Asia. Recently, there have been proposals to connect India's Andaman and Nicobar to Indonesia's Sabang as part of India-ASEAN's maritime connectivity projects.

- ***Digital Connectivity***: In the present global world, connectivity is not only physical but also covers digital and cyber space. In the recent few years, India, which is a leading IT service provider. In this context, the Act East Policy puts equal emphasis on collaborating with SEA in the field of digital connectivity and in prevention of threats arising from cyberspace.

- **Connectivity with NER:** One of the objectives of the Act East Policy is to transform the Northeast into a connectivity zone and eventually into a development zone. The linking of India's northeast with the Southeastern region is important due to their geographical proximity. Northeast region is described as the physical and cultural bridge between India, Southeast Asia and East Asia (Thomas, 2017). By providing better road, rail and sea connectivity of NER with Southeast Asia, the region will be able to yield potential economic and employment opportunities (Sebastian, Varghese, B. Shalini, 2022). The vision is to promote cross border trade, mobility of people and services, provide better employment and education opportunities, boost investment and tourism. Some of the major initiatives taken include the KMMTT Project which connects Kolkata with Sittwe port in Myanmar and to Mizoram through Arakan and Chin Chin states with river and road transport. Other key projects are the Trilateral Highway connecting Moreh-Tamu-Myawaddy -Mae Sot and the Asian Highway Connectivity. A ministry named DONER was also set up to look after administration and the welfare of the NER.

5. CONCLUSION

India's outlook toward the ASEAN nations has expanded since the launch of the Act East Policy. As a result, their relations have seen several advances over the past decade. Currently, the two sides are part of key multilateral groups, which have further strengthened their relationship. India and ASEAN have also engaged in numerous defense and security dialogues. With a plethora of shared interests, India and Southeast Asia now have new opportunities to collaborate in the Indo-Pacific neighbourhood. In today's geopolitical climate, both sides play crucial roles in the area, and only through their collective effort and support can peace and regional security be maintained.

In the coming decade of the policy, numerous avenues exist for continued cooperation between India and ASEAN that will benefit both sides. For example, maritime connectivity is critically important for both. They must also actively work together on broader issues like fighting terrorism and ensuring cyber security. They can collaborate to make cross-border movement of people, goods, and services more seamless. Regarding education, there is a need for stronger academic exchange and interaction. More student exchange programs can be developed, and universities

can collaborate to hold events and seminars that highlight shared heritage and cultural similarities between India and ASEAN. This is an area where youth from both sides can play an active role. 'Religious tourism' is another topic that has been discussed in relation to India-ASEAN relations, with plans to develop Buddhist and Ramayana pilgrimage routes. It is culture that unites India and ASEAN nations, and their existing relations are sure to strengthen further in the future.

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