

INTERPRETING INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY THROUGH FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Look East Policy introduced in the 1990s during P.M. Narasimha Rao was revived in 2014, under P.M. Narendra Modi and renamed as the “Act East Policy” stressing on the need to be more “active” in extending relations and integrating with India’s extended neighboring countries of the Asia Pacific region. The Act East Policy is analyzed and understood through the functionalist perspective, on how Act East Policy uses non-political factors such as economy, social and culture as its objectives in its attempt to promote cooperation with the countries of the Asia Pacific region, and also to integrate regionally through regional organizations like the ASEAN. The recent development like the implementation of Free Trade Agreement on Investment and Services between India and ASEAN in the economic aspect proves the importance of non-political sector which are mutually beneficial to all participating states in seeking integration. Regional integration is of great importance to India and its neighboring countries to counter the rise of China in this region. KEYWORDS: Regional Integration, Functionalism, Soft Power, Act East Policy, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Northeast India.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION The Look East Policy was introduced in the 1990s during PM Narasimha Rao’s period to adapt India with the changing world order with the end of cold war, lost of an ally because of the disintegration of the former USSR. It was also to alleviate India from its economic crisis by engaging more with the South East Asian countries, following the success of the Asian tigers. The Look East Policy had two phases, the first phase was in the 1990’s focused on economic and institutional relations with the ASEAN countries and the second phase started in the 2000’s with the extended the focus on Japan, South Korea and Australia (Lee, 2017), and the importance is given for the need of developing India’s northeastern states by using it as to connect India with its South East Asian neighbors . Thus, with the passing of its phases this policy has been followed by the broadening and deepening of India’s engagement with the region, from its initial geographic focus on Southeast Asia to encapsulate the broader East Asia and now Indo-Pacific region; and the deepening to expand beyond its initial focus on economic integration towards greater political interaction and security cooperation. (Bajpae, 2017).

In 2014, with the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government with Narendra Modi coming to power as the new PM, the Look East Policy was renamed as the Act East Policy by the Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj (MEA, 2014) stressing on the need to act more in engaging relations with its extended neighbours. 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 neighborhood (PIB, 2015). Thus, the usage of the non-political sector is seen in the objective of this foreign policy initiative. India stressing on old cultural and historical links, and the importance of its soft power to cooperate and become more engaging with these countries

This paper focuses on analyzing the Act East Policy, its success, and implications through the functionalist perspective of International Relations. It also questions how far India is successful in using the Act East Policy to integrate regionally with its neighboring countries in the Asia Pacific region, as compared to China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

INTERPRETING INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY THROUGH THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

RELATIONS Functionalism is a theory propounded by David Mitrany when the whole of Europe was in a profound crisis period. He was strongly influenced by the works and ideas of the philosophy of the Fabian Socialist. His work, "A Working Peace System" gives a clear meaning on his idea of building a peaceful international system. His main belief was that a crudely international system of sovereignty, extreme and exclusive nationalism, anarchy and suspicion amongst the states leads to war, which was the cause of both the world wars. Therefore, scholars like David Mitrany proposed a step by step approach towards regional unity which can later expand or upgrade to global unity which will, later on, leave the rigid structure of the nation-state system of the existing international system.

The classical functionalist lays emphasis on socio-economic and welfare aspects rather than political needs. The gradual and pragmatic cooperation on non-political sectors such as economic, cultural, social and scientific which are called the functional sectors will lead to development. And this outcome of cooperation in these functional sectors which are non-political sector has a spillover effect. This means "if an international cooperative venture works to mutual advantage in the sector of coal and steel production, then it whets the appetite of and creates additional administrative requirements of participating government to enter into cooperative ventures in related functional areas, such as transportation, pollution control and eventually to political unification" (Columbis & Theodore & Wolfe, 1981). The European Union is the prime example of a regional organization that works on the lines of functionalism. The members of the European Union pooling their sovereignty altogether to make an international organization, to deal with a common task. The member states which was devastated after WWII, recovered and revived economically, due to their cooperation amongst the members on the functional sector. Churchill's speech in 1946 on calling it a "United States of Europe" further gave anuplift to the spirit of cooperation and regional integration of the European Union later on.

The Look East Policy was formulated to adapt India to the changing world order following the end of the Cold War and to recover the Hindu rate of growth the country had been facing since independence. The new leaders tried to reset

Indian foreign policy to achieve various objectives such as distinguishing its national foreign policy from that of its colonial masters, to assert leadership in the international realm as well as to preserve the country's autonomy (Lee, 2015). During that time, the policy makers and PM Narasimha Rao agreed on the economic solution to end India's backwardness in the economy was to engage more with its Asian neighbors. Thus, this marks a remarkable shift from the foreign policy focus from the West-centric orientation to the Eastward looking, to suit with the changing politics in the region. Later on, the new NDA government with Narendra Modi as the new Prime Minister in 2014, revived the old, "Look East Policy" into "Act East Policy" by the Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj in 2014. This transition can be understood from India's view, to be more actively engaging with its "Eastern" neighbours, to have a more active role in the region through the regional organisation like ASEAN by being a more engaging member to its other regional forum too, Being close to the ASEAN states will also make them go towards India in countering China, which will mutually benefit both India and the ASEAN states to suit the changing international order. The failure of the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to acknowledge and proceed regionalism due to the rift between members like India and Pakistan and also the failure of SAARC to actualize the South Asian Economic Union.

With this new initiative under the Modi government, the set objectives for the 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 with other countries in the neighbourhood." This objectives which are non-political sector or called the functional sector according to the classical functionalist scholars lay the emphasis for the development in socioeconomic, cultural factors for fostering better relations between India and the Southeast Asian neighbors. Here, the persuasion of the Indian soft power is used, the rich heritage linking to the birth of Buddhism with the rest of Southeast Asia. These functional sectors along with India's soft power has been used by India in this foreign policy initiative to engage better cooperation and relation mostly with the ASEAN states, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The improvement in these proposed objectives, the cooperation in the functional sector will grow confidence between India and ASEAN states in the political sector as well.

COMPARISON OF ACT EAST POLICY WITH THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded in 2001 as an intergovernmental organisation, with aspects of military, economic and political. It fundamentally centers on security concerns related to terrorism. Its main objectives are (i) to strengthen relations among member states; (ii) promote cooperation in political affairs, economics and trade, scientific-technical, cultural, and educational spheres as well as in energy, transportation, tourism, and environmental protection; (iv) safeguard regional peace, security, and stability; and (v) create a democratic, equitable international political and economic order (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015).

The SCO as China's initiative being one of the leading and founding is more effective and successful in terms of integrating its members, its focuses on cooperation and security in dealings with terrorism and American intervention particularly the presence of NATO in Central Asia. With summits that were held in Uzbekistan, the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) was established as a result of it. The term "security threat" keeps getting expanded in SCO summits that

were held in 2007, with the signing of the Collective Security Treaty Organization showing concerns with cyber -related warfare and drugs, as a security threat. The SCO as an organization has become more of a military like NATO. The members have joint military exercise, intelligence sharing to become strategic partners in countering security issues. In SCO, the Chinese premier then in 2003, has proposed for a free trade area, not to have barriers in the free flow of trade.

The SCO is more systematic and organized it has an organizational structure, the council of the head of the states at the apex, followed by the council of the head of government below it. There is a council of foreign ministers, a council of national coordinators, followed by the Secretariat of the SCO acting as the primary executive body of the organization. The different councils have regular summits and meetings to discuss and to promote cooperation within the organization. Unlike, the Act East Policy engagement with ASEAN, it lacks this systematic coordination and hierarchy in the organization with a separate function to deal with. The SCO members are not only confined to SouthEast Asia, and have developed regional powers like Russia as its members. Meanwhile, with Act East Policy it has more do with the Eastern neighbors and India is not likely to engage in extreme measures to address security issues with ASEAN, given India's own security problem internally

The approach of regionalism by the SCO is more in the non-traditional terms due to the rise of new threats like drugs, terrorism. And it addresses mostly on political sectors, as it starts off as a military alliance rather than an economic initiative like the Act East Policy. In November 2005 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated that the "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is working to establish a rational and just world order" and that "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation provides us with a unique opportunity to take part in the process of forming a fundamentally new model of geopolitical integration" (Uz Report, 2005). Economic initiatives of the SCO includes the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Russian led Eurasian Economic UNION, which are big projects and investment compared to Act East Policy's BIMSTEC or the Mekong Ganga Initiative. The SCO is a much bigger initiative with more members and covers more than half the population of the globe. Act East Policy and ASEAN focus mainly on economic, culture, and diplomacy and this is not comparable with the SCO since India tries to stay away from becoming a military alliance. The whole idea of aligning with the ASEAN states was to softly counterbalance China and not by forming a structured military alliance to deal with it. India uses more of a soft power approach and China uses a hard power approach here. China compared to India is more developed on account of the economy, the total operating of the SCO budget amounts a large sum of and is a big investment for China. The SCO mirrors Chinese intention to expand its influence and presence in Central Asia.

There is the West involvement, the United States has views India to be a regional leader, stressing on the need for the role of India in addressing security concerns in the region. And India can help the USA in remaking a positive image given its military intervention history in Southeast Asia. As US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton encouraged India "not just to look East, but to engage East and act East," a sentiment that has continued to be echoed by senior officials in the State Department more recently despite India's subsequent economic slowdown. While, the main intention of the SCO is to counter American Influence, though direct statement and comments have not been made by any of the leaders. In 2005, the USA applied for observer status in SCO, but it got rejected. India has a better relation with the USA, since Modi became the PM, his first visit to the United States in October 2014 and the invitation for President Obama to visit India as the Chief Guest for Republic Day in January 2015. Though India doesn't have many resources to initiate something like the SCO, India is hugely considered

as one of the major key players in the dynamics of security of the Asia Pacific region. The ASEAN countries are aware of China's aggressiveness and expansionist policy and India shares the same view. Thus, the Act East Policy has helped India in integrating more with its neighboring countries.

With the new development in India's relationship with the ASEAN states, Japan, South Korea, and Australia over the past few years from cooperating in non-political sectors to becoming strategic partners. The Act East Policy has achieved its main objectives that functional needs with less stress on politics and power makes states more cooperative. This way regional integration can take place without any states worrying over the infringement of their sovereignty. Amongst the ASEAN states, there is no regional leader, and India had proven to be one of the key players in the dynamics of this region. Though Functionalism as a theory has criticisms, its stress on non-political sector when states are always competing for power in International Relations. And functionalism is not the immediate solution rather a long term process. Despite these flaws, the benefits of functionalism are reflected in the success of the European Union in its integrative process starting from the economic aspect to becoming a political integrated organization.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE ACT EAST POLICY

The Look East Policy took in the importance of the Northeastern states of India, in the formulation and execution of this foreign policy. The Act East Policy continues the same. The previous policymakers didn't take into account the development of this region, and this becomes a block to the overall development of India as a whole. Because of the ignorance and negligence in both domestic and international policy formulation as well as implementation of the previous governments, the North Eastern region is the most underdeveloped and unstable region of India (Nath, 2004). There is less development in these parts compared to the other states of India. Given, its location, it holds close proximity to South Asia, and these states borders countries like Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. North Eastern Region provides a unique platform in terms of growth opportunities it offers by inter-locking the region with the neighboring countries in the South and South East Asia. (Kalita, 2018).

The Act East Policy serves as the opportunity for developing the North Eastern States of India, the location of these states can be put into use and this will benefit the states immensely. The states as being the direct entry to South East Asia will increase their connectivity and with this trade, investment and tourism will be increased (Panda, 2018). Improving connectivity in northeastern states is the key to the success of the 'Act East' policy that seeks to strengthen India's ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Union Minister of State for External Affairs V K Singh said (The Economist Times, 2018). To increase the connectivity, the government of India has joined various subregional cooperation initiatives like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) to improve the connectivity of the Northeast with the eastern neighbors (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Other connectivity projects such as the four-lane trilateral highway linking India (Moreh in Manipur) with Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar which will be expanded to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Live Mint, 2019). This connectivity projects after its constructed will only be useful if they are used for trade, commerce, and transportation daily. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport which connects Kolkata and Myanmar (Sittwe port) serves for the increasing sea connectivity between India and

the ASEAN states. This makes trade more direct between India the neighbors and increasing the trade flow multilaterally as well as bilaterally with its neighbors.

The region has its history with its long internal problems and conflicts with the insurgency groups, and its law and order problem, unemployment and lack of infrastructure. With the increase in connectivity, investment in this region from the ASEAN states can provide an opportunity to pace development. This was always neglected before and should be taken as a priority now. The development of this region. The region has the capability to make India a continental power within Asia and an economic giant in the world if the locational advantage of the region is properly utilized (Nath,2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The Look East Policy transition to Act East Policy in 2014 came in for the need of the hour due to the changing international system of the 21st century. Functionalism as a theory serves in understanding the dynamics of this policy, how the objectives of making economic, social and cultural sectors have improved after the Modi government have introduced the Act East Policy, and its initiatives and foreign visits in SouthEast Asian, Modi's first prime ministerial to Bhutan, reflects India's intention to make better relations with its neighbors. ASEAN has always been the center stage for this, and through this Policy, it has helped India in fostering strategic relations with them. Regional integration is the key to the development process, an international order of peace and security. ASEAN is still in the initial stage of it, with further cooperation it can be upgraded into an advanced regional organization like the European Union. Through, the Act East Policy regional integration is not just with the neighbors but also within India, to use development in the key sectors like economics, social, increasing connectivity and transportation, using the northeast as a gateway. By developing this region, the internal security can be resolved and it can be integrated more with India, understanding the potential of this region in making India's foreign policy. The northeastern region has the potential for strengthening the relations between India and its neighbors better.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a regional organization takes in the form of a military alliance has Chinese intention in expanding its influence in Central Asia. It has been received positively by the other countries, the developing ones in the region for its need to align with China and take aid to aid development and address security issues. India lacks the leadership role to make ASEAN systematize like the SCO. It will take indeed a long time for India with ASEAN to catch up on the level of SCO in terms of uniformity and integration.

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