

Act East Policy: An Option for India to Engage in Asia-Pacific Region

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Abstract- *Nowadays, the Asia-Pacific region is the world's primary focus for economic and strategic issues, rather than Europe. There is no denying that global events will undoubtedly impact the nation of the Asia-Pacific region. After the cold war's end there were many debates on security in the Asia-Pacific, much of these debates was on, how geo-politics and geo-economics of the region would perform and what happen when the hegemony of world power was decline. Asia-Pacific today has both opportunities as well as challenges in the growing globalisation process, this region has commenced upon creating not only unprecedented opportunities for economic process and development but also substantially increasing intra-regional economic integration and interactions. India is a big developing power that is largely acknowledged to have a substantial impact on the balance of the regional security framework. India's profile is continuously growing since its economic liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation program and consistently high growth rates its economy has been recording. The paper, aside from examine the growing security environment in the Asia-Pacific, describes the evolution and contours of the Act East Policy.*

Introduction-

The attention of the world politics has now turned from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region in terms of strategy and economy. It is unquestionable that the present country will be dominated by events over the world. The world's largest and second largest economies such as United States and China, respectively, are part of Asia – Pacific region. India with a population of nearly 17.7 percent of the world population and according to International Monetary Fund, the sixth largest economy, is the new and rapidly rising power in the region, which by most accounts will decide not only the fate of regional order that would emerge in Asia.

Amidst considerable importance about the American strategies toward this area, with reference the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report' release by US Department of Defence and the presence of its troops in South Korea and Japan. Among these policies transformation, the security policies of Japan and Australia are undergoing dramatic changes from Self-defence to stablishing relationship between the nations of the region. Moreover, the presence of many traditional and non-traditional security problems that could potentially seriously compromise regional peace and stability. Future of multilateral mechanism created in last two decades, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are in right direction.

A dramatic strategic change in India's foreign policy environment is signalled by the country's Act East Policy, which is an improved and lively replacement for the Look East Policy. Initiated in 2014, the strategy highlights India's intention to strengthen its ties with the Asia – Pacific region under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Act East Policy frames India as a proactive participant in the dynamic geopolitical Asia – Pacific region by promoting economic, security, and cultural linkages.

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao introduced the Look East Policy in the early 1990's with the goal of forging strong economic and geopolitical ties with the countries of South East Asia. However, a more comprehensive strategy was required due to the evolving geopolitical landscape and India's growing global ambitions, which resulted in the creation of the Act East Policy. This strategy includes economic, strategic and cultural aspects in addition to broadening the geographical focus to encompass East Asia and the larger Asia – Pacific region.

Emerging India and Asia-Pacific Security Scenario -

Since, India is a large emerging power, the balance of the regional security framework will be significantly impacted by it, as is commonly acknowledged. India's profile is continuously growing since its economic liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation program and consistently high growth rates its economy has been recording.

India's economy is the fastest expanding in the world, the third largest in Asia, and the third largest in purchasing power parity (PPP) globally. India looms larger today than ever as a military power capability. India is looking beyond the narrow strategic confines of South Asia at the larger Asia-Pacific Region. India is considered just not as regional power but is gaining such an important position there, future of Asia-Pacific power or strategic balance would be depend on India's policies and relations with great power. The recent improvement in bilateral ties between the United States of America and India, resulted in the signing of Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) during 2+2 ministerial dialogue between the countries. These fundamental agreements of the United States are the testimony of India's rise. These agreements are meant to create basic groundwork and promote interoperability between militaries by establishing common standards and systems. Certainly, China is the biggest factor in American Security calculations in dealing with India.

Similarly, warming of relations between Japan and India after Sinzo Abe's visits in January 2014, December 2015 and September 2017; India and Japan signed a nuclear deal in November 2016 and both become Quad partner in its first 2+ 2 dialogue held on November 30, 2019 and signing the Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services (RPSS) between the self-defence force of Japan and armed forces of India. Firstly, India, Japan, South East Asian and Far East Asian countries share various common concerns and interests at global, regional and bilateral levels, Contrary to its previous uncertain Policies, India is showing a positive approach to become an active participant in the Asian regional multilateral Forums, especially the ASEAN- led ARF and EAS.

India and China relations are in the process of enormous improvement but the unresolved border issues and China's military capability, importantly in the nuclear and missile field, such are factors which are play a negative role in the relations between Countries. Furthermore, China and India are emerging as competitors for investments, markets, technologies and for political influences in the world. South East Asia is already experienced a certain level of subtle competitiveness as India continues to bolster it's Act East Policy. They have undergone a fundamental shift in their relations. India is most likely to pursue an independent policy, especially with the United States of America, Japan And Australia. Therefore, since last decade, India has emerged as a vital player in the Asia-Pacific that can regulate the nature of regional political and strategic equilibrium. A brief evaluation of emerging Asia-Pacific security scenario is attempted below.

After the cold war's end, there were many debates on security in the Asia-Pacific, much of these debates was on, how geo-politics and geo-economics of the region would perform and what happen when the hegemony of world power was decline. Therefore, it is prudent to keep in our mind that any debate on the security balance of the Asia-Pacific must begin with a clear note of caution.

It is fact that the Asia-Pacific region has remained more on less peaceful after the end of cold war. But the future of this region is not looking as past. There are many existing well-known potential flashpoints such as Korean Peninsula, Taiwan problem, Hong Kong problem, South China Sea problem and the Kashmir issue, but major wars unlikely to occurs in the coming future. Countries use the force as an instrument to solve their dispute. Therefore, in the Indo – Pacific region, there are two types of operation is running simultaneously; the economic and security.

With the various security problems, as mention, the economic bonds are also enhancing very fast with each other. Trade is growing faster within the region. Similar tendencies to those in commerce can also be observed in regional investment. These growing trends are likely to pick up momentum of the area and if India manages to maintain the present growth rates in trade and economy. Due to the strengthen the fast-growing economic bonds across the Asia-Pacific region, various intra-regional linkages are being formed additionally , several new mechanism, political and economic initiatives are being developed, such as EAS, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6, BIMSTEC, IOR-ARC etc.

The characteristics of political relationships is also influenced by the changing economic relations .The economic structure of the area is influenced by the China due to its growing economy power. China will became the economic engine of the area due to its size and quick expansion, and as a result of its prosperity, it will also acquire potential dominance.

Simultaneously, multilateralism is emerged in this region for the security purpose. Creating a constructive communication and consultation on political and security matters for shared interests and concerns is the goal of ASEAN Regional Forum, which established in 1994. On the point of particular, the inter-great power relations that have been marked by constant tension and mutual suspicions. For example, it is difficult to neglect growing economy of Tokyo that its status as the dominant economic power is in the decline mode.

It is too early to give any definitive statements at this stage through given the fluidity of the security environment, It is not necessary that strong economic bonds and growing inter-dependence would reduce tensions. But no one can ignore common economic takes acting like a deterrent for blatant attempts to spread spheres of influence politically.

The Act East Policy: Objectives and Strategic Goals -

Increasing economic cooperation with the Asia – Pacific area is one of the Act East Policy’s main objectives. India wants to integrate it’s infrastructure, commerce, and investment with other East Asian economies, particularly the ASEAN nations. India is working to link it’s economy with the thriving markets of the Asia – Pacific region by taking part in regional trade agreement and economic initiatives. India is utilising regional trade agreement and efforts like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to connect it’s economy with the dynamic markets of the Asia – Pacific region.

India’ dedication to regional security and stability is emphasized by the policy. This entails developing strategic alliances with important regional entities including Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN nations, as well as, enhancing military cooperation and holding cooperative exercises. India’s strategic alignment with democratic partners to guarantee a free, open, and inclusive Indo – Pacific is exemplified by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which brings together the U.S., Japan, Australia and India.

Considering the strategic importance of the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, maritime security is an essential component of the Act East Policy. In order to protect important sea routes, combat piracy, and handle non-traditional security concerns, India is strengthen its naval capabilities and promoting marine collaboration. India wants to improve people – to – people relations with the countries in the Asia – Pacific region by utilising it’s rich cultural legacy. This strategy’s key elements that promote understanding and goodwill among people include cultural exchange, tourism, educational partnership, and diaspora participation.

Engagement with Asia – Pacific Region –

Political Engagement

If we discuss about the political engagement between the Asia-Pacific region and India, A two-dimensional approach has been used, first is to establish link with the regional multilateral Institutions and second is to improve two-way relation with the nations of the Asia-Pacific .

As a component of this policy, India is continuing trying to upgrade its political engagement with other important countries of Far East Asia such as Japan, China, Australia and South Korea. This process of increased political engagement got further strengthened with a various visit of Prime Minister. The political linkage with ASEAN has been further increased by the recent ASEAN- India partnership agreement. At the same time, India’s bilateral relations with the area have seen a notable shift.

Economic Engagement-

The economic exigencies are the prime factor behind the Act East Policy. It was strongly felt that India needed to qualitatively enhance its economic links with the growing Asia-Pacific region in order to liberalise its economy that was started in early 1990s with their Look East Policy. Trade between the Asia-Pacific region and India has increased throughout the 1990's, indicating a rise in economic contact between the two regions. To encourage economic exchanges at the level of the public and private sector, numerous institutional frameworks have been developed. India has signed many free trade area agreements among India, Japan, South Korea and South East Asia etc.

In an effort to promote more investment possibilities and seamless commercial flows, India is aggressively pursuing trade agreements with ASEAN and East Asian nations. Notable examples are the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Japan and the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore. In order to improve connection with Southeast Asia, India is investing in infrastructural projects. Two major projects to improve road and sea connectivity are the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project and the India – Myanmar – Thailand Trilateral Highway Project.

Strategic Engagement-

If we look upon the strategic engagement of India in Asia-Pacific region then we find that India seems to be enlarging the policy of defence cooperation with the Asia-Pacific countries. India consistently participates in the Shangri-La dialogue and the ASEAN Regional Forum, two crucial forums for security discourse in the Asia-Pacific area. Numerous bilateral military drills have been held between India and South East Asian nations to strengthen their security cooperation. Furthermore, the regular visits of the Military Chief to the region will strengthen the strategic cooperation. With a rising and aggressive Chinese policy, the Asia-Pacific region has become a strategically vital region for the other countries. In this scenario, India's challenges and options for ensuring effective security and defence indeed doubt.

Strategic conversations and high – level interactions with important regional entities have been institutionalised by India. Examples of India's commitment to ongoing diplomatic engagement include the yearly, India – ASEAN Summit, the East Asia Summit and bilateral strategic dialogues with South Korea, Japan, and Australia.

Challenges, Opportunities and Future Prospects -

Today, Asia-Pacific has both opportunities as well as challenges in the growing globalisation process, this region has commenced upon creating not only unprecedented opportunities for economic process and development but also substantially increasing intra-regional economic integration and interactions. For example, Japanese and Vietnamese economy, which till recently was the centre of growth for the region. There are several other countries which are emerging as pillar of economic power with having fastest growth across the region. The world's four largest economies are belonging to this region, and the two fastest growing economies of the region, which combined together more than 37 percent of the world's population are likely to create heavy demand for a variety of products and natural resources, which can benefit a large number of countries belonging to the production process of commodities. If the free trade agreements in bilateral and multilateral pattern are signed by the countries of the region, then they would help not only further increase mental of economic integration but also contribute to overall prosperity as well.

However, on the regional securities point of view there are serious challenges to be considered. Clearly, there is no suitable cause to the appearance of a danger for a conflict breaking out, but the region is undergoing various profound changes which alter the nature of regional order due to these developmental consequences. We can clearly see that the present equilibrium of regional order is going to change, the changing nature of relations between inter-great power and creation of many newly multilateral initiatives among the countries of the region. There are various issues that need greater attention for the peace, stability and development of the Asia-Pacific. This is widely accepted assumption that Asia-Pacific region transforms in a manner that it enters into a new era. If we go with this assumption then the problem of understanding and balancing regional security that must be used become important concern.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there are a tonne of potential. India's strategic involvement in the Asia – Pacific area might have significant advantages as it continues to be a major economic force in the world. The Act East Policy has the potential to considerably increase India's regional influence and contribute to a peaceful and prosperous Indo – Pacific region by creating t favourable climate for trade, investment, and security cooperation.

Conclusion-

India must needed to advance a dialogue-based approach to deal with security and peace related issues. India needs to build new networks and direct contacts among the militaries of the countries, which would help in reducing the tension and prevent actual hostilities. Now, India's should change their approach from bilateral basis to trilateral and multilateral format to build defence cooperation. Therefore, it may be prudent to solve security-related issues in trilateral or multilateral framework, where all concerned parties are contributing to solve the issues. India ought to progressively strengthen their relations and explore the possibility of free and open Asia-Pacific for the world. India would have to put in place robust policies for safeguarding and projecting its key national interest and in the process be the Net security provider for the Asia-Pacific region.

Act East Policy which emphasises proactive engagement with the Asia – Pacific region, marks a strategic pivot in India' foreign policy. India wants to become a stronger regional force and a key player in determining the future of the Indo – Pacific by combining the economic, security, and cultural aspects with the geopolitical environment of the 21st century changing, India's Act East Policy will become increasingly important in handling the Challenges and seizing the possibilities.

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