

Jagran editorial: India making Act East a reality, country's credibility rising

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Editorial

Jagran Editorial: India is realizing Act East, the country's reputation is increasing

During the ten years of Act East, Asia-Pacific has transformed into Indo-Pacific and most countries, except China, have a positive attitude towards this change. Now to make the concept of Indo-Pacific successful, India will have to create synergy between its Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) and the Indo-Pacific visions of other countries. India will now have to move forward with realism and strategic prudence.

Shriram Chaulia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is going to Laos to participate in the 21st India-ASEAN Summit and the 19th East Asia Summit. Though the presence of Prime Ministers in these two summits is common every year, this stopover holds special significance as India's Act East policy, i.e. the initiative to develop the eastern edge, has completed ten years.

In 2014, the Modi government renamed the Look East policy, which was in effect since 1992, as Act East with the objective of making it dynamic and comprehensive. On the basis of the developments of the last decade, it can be said that this was not a superficial change.

Under Act East, India has strengthened its relations with South East Asia (10 ASEAN countries), North East Asia (Japan, Korea and Mongolia) and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island countries) in trade, military and cultural fields. At the same time, India has also strengthened its strategic partnership with the US, which is directly related to the economic and geopolitical scenario of East Asia.

In the era of Act East, India has made deep inroads in East Asia. India was once known only as a South Asian country, but now it is playing a big role in deciding the destiny of East Asia. In a region where only China and America were once considered the major and decisive powers, today India's credibility has increased there and it is going to become even more influential in the future.

Australia's Lowy Institute, a research institute, has ranked India as the most powerful country after the US and China in the Asia Power Index 2024. It is not hidden from the various countries of East Asia that India is an important player in maintaining balance in their region. In 2004, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, had said that if ASEAN is the frame of an airplane, then China is one of its wings and India is the other and flight cannot take place without these two wings.

Today, under Act East, India-ASEAN bilateral trade has doubled to \$131 billion as compared to 2014. ASEAN has also given India the status of a comprehensive strategic partner above a strategic partner. However, the East Asian countries were hoping that India would also join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement in 2022 and that it would give them more opportunities in India's huge market.

But, due to India's trade deficit with ASEAN countries and China's huge investment in them, India avoided that agreement. On the other hand, with the aim of intensifying competition with China, America had created the Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022 itself, in which India became a founding member. Compensating for rejecting RCEP through IPEF is a challenge for Indian foreign policy.

India's growing proximity to the US will not only bring East Asia into a position of mutual economic benefit but will also enhance regional security. The US is considered the top defense partner in this region and China is the primary economic partner, but China has terrorized smaller countries with its expansionist behavior and intimidation in the past decade.

Every day China makes territorial claims on the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan and Japan and tries to dominate them with military force. In such a situation, India alone cannot resist China in a distant and extended region like East Asia. India, America, Japan and Australia have reactivated the Quad group since 2017.

The Quad is not a military alliance, but its aim is to create a regional order based on rules and international law. In clear terms, the Quad stands against the China-centricity of East Asia. India has also supported the Aakus alliance announced between the US, Britain and Australia and the Squad between the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines. It is in

India's interest to work together with these new groups to create a geopolitical balance. However, cooperation with such groups does not mean that India will be completely dependent only on the US and its friends.

In comparison to Look East, India has highlighted the issue of defence more in the Act East policy and has created new triangular equations in the Indo-Pacific. In view of this, useful combinations like India-Indonesia-Australia, India-France-Australia and India-Singapore-Thailand have been operational for some years. In this series, if triangular groups of India-Japan-South Korea and India-Vietnam-Indonesia are also formed, then India will not only remain as a security provider in the Indian Ocean, but will also be able to lead the entire Indo-Pacific.

(The columnist is an international affairs expert and author of 'Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners')