India's Revitalized Look at Pacific and East Asia

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1. Introduction

- Several political, security, economic and socio-cultural factors are at play making Asia Pacific a highly dynamic region. India needs to have a long term strategy to make use of the opportunities arising in the Asia-Pacific while keeping in view the security challenges.
- The Asia-Pacific is marked by the following key trends:
  - rise of China;
  - the rebalancing strategy of the US;
  - a regional architecture underpinned by centrality of ASEAN;
  - the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region and maritime issues;
  - The growing salience of non-traditional security threats.
- The Indian Government will pursue a greater role in the Asia-Pacific in line with India’s growing economic and strategic interests, based on practical partnerships with Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and ASEAN.
- India’s Look East Policy has shaped its engagement with the Asia-Pacific for over two decades, and, in recent years, has been driven by an external balancing strategy against China’s influence in the Indian Ocean, as well as India’s desire for a greater global role.
- The evolution of India’s “Look East” policy to an “Act East” agenda under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is part of a serious effort by India to become a more influential power east of Malacca.
- Several political, securities, economic and socio-cultural factors are at play making Asia Pacific a highly dynamic region. India needs to have a long term strategy to make use of the opportunities arising in the Asia-Pacific while keeping in view the security challenges.

2. Opportunities for India

- India enjoys high credibility in ASEAN and East Asia. India and ASEAN have raised their partnership to strategic level. The challenge is to deepen it further.
- The ASEAN-India Commemorate Summit Vision Statement has identified a number of projects for cooperation in the fields of political and security, economic, socio-cultural and developmental, connectivity in regional architecture.
- Earlier, the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Report (2013) had identified even a larger spread of projects for cooperation. Thus, there is no dearth of ideas. However, what is required is the identification of resources, establishment of institutional framework, monitoring mechanisms, coordination etc. to ensure a timely implementation of these projects.
- The next big trend in ASEAN region will be ASEAN economic union & RCEP. This will open up opportunities for India.
- The success of ASEAN-India cooperation will depend upon how rapidly the two sides move towards economic integration through FTA in services and in future through RCEP.
- India has yet to weigh the costs & benefits of joining the RCEP.
- The connectivity between ASEAN and India has been talked about for a long time but the progress has been slow.
- Similarly, the regional cooperation, particularly within the framework of BIMSTEC and Ganga-Mekong Cooperation, the Trilateral Highway etc. has also been slow. The two sides need to focus on implementation issues.

3. Strategic significance

- India’s engagement with East and Southeast Asia has also developed strategic dimensions. In particular, as China’s relationships with India’s neighbors in the Indian Ocean deepen, the strategic relevance of India’s own connections with neighboring Asian states in the Pacific Ocean will likewise grow.
• Importantly, China’s assertiveness, particularly in maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, is prompting Asia-Pacific nations to look to India to play a balancing role; demonstrated by the accelerated outreach to India by states such as Japan and Vietnam.
• With almost 55 per cent of India’s trade transiting through the Malacca Straits, India does not want to see these crucial waterways dominated by a strategic competitor.

4. PM visit to Fiji and other Pacific island countries and its significance

Background information
• The Pacific Ocean is the earth’s largest ocean covering 46 per cent of water surface and 33 per cent of the earth’s total surface, making it larger than the entire earth’s land area.
• It is bounded by 41 sovereign states plus Taiwan, and 22 non-independent territories. It is rich in marine resources and accounts for 71 per cent of the world’s ocean fishery catch.
• The Pacific has for long been an area of geostrategic interest for countries such as the US, Japan, China, Russia, Australia, and Indonesia – large economies which lie on its boundary. The 14 PIF members are being wooed by these powers.

Salient points of Prime Minister visit
• Narendra Modi had become the first Indian prime minister to visit Fiji in the South Pacific Ocean in the last 31 years (after Indira Gandhi in 1983).
• It is indeed significant for India to focus on Fiji, a country which has earned much praise in the world community for its transition towards democracy, undertaking constitutional and legal reforms and playing role of a significant regional player.
• Fiji has a high percentage of ethnic Indians and Narendra Modi and his Fijian counterpart Frank Bainimarama, an elected leader now, will look forward to harness the deep historical and cultural links between the two countries. The fact that Bainimarama has taken the initiative to invite representatives from 13 other island-nations of the Pacific to meet PM Modi speaks abundantly about his willingness to cement relations with an old ally like India.
• A number of countries in the Pacific Ocean have a large concentration of people of Indian origin and Modi will look forward to tapping those human resources to spread India’s soft power further as a counter to serious competitor like China in those areas.
• Fiji is also significant for India as it helps the latter track the Mangalyaan, one of the biggest prides in India’s space programme, from near its territory.
• 3 MOU signed:
  1. MoU on Cooperation on exchange of information on structure and content of training programs for diplomats.
• The second summit of the Forum for India Pacific Cooperation (FIPIC-2) in Jaipur on 21-22 August 2015 has made significant progress in strengthening India’s engagement with the 14 Pacific Island countries who are members of the Forum. Building upon the previous summit in Fiji in November 2014, FIPIC-2 announced several new projects and activities.
• Way forward: Indian diplomatic representation is weak and many of the PIF members are covered by small non-resident Indian missions which are not able to make frequent visits. More frequent visits are required, which implies strengthening our Missions covering the region. Another approach could be to have, in addition, Special Envoys from India for promoting bilateral relations with these countries. These could provide advocacy and give a push to cooperation.
Australia:

- India and Australia have a long history of shared security interests, both within and beyond the Indo-Pacific region. This illustrates the potential for further growing and deepening our relations.
- As two prominent Indian Ocean states, India and Australia are cooperating closely in the region. Building cooperation helps to provide for a more secure maritime environment.
- By 2030, the Indo-Pacific region is expected to account for 21 of the top 25 sea and air trade routes; around two-thirds of global oil shipments; and one third of the world’s bulk cargo movements. So improving security will be crucial to protecting our prosperity.
- In this setting, it is not surprising that, being Indian Ocean states, defence engagement between Australia and India focuses on joint naval cooperation.
- The ships of India-Australia navies regularly engage in port visits — and short-term passage exercises —to further our relationship. HMAS Newcastle visited India in April this year to mark the centenary of ANZAC celebrations and to conduct a passage exercise. Perhaps most significantly, our navies will conduct our first Bilateral Maritime Exercise-Exercise AUSINDEX-in September.

Act East Policy (Upgraded Look East Policy) in 2014:

- The Look East policy has shaped India’s engagement with the Asia-Pacific for over two decades, substantially deepening India’s economic, institutional, and security relations with the region. Initially intended to develop India’s economic ties with Southeast Asia, India’s engagement with its eastern neighbours has since shifted to include Northeast Asia and Australia. In recent years, Look East has acquired a strategic dimension with a significant naval emphasis.
- Since coming to power in 2014, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has lent India’s Look East policy even greater momentum, unveiling an upgraded ‘Act East Policy’ during the India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. This is more than just a rebranding.
- The message is that India is becoming increasingly willing to play a more active and prominent strategic role, exemplified by enhanced defence diplomacy in East and Southeast Asia.
- In addition, since becoming Prime Minister, Modi has advocated a ‘Look East, Link West Policy’ pointing to a broader Indo-Pacific conceptualization of India’s region.
- Prior to the 2014 election, expectations were high that Modi would build on Gujarat’s existing economic links with China, Japan, and Singapore to deepen India’s engagement with the region. India’s decision to upgrade its Look East Policy is a reflection of the longer-term economic and strategic benefits of closer relations with the Asia-Pacific.
- The Modi Government has devoted considerable diplomatic energy to strengthening relations with key East and Southeast Asian partners, with particular emphasis on Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and ASEAN.
- The forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation was launched in 2014 as platform to further India’s association with the 14 island nations of the Pacific like Fiji, Kiribati, and Marshall Etc. The Forum is providing a perfect platform.

Importance of these pacific island Nations for India:

- It is key factor in India’s Act East Policy
- Strategic importance: China’s relationships with India’s neighbours in the Indian Ocean deepen, the strategic relevance of India’s own connections with neighbouring Asian states in the Pacific Ocean will likewise grow. So for countering China’s Sphere of influence.
- Climate Change Negotiations: Co-operation in upcoming international for a can be sought, such as at COP-21 in Paris.
- UNSC: The Island Nations support India’s candidature for the permanent membership of a reformed UN security council.
- Diaspora: A number of countries in the Pacific Ocean have a large concentration of people of Indian origin. Over 37% of the Fiji population belongs to Indian origin.
• **Resources:** Rich in resources such as oil, gas, sea bed minerals etc.
• **Soft Power Diplomacy:** Providing grants in aid,
• **Trade and Investment**
• **Space Mission:** Fiji has been instrumental in hosting Indian scientists for tracking India's Mars Mission. Similarly other Island nations can be vital in other space mission.

5. **Way Forward**

• One of the weaknesses of India’s Look East Policy has been the relatively less involvement of **India’s North East** in it. This lacuna must be addressed urgently.
• An institutional framework needs to be set up for security cooperation between India and ASEAN. For instance, the India-Japan security statement of 2008 could be adopted for India-ASEAN security dialogue and cooperation. This will help set up a broad-based security dialogue between the Indian and ASEAN institutions. India-ASEAN counter-terrorism dialogue should be stepped up & information sharing should be facilitated. Mutual legal assistance treaties and extradition treaties should be set up. Maritime security dialogue should be initiated.
• Andaman and Nicobar Islands should be brought into the framework of India-ASEAN relations.
• People-to-people connectivity needs to be improved.
• India needs to pay special attention to Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore on bilateral level. These countries can help India in raising Indian regional profile.
• India needs to focus on Indian Ocean issues and those of Ocean governance. India needs to take active role in the shaping of the agenda of IOR-ARC.