

## Book Review

# The Indo-Pacific in India's imagination

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*S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra  
India's Eastward Engagement-  
From antiquity to Act East Policy Sage, 2019*

The book, as the title suggests, takes an overview of India's relations with its East from pre-historic times to the present. It articulates the Indo-Pacific idea for India. The inclusion of the discussion on the historical background makes this book relevant to the current discourse on India's role in the Indo-Pacific. In keeping with the contemporary discourse, the book has used the term 'Indo-Pacific' throughout. The book attractively captures how Indo-Pacific has always been India's vision of the wide maritime region that it straddles extending into the Pacific in the East. Amidst the different concepts and definitions from other countries, the book argues upfront that India should not look to base its Indo-Pacific strategy on other countries' notions but should examine its own history. This reckoning makes ownership of the Indo-Pacific idea unambiguous. The authors write that since India has had old cultural and historical linkages with the Pacific, it can easily accept the construct of Indo-Pacific. Even if India sees convergence with US's Indo-Pacific interest then that is also compatible with its own interests. However, India's Indo-Pacific idea that covers Western Africa is at odds with ASEAN centrality because ASEAN has no game in Africa. Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical term has its advocates and the dissenters and the question arises whether this dichotomy divides Asia. Despite the passage of time the trend of international relations in Asia appear unchanged. Southeast Asia did not want to choose between India and China during the Bandung conference, and even now they do not wish to make either-or choice. This sentiment runs deep till date

### Look East to Act East

India's Look East Policy was renamed as 'Act East Policy' during the first term of Prime

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Minister Modi, signalling a more vigorous approach towards the Eastern neighbourhood. Several books and literature exists on the topic but the focus of these books is largely from 1990's onwards. For an average student of Southeast or East Asian studies in India, the understanding of the relationship with the East begins with the end of the Cold War and how the fall of the iron curtain served as an avenue for New Delhi to engage with the East. Generally it is known that India enjoyed a close relationship with the East during the 1950s. But how close was India with East Asia before the Cold War? Or, how were India-Southeast Asia connections in the ancient and medieval times? The answer can be found in this book. The book is divided into seven chapters that also cover India's foreign policy towards the east.

The first two chapters, fairly lengthy, examine the history of India-East connections. The first chapter is conceptual and examines India's idea of the East- how the East has been traditionally seen as the pious or a good omen culturally. In the second chapter titled '*Waves of History*' the authors go back in history, presenting crucial evidence of India's linkages with the East since 'antiquity' as suggested in the title. Archaeological evidence in Thailand dating back to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC bear remarkable similarity to evidences discovered in Northern India. There are books that have written about India's ancient connections to the East through trade, religion and political expeditions but this book puts it all together with the contemporary developments.

When it comes to the Indian influence, culture is the largest aspect. The Authors have categorised it into three phases- the Hindu-Buddhist, the spread of Islam and, the British colonial. This section is very interesting with its presentation of relevant historical evidences. The Indian influence on this region is profound and widespread, making it 'greater India'. One of the Indonesian scholars, Fareesh Al-Noor had remarked once that Muslims in Southeast Asia look at India as the home of Islam. The interesting question raised here is- What is the idea of India? What is its geographical expanse? Do the current borders represent the idea of India? This is indeed a rather theoretical problem because it does not have much relevance in the present times. Today India's relations with the East are guided by interests and less by ideational factors. Also, this region has had influence from China as well- which some may not know and may have the impression that Indian influence was unchallenged. The book does not look into China's influence in much depth, simply because that is not the book's purview. But a reader would reckon that the Indian and Chinese influences have existed in this region since ancient times and continue even today, though the Indian connection has been more extensive.

The third chapter focuses on the role of Pandit Nehru in shaping India's eastward engagement. Called '*The Nehru Wave*' this the period is classified into three phases. It describes Nehru's vision of Asia, of India's place, and his views on China, and how his participation in the International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism in 1927 influenced him to shape the Congress Party's views on world affairs. Nehru's ability in building relations with Asian neighbours are well presented. There are sections on Nehru's trips to Burma, Indonesia, and his views on Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and Japan. The fourth chapter '*After Nehru: Did India get distanced*' assesses the role of his successors- Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai and Rajiv Gandhi.

Nehruvian idealism gave way to realism in the 1980s when India supported Vietnam on the Cambodian issue. The Indian position cannot be said to have created a wedge between it and the ASEAN states, which had taken an anti-Vietnam posture. These issues have been well explained and go to show that international relations are never a zero-sum game. Each country has its interests which may not suit another country but there is a broader understanding of both the inevitability of national priorities and of shared interests.

### **Evolving Policy towards the East**

India's recent engagement with East Asia has a pattern. It has faced regular interruptions beyond India's control-- such as European colonisation, and Cold War rivalry. Additionally, domestic issues in Southeast Asia, and the dynamics of South Asia have prevented and continue to constrain India from playing a bigger role in the region. The formulation of the 'Look East Policy' (LEP) in the early 1990s ended the ad-hoc approach that had guided the foreign policy till then. This phase was driven by PM Narasimha Rao's vision and authors write on how his role deserves to be acknowledged.

India's China policy has also evolved with the passage of time. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi set the normalisation process rolling and was carried forward by Rao. India has been sensitive about the role of Western navies in the Indian Ocean given its appalling colonial experience, but by the 1990s began to realise that it needs to cooperate with the US while safeguarding its autonomy. With the announcement of US's rebalancing strategy in 2011, and in the light of China's assertiveness in India's neighbourhood and in the South China Sea, '*the consolidation and expansion of India in the Asia-Pacific region looked inevitable.*' This was articulated by PM Manmohan Singh when he accorded the LEP as India's topmost foreign policy priority. The efforts of the various leaders and actors made India a key player in East Asia- something that Nehru had predicted decades ago.

Under PM Narendra Modi the LEP was reconceptualised as 'Act East' and expanded to include Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Island Countries, even Bangladesh and, a deeper engagement with US and Japan,' *with an additional priority on security, connectivity and regional integration*' and it moves beyond ASEAN. The sixth chapter titled *Act East Policy (2014- ) : How different, How Successful* presents the current led of the policy, 2014 onwards and write that five years (2014 to 2019) is too short a time to assess the policy outcomes.

While the book covers India's eastward engagement comprehensively, a few aspects required more discussion. When one wants to understand the genesis of foreign policy, all facets are expected to be uncovered- despite all the goodwill, 'how and why we failed' to engage the region more effectively are critical questions that the book should have tried to answer. The authors devote substantial discussion to Nehru's activities and achievements but have not covered his failures, or the reason for his diminished influence, in equal detail. If you are looking for answers as to why China became hostile to India or how Indonesia fell out with India, they are not found in any detail in this book. That said, one gets a sense that at Bandung, Nehru seemed to have underrated the communist threat that China posed to Southeast Asian countries when he went on '*selling China to Indonesia*'. Clearly, his sentiments were misplaced.

Similarly, the authors have only vaguely referred to Subhash Chandra Bose. The authors suggest that when Subhash Chandra Bose sought help from Japan, it was not appreciated in Southeast Asia and it dented the regional perception of India. This is an important and controversial point which requires more discussion than what the authors have provided, and more evidence. There should have been at least a footnote or a reference for elaborating such an argument, and it should have been backed by solid evidence. Likewise, the part about the strategic undertone on India-Southeast Asia relations that were shaped by the British, and how the use of force by the British '*distorted the idea of India in the perception of the East by adding a military and aggressive dimension to it*' could have been properly elaborated.

The book is a scholarly work with a clear policy perspective in how it presents the history of India's eastward connection. It helps one understand how India's eastward engagement began, how it was shaped and what the challenges it faces. It covers the role every Indian Prime Minister in shaping policies towards the East. We learn about the centuries-long process of India's eastern engagement and the authors have some valuable recommendations for the future. One must also appreciate the comprehensive annexures that compile all the diplomatic visits, India's trade with ASEAN, details of India's trade, FDI

inflows and outflows and military exercises. These comprehensive annexures are valuable for researchers. The referencing style is reader-friendly and does not disrupt the flow. The book would be valuable to students of Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian studies and of interest to experts of Indian Foreign policy.