

LOOKING EAST, ACTING EASTWARD

By **Jed Del Rosario** - Sunday, February 17, 2019



For CENTURIES, Indian merchants and missionaries have visited and interacted with South East Asia, including the area that would later become the Philippines. This Indian influence persists today in the form of several cultural and linguistic artefacts.

However, Southeast Asia's relationship with India is more than just a historical and cultural fact, it is also a geopolitical reality, and it is a reality that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is attempting to capitalize on through the Act East policy, a policy which aims to strengthen India's economic and political influence in our neck of the woods.

The Act East Policy traces its origins to India's Look East Policy, which began in Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's administration. What makes these two policies different is that the Look East policy was primarily an economic strategy, whereas the Act East policy links India's military and economic interests with those of East and Southeast Asia.

The Act East policy also seeks to strengthen India's Northeastern region by linking its infrastructure with various Southeast Asian nations, particularly Myanmar and Thailand. Japan may even be included in this new policy, with Tokyo and New Delhi policymakers proposing the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, which is an obvious attempt to challenge China's One Belt One Road Initiative.

However, Act East is more than just about expanding trade and influence. In order to understand the context of this policy, it's important to point out that China and Pakistan maintain strong ties, which presents a problem for India, given the country's long and complicated history with both of its neighbors.

Also, India is a relatively isolated country, blocked by mountainous regions to the north and surrounded by oceans to the south, east and west. For a long time, these geographical realities prevented India from projecting its interests beyond its immediate sphere of influence, and now its leaders are trying to address that issue.

If India cannot expand its economic and military influence then it will lag behind China, which is actively expanding its influence not only in Asia, but also in Africa. India, therefore, finds itself a situation where it must catch up with an aggressive PRC or risk getting left behind in the larger global system, and this is good for Southeast Asia.

India's Look East policy offers several great opportunities not only for the Philippines but for the rest of ASEAN as well. For starters, India has a large economy, and although such an economy is not yet compatible with ASEAN countries, a little prudent investment may be what's necessary to bridge the divide.

Secondly, India has a considerable military, a military which may be leveraged to maintain regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia. And of course, India has strong historical ties with Southeast Asian nations, and rebuilding such ties may yield favorable dividends in the future./PN

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