

“Act East” Policy as India’s Respond to China Expansion

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Abstract

This article aims to explain India’s Foreign Policy change in 2014 from ‘Look East’ policy to ‘Act East’ policy. India as world’s largest democracy and a rising power has exercised her power in both South Asia and Indian Ocean. On the other side, China’s assertiveness in those two regions. The trigger of this foreign policy change is China’s strategies in which China aims to enter European market Where the trading paths are through Indian Ocean littoral countries including South Asia. These strategies are famously known as The String of Pearls and One Belt One Road (OBOR) where China is trying to create hegemony mainly with economic aid and infrastructure development. By Hegemonic Stability Theory from Robert Keohane and Securitization Theory from Barry Buzan, this article shows the periodical events for India’s foreign policy progress, China’s approaches to achieve its interest, and how India’s action to contain power and influences from another country in Indian Ocean littoral countries.

Keywords: *foreign policy, Act East, Indian Ocean littoral countries, Sino-Indian*

Introduction

The success of India in economy, military and politic cannot be separated with the struggle of dark historical background from The Great Britain colonization. Having to suffer from great poverty facing agriculture catastrophe which the country could not feed its population, motivated India to open for cooperation with international Institution. Because of its policy, India could pass poverty and started building infrastructure .

A developing country like india was going through economic liberalization to improve efficiency of the economy in global market by launching a market-oriented economic reform to integrate its national economy with global economy. With the new

intention to capitalize Southeast Asia economy, India interest also aiming to political and military relation with the region and also India was trying to free herself from narrowing South Asia relation. India was trying to dominate South Asia region, the country got geographic advantage such as India is the center of South Asia with India land and maritime border, for non-Indian state access the must cross Indian territory. India has been looking influence in Southeast Asian countries, but now, India has managed to rebuild relation with its neighbors in South Asia except for Pakistan. This is because they had freezing relations that India was not active in regional agenda. Additionally, India has done some agreements with Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal to achieve multilateral agreement among South Asian member countries (Jena, 2012).

The birth of “Look East” Foreign policy in 1990s became the pillar of Indian Foreign Policy, it aims a closer relation with Asian countries. A developing country like india was going through economic liberalization to improve efficiency of the economy in global market by launching a market-oriented economic reform to integrate its national economy with global economy. With the new intention to capitalize Southeast Asia economy, India interest also aiming to political and military relation with the region and also India was trying to free herself from narrowing South Asia relation. Then India tried to engage the region so it did not dominated by single China power (Gangully & Pardesi, 2009). As the data displayed above, we can see that India’s engagement with Southeast Asia countries projected within “Look East” Foreign policy in 1991. Initially for strengthen economic cooperation then India tried to play bigger role in politic field.

With the stable growth in the last decade, India has rise as one of the largest economies in Asia. With the rising of middle class, India has large potential and opportunities in the region and global stage. From this, India sees the opportunities from ASEAN’s strategic location that makes its stability crucial for India’s economic security,

then India looks to develop its influence in the region by shaping vital relations with ASEAN. But, not only India that has the intention to exercise its power in Asia. China's presence became a big concern for India. China provided military support to all India's neighbors, especially China provided important assistance to Pakistan in nuclear program. The threatening presence of China was not only in Pakistan, but also to countries that have touching borders with India. Meanwhile China tried to increase bilateral trade in Asia. So, India needs to secure its position by rebuilding relationship with Asia countries.

China Strategies in Indian Ocean Littoral Countries and Asia

In order to fulfill China's interest, the country was implementing two strategies. There are the 'string of pearls' strategy to ensure domination in Indian ocean littoral countries by military and naval presence and the second is the 'One Belt One Road' strategy to achieve China's economic ambition by considering some bilateral and multilateral relationship. Within the idea of hegemonic stability, it was said that it is only needed a dominant power in a region to create a law and order. To become a hegemon, a country needs a capability to manage the system in the region. To manage and maintain the order, a hegemon needs to fulfill three conditions, first is massive economic development, second is a dominant economy and technology sector, and the third is military power. If there is a condition where one of these conditions is overlapped by another state, the hegemon could lose its position as a dominant actor in a region or as a hegemon. With China's growing economy and military has proven that the country is capable on maintaining the three conditions in order to become a dominant power country. Therefore, China is developing maritime its maritime power, through its aircraft carrier, China is trying to project power in Indian Ocean and South Asia. In that region, China is developing naval program facilities in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and

Pakistan. Mostly, the financial aids that given by China for those countries are for building ports and infrastructure to ease the energy transport from the Middle East countries to China. For instance, China is developing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This relation was part of the 'One Belt One Road' strategy that aimed to increase trade between China, the Middle east and Europe. Thus, China was practicing its strategies in the Indian Ocean littoral countries and the South Asia in order to fulfill its goals, such as gain recognition through economic domination in the region as mentioned before.

India's Act East Foreign Policy

Having 70 percent of oil and gas energy traded and imported through Indian Ocean, India required to have free access to sea routes to ensure its economic development. With the increased presence and influence of Chinese naval military in the Indian Ocean, India needed to secure its interest and profile in the region. According to K.M Panikkar, an pioneer Indian geopolitics, he argued that more than 60years ago, Indian Ocean must remain truly for Indian, since India's trading activity was dependent on Indian Ocean. Earlier, in 16th century, a Portugese Governor Alfonso Albuquerque stated that strategic choke points extended along the Indian Ocean. It was started at the Horn of Africa to the Malacca Strait (Ministry of Defence, 2007). From these facts, India believed that Indian Ocean must be protected because the region is important for India. Since then, India's economic activity became more dynamics around the waters. In the Cold War era, India limited its influence in the Indian waters and its littoral countries. The country isolated herself from its neighbor in defence condition. However, in 1991, India took different approach and adapted a new policy to compete with a rising China. Then, India opened up its political and diplomatic circle along with economic reform by implementing economic liberalization. Improving its foreign policy into neighbourhood

centrist, India had three main points where regional integration centered. There are culture, commerce and connectivity. India shared famous historical relations with South Asia countries in terms of culture and commerce. In fact, connectivity became a crucial point in shaping regional relationship. From this, India is trying to alter the role of a regional leader and global actor. India pursued a greater regional integration through trade, and investment that covered energy, education, and disaster management. So, many approach has been done by India government to enhance connectivity and cooperation in diverse areas. Thus, India needed to improve connectivity through cultural ties, technology and transportation (Mathur, 2014).

Geographically, The country shares land and water border with eight countries. They are Bangladesh, Bhutan, The Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. They shared close borders, they also has close historical, religious, economic and languages. Because of the geographical closeness, they often not seceded on maintaining peace and regional stability, in fact they faced many frictions among neighbors. But, to become a regional leader, India is trying to promote more advance relation with neighborhood. The reason why India claimed South Asia as her backyard because South Asian countries shares collaborative languages cultures, religions, and ethics. Thus, India called those regions as its backyard The country underwent a policy change that focus on economy and geography strategy that was implemented in the South Asia region and Indian Ocean littoral countries since Indian Ocean is considered India's backyard, so India must take care of it.

Regardless India's claim upon the importance of the all Indian Ocean region, historically and economically, India's concerns are around the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, and the part of Northern Indian Ocean (NIOA) that extent around 50 kilometers . the NIOA was important for India because it connect the waters

of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal that became the key economic success (India Ministry of Defence, 2009). According to the United States Department of Energy, in the region, there were oil back-up and fisheries underneath the NIOA. India produced 3.93 million tons of fish annually, also the region was significant for India because it could produce 5.7 billion barrels of oil (Energy Information Association, 2011, pp. 2-4). . More than 100.000 ships passed through this location annually. The trading shipping lanes were facilitated by more than 187 minor ports. From 1986 to 2006, statistic shows that imports situation rocketed to 2.900 percent. Through this region, India imports 75 percent of oil and 16 percent of the gas (Krueger, 2008, p. 273). From these facts, it display Indian Ocean's significances to India. Thus, with several countries located in Indian Ocean's littoral , India decided to make a great sphere influence in that region.

Clearly, India was an important geopolitical player in the region. It has 12 major ports and 200 non major ports extending from the East and West cost of its island. Therefore India was very dependent and ambitious toward Indian Ocean Region. Through the region, India run its activity such as export and imported of important cargo, oil, gas, and energy. Then, India's maritime interest was to secure its shipping lines. Despite China's growing naval presence in Indian Ocean, India had overcome the problem regarding to her security. Within the Act East policy, India transformed the Indian Navy from a coastal force to a distant operation from the Indian Ocean and beyond. India planned to spend US\$61 billion in next 12 years to expand its naval assets. In addition, the country also added more than 100 new warship and panned to add six nuclear ballistic missile submarines (Albert, 2016) .

Moreover, China's "string of pearls" strategy and "One Belt One Road" initiatives also naval presence in India Ocean threaten New Delhi's ambition to create sphere of Influence in the region. To counter the threats possessed by China,

India with Iran underwent finalization of the Chabahar Agreement to lessen Chinese influence in Indian Ocean through the Gwadar port in Pakistan. Additionally, to contain China's aggressiveness in India's neighbourhood, India on the other hand developed strong military relationship with Maldives. The development included having two helicopters permanently basing in the Maldives to increase its surveillance capability. India also set-up naval radars along Maldives' entire coastline that would detect approaching vessels and aircraft. These radars would be controlled by Indian Coastal Command (Shrivastava, 2014)

Barry Buzan in his book explained that states, territory, and society security were essential part of international security. Thus, India as a rational actor justified any extraordinary measure if there was any security threat (Buzan, Waever, & Wilder, 1998, pp. 24-25). From this strategies, India saw China's assertive as threat that surrounded India from its 'backyard' which was the Indian Ocean and India was aware of that development. Thus, India's change in policy could be indicated as an immediate action toward China's expansion.

However, the importance of Indian Ocean pulled India to define its strategic implication or according to Barry Buzan, India took an extraordinary mesaure toward threats. Through 'Act East' strategy that was initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India was becoming more focused in Asia-pacific region that primarily include South Asia and India Ocean where the places became the focus of strategic international sea lines of communication and maritime resources. India's focuses toward Asia-Pacific emphasizes in India's proactive roles as a stable peacebuilder, political and economic partner within the whole Asia Pacific region including Australia and New Zaeland (Panda, 2016). Using this new foreign policy, New Delhi

had to reform essential aspects including politic, security, ideology, national identity in order to influence in international politic and ease the securitization move.

India's relation with all South Asia countries were not always in a good condition. For instance, India-Pakistan border dispute. India considered Pakistan as a threat, moreover China has been giving aid to Pakistan related to major infrastructure development. India was not only had historical and border dispute with Pakistan, but also with other Asia countries, such as Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Myanmar (Gaens & Ruohomaki, 2017). Knowing India's relation with its neighborhood countries, China in the same time has been actively approaching that region. Then, China through his military and economy aid were welcomed by that region, considering China barely had historical and border dispute with South Asia countries.

Considering that India is a securitization actor, India was likely to highlight sovereignty and power, highlight wealth, highlight offensive and defensive strategy, highlight interest to achieve sustainability, and highlight national ideology to justify its actions (Buzan, Waever, & Wilder, 1998, pp. 22-23). To make India and its neighbourhood countries in a positive condition, there were several approaches had been done by India, such economic, diplomatic, and security approaches. These approaches were likely succeed if applied in regional organization. Realizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision to rebuild neighbourhood relation in the South Asia region, he invited the leaders of government of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to participate in his inauguration ceremony on 26th May 2014. This action indicated Modi's priority and seriousness towards neighbourhood countries.

To fulfill India's agenda creating a good profile as a part of Act East policy in South Asia region. India should work in convincing its neighbourhood that India was an opportunity and not a threat. Among South Asian countries, India is the largest country and has the strongest economy. She has a responsibility to lead SAARC to grow its domestic market. In its open market, India already joint with Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. They agreed to invest and to upgrade cross-border infrastructure. To accomplish the foreign policy, For instance, Modi visited Bhutan and Nepal, meanwhile his Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Nepal. By actually visiting these country, it showed that India put high priority to its neighbourhood country. Modi left a clear message that India respected Nepal that proven by India's willingness to aid Nepal's development agenda. India offered a loan of US\$100 billion to please Nepal government. From this effort, Modi hoped that the action could bridge the communication gap for the past few years (Muni, Modi's Neighbourhood Initiative, 2014).

Having China as threats of security but also a potential economic partner, India initiate subregion group consist of Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar that focused on regional commercial hub that connect India and China. In order to integrate countries in the South Asia, India initiated anew subregional development like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).. Additionally, to become a security provider in the Indian Ocean, India tried to strengthen its naval capabilities by participating in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise (Ashraf, 2015). Furthermore, India initiated annual naval exercise called "Malabar" exercise.

According to Waever, security means state's declaration to an urgent or emergency condition. Thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development (Waever, Buzan, & Wilde, 1988, p. 26). To do securitization move, the government need to allocate resource to present an existential threat to justify action taken by the government. But then, the most important think to understand securitization action is, it is an intersubjective approach. Most of the time, it is not easy to judge or refer an issue really a threat or not . Different states and nations have different stance and opinion to define the existence of threat. For instance, the action taken by India to change its foreign policy from 'Look East' to 'Act East' that more focus on military, security and economic partnership around the Indian Ocean. India felt the presence of China military power in the Indian Ocean and its littoral states. But some of the states did not feel China's presence as a threat, such as Pakistan. Pakistan welcomed China's presence because China supported infrastructure developement, and most importantly, Pakistan got military aid to back-up the Kashmir border issue between India and Pakistan. However , India still believe to counter China's power in Indian Ocean and its littoral countries by conducting immediete military joint excercise whcih the member of this excercise were countries that also felt China's assertiveness in their territorial. The exercise aimed to ensure India's neighbourhood countries to believe China's aggressive approach in the field of maritime security.

To prove India's seriousness about perceiving Chinese power and activity in Indian Ocean, the country worked hard on push and strengthen security relationship with Indian Ocean's littoral countries. By increasing security capacity to these small countries, India expected to have her national interest fulfilled and supported by these small powers. In early 2015, Prime Minister Modi published all his tours in

Indian Ocean littoral countries such as Mauritius, the Seychelles, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. These high visits stimulated India's five way security arrangement such as strengthening maritime capabilities, training, and sharing maritime awareness among these five states (Brewter, 2015). India was not merely focused on its neighbourhood countries, but also far countries on the Indian Ocean rim especially Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Fruhling, Goldrick, & Medcalf, 2014). These countries shared similar concern with India upon China's long term purpose and proposition in Indian Ocean.

According to the United States Department of Defence, it said that, "Maintaining a shared vision on maritime security issues; upgrading the bilateral maritime security partnership; and collaborating to both build regional partner capacity and improve regional maritime domain awareness (Department of Defence, 2015)". From this statement, it became India's motivation to contain China's growing expansion in the Indian Ocean Region. Also, it could be interpreted that India is working on enhancing its military capabilities as security provider in the region.

Act East policy focuses around economic improvement, diplomacy including high level visits, and military exercises. For instance, the country adding more its military command area in the form of naval presence and it was used to utilize navy as a main instrument of diplomacy. The country was success in establishing a Special Strategic Partnership with Japan, South Korean and Phillipines to conduct joint military drills. Considering that China had naval bases in Djibouti, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan. India also had a counter plan to reduce China's influence by building naval facility in Seychelles. Also, India increased its naval assets in the Bay of Bengal to balance China's project with

Pakistan knows as the China Pakistan Economy Corridor (CPEC) (Karim, 2017, pp. 80-82).

Not only India focused on Indian Ocean region maritime security, but also The Northern approach which was considered as key element success of 'Act East' policy. There were several reasons why India would like to conduct and success the Act East policy. Geographically, India was considered a strategic region that could become a game changer in achieving policies. Located between China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar which the border stretched up to 4,500 km. This region would like to be used by India as an opportunity to bridge India and Southeast Asia. Historically, many people traded and travelled through the Southeast Asia region and Yunnan through the old Silk Road. They traded salt, handicraft, silk, spices, and other goods in Himalaya. This region was the place for people to pass for migration from Southeast Asia to Yunnan to Assam (Myint-U, 2011). Moreover, India's first prime minister already recognized the potential of the region. He proposed to build the Asian Highway and Asian Railway Link and natural gas pipeline. For the Asian Highway, this project was supposed to be started at the Imphal in India to Tamu and Myanmar, then the road was continued to Mandalay in Myanmar beside that, India also supported the railway building to connect India and Singapore through Kuala Lumpur, Hi Chi Minh City, Phnom Pen, Bangkok, Vientiane, Yangon, Mandalay, Klemyo, Tamu, Dhaka, and Kolkata. The road construction has started from Tamu to Kalemyo in Myanmar. There was a plan to construct a 1,360 km highway from Moren in India to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar (Goswami N. , Looking East through India's North East, 2009, p. 30). According to Moreh Chief Minister Ibobi Singh, "Moreh is the most strategic international trading point in the region"

(Lee, 2007). Picture below showed India's project to connect India to Myanmar through Bhutan. Thus made Bhutan was a strategic partner for India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the importance of northeast region to become India's door to Asia in the 21st century. He intended to make this region to be developed through economic corridor and called the region as NEZ or Natural Economic Zone. The projects to develop the region including scholarships, a national sport university, agricultural colleges, digital connectivity and new railway lines. With US\$10 billion budget allocation for northeastern region, Prime Minister Modi focused on infrastructure that linked region of India to Myanmar. Moreover, he emphasized his vision in the 12th Association of Asian Nation-India Summit on November 12th 2014 that centered on economic prosperity through project like the Kaladan-Multi Modal Transit Transport Facility and many more. The transport facility was aimed to establish connectivity between Indian ports to the eastern side and Sittwe port in Myanmar through a small river corridor and road that providing an alternative trade route to the northeast. (Goswami N. , Act east policy: Northeast India as a Strategic Catalyst, 2015, pp. 70-72).

Through the Act East foreign policy, India worked to connect the North East Region and mainland India through Bangladesh., Bangladesh was considered of holding strategic position in terms of trade and connectivity. Thus, India tries to make a good deal of relationship with Bangladesh for the sake of economic sake. According to a Lead Economist Hindustan, Bangladesh was potentially India's economic partner. Their trade relations rose from US\$ 1 billion in 2002 to over US\$6 billion. Since 2011, India's import from Bangladesh grew 6% per year from 2012 to 2016. Not only India and Bangladesh had cooperation in economic activity, but also in energy cooperation. India exported 600 mega watt of power to Bangladesh. In the

near future, the energy trade could link up with the possibility of hydropower export from Bhutan and Nepal to form a subgroup of regional organization called BBIN or Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal power market. They also planned to facilitate access to energy supply through natural a pipeline that linking Myanmar to India via Bangladesh. By having a good relationship with Bangladesh, India could advance India' Act East vision. It could give connectivity while reducing time and cost of trading (Kathuria, 2017).

Since 2014, India was trying to establish a peaceful and stable environment in South Asia for India's development. In the first few month after the new foreign policy was launched, India-Nepal Joint commission was established. After 23 years having inactive relation, India reviewed its relationship by rebuilding bilateral agreement. Also, Modi invited the President of Sri Lanka to have state's engagement despite some political party's opposition in another point. However, India continued to maintain a positive relationship with the partner country.

With that being said, this chapter shows that India's drive to change its foreign policy from 'Look East' to 'Act East'. The former policy was focused on economic development in the Southeast Asia, but then the recent policy focused on developing infrastructure in India's neighbourhood countries. Also, it has been explained with securitization theory in which a country should prevent a threat developing. In this chapter already explained India's extraordinary movement to prevent China's assertiveness in Indian Ocean region.

Conclusion

. By India's Look East policy was driven on economic and political urgency. Meanwhile, Act East policy focused on strategic approach to establish influence in

Indian Ocean where China has been projecting power for few years. This research shows that as world's largest democracy finally showing its potential as a great power country. Generally, this new foreign policy would include security, strategic, political, and defence collaboration with Indian Ocean littoral countries.

Indian Ocean is one of the busiest waters compared with other ocean. Having more than 1000 ships passed annually, it made the region the most strategic place. This region also connect Africa, Europe, South Asia, Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Thus, several activities were conducted here, whether legal or illegal. In fact, India's trade activities were traded through the region thus India tried to ensure its trade tack.

More importantly, India's willingness to provide security was driven by China's assertiveness in India's backyard. China has been giving aid to develop infrastructure among Indian Ocean littoral countries that happened to be India's neighbour states. China's strategies to influence aforementioned states were by military and massive economic approaches. Additionally, the country also active on protecting the waters by reducing pirates activities on Indian Ocean. Thus, through Act East , India could create influence, provide security, and maintain balance with China government.

Since India opened it market, India's economy rocketed and she gained recognition as an Asian Tiger. India managed to sign ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement trath ease trading activities among its member. She also became the member of The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), a defence coopertive mechanism to discuss maritime security issues. Also, India initiated The Indian Ocean Rim Association to promore security in the Indian Ocean.

In January, One Belt One Road (OBOR) is Beijing's attempt to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean. According to Jagannath P. Panda, OBOR was one aggressive project and might erect concern among regional states and any other power. OBOR's focuses are Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. Linking Asia to Europe and Africa, OBOR aim to build economic corridors, acquire land through investments, and maritime power through infrastructure construction (ports and harbors).

On the other hand, China is trying to anchor its power in Indian Ocean. Started from The String of Pearls years ago by dominating military and naval presence in the region. Recently, China is pursuing its One Belt One Road strategy to achieve economic ambition by connecting Asia market to Europe by developing ports and harbour. Moreover, China is building a strong bilateral relation with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the maldives, and Pakistan. With China's growing economy and military, it has proven that China is capable to project its power in Indian Ocean and South Asia, as well as became a hegemon in the region. Therefore, India's action to change its policy from 'Look East' to 'Act East' was in order to contain and counterbalance China's assertiveness in Indian Ocean since the region is an important water for India. Indian Ocean since 16th century, and the fact that now 70% of India's economic activity was through Indian Ocean. Thus, India must protect Indian Ocean with 'Act East' policy.

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