

# India Look East Policy in the North East Region: A Study on Indian Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

This period witnessed the end of the Cold War between the two military blocs which brought an end to the bipolar world, which was based on confrontation of two politico-economic systems and their military expression. It also brought an end to the stability of the world based on mutual deterrence. The high risk-high stability situation has been replaced by a low risk-low stability situation. The end of Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union also brought about the reorientation of former Soviet client states, especially those in the Third World, from centralised to market economies. These global changes have precipitated two consequences in the prevailing international relations. First, there is a growing interdependence between countries and second, economic and trade issues are gaining vital precedence over the political and military ones. With a shift from geo-politics and geo-strategic to geo-economics, the economic dimensions of international politics has become prominent. The world previously polarised by an ideological struggle rapidly changed into economic blocs." With the end of Cold War and the resultant breakdown of the overarching Cold War structure that underpinned and ordered international relations, nation-states became aware of the need to re-evaluate their place in the international system. The post-Cold War phase in international relations witnessed a distinct trend towards regional integration. As a result, a large number of states from different parts of the world began to make serious attempts to constitute themselves into regions to give fresh impetus to a wide variety of cooperative ventures amongst themselves. Regional integration, in general, appeared to be an effective device to serve economic and commercial objectives of these states. In the process, old organisations were recasted and new organisations were created to suit the changing global political context. All these developments consequently brought about a change in the world policies leading to the development of a new world order and dramatically altered the basic parameters in which the operated."

**Keywords:** Integration, Regional, Organization, Major

Growth of Regional Integration; The growth of regional integration has been one of the major developments in recent international relations and has become part and parcel of the present global economic order. This trend is "now an acknowledged future of the international scene and "has the predominant pattern of international relations since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648

is evolving towards a system in which regional groupings of states is becoming more important than sovereign states. Walter Lippmann believes that,

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“the true constituent members of the international order of the future are communities of states.” The process of regional integration has increasingly affected and even shaped international relations. Trade, economic cooperation and many trans-border issues and problems are increasingly being dealt at a regional supranational level. It is this development of increasing regional cooperation in economic, political and security issues that has gathered momentum in recent years. These integration projects are an increasingly growing phenomenon and occur simultaneously with globalisation.”

Regional integration has been defined as “an association of states based upon location in a given geographical area, for the safeguarding or promotion of the participants, an association whose terms are fixed by a treaty or other arrangements.” Philippe De Lombaerde and Luk Van Langenhove define regional integration as a worldwide phenomenon of territorial systems that increase the interactions between their components and create new forms of organisation, co existing with traditional forms of state-led organisation at the national level. According to Hans van Ginkel, regional integration refers to the process by which states within a particular region increase their level of interaction with regard to economic, security, political, and also social and cultural issues. In the present age of economic globalisation, integration is generally defined as “the voluntary linking in the economic domain of two or more formerly independent states to the extent that authority over key areas of domestic regulation and policy is shifted to the supranational level.” In short, regional integration is the joining of individual states within a region into a larger whole. The degree of integration depends upon the willingness and commitment of independent sovereign states to share their sovereignty.”

### **International Organisations and Regional Integration**

The end of Cold War brought about significant changes in the political, economic, and strategic environment of the world. The issues in this new environment are vast and complex that it needs global cooperation and action to tackle them. Nation-states realized that these issues can be best addressed at multilateral agencies and therefore

multilateralism is being espoused by the United Nations and is increasingly regarded as the modus operandi in world politics today. However, the multilateral system is facing increasing challenges.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the repeated failure of multilateralism, developing countries have lost confidence in the global multilateral institutions to provide equitable development rules, and to give them ownership of development policies. Since multilateralism, the first best option, is not attainable by many countries, both developed or developing and large or small, are pursuing the second-best option - regionalism.<sup>13</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

### **North-east India and the Look East Policy**

The North-eastern region of India comprises of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The region covers an area of 2.62 lakh sq. km. and accounts for 7.9 percent of total geographical area of the country. With a total population of 39 million, it accounts for 3.8 percent of total population of India. The region is physically isolated from the rest of India with a tenuous connection through a 21-kilometer long landmass, known as the “Siliguri corridor” which is less than 2 percent of the 5000 kilometer combined perimeter formed by the seven North-eastern states, and the remaining borders China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Recently Sikkim has been added as the eighth state of the North-eastern region. Northeast India, as B.G. Verghese lucidly describes, is “another India, the most diverse part of the most diverse country, very difficult, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood, once coy but now turbulent and in transition within the Indian transition.” The people of the region have distinct ethnic and cultural identities, which are more similar with the people of Southeast Asia and China than the mainland India and interact mostly with the present day Myanmar and Southwest China during the pre colonial period. Many communities in North-east India trace their origin to Southeast Asia. In recent years, Tai-Ahom intellectuals in Assam are focusing on the cultures of their ethnic cousins in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia too there is growing awareness of North-east India. Many northeast Indian cultural figures too are drawn eastwards.

The North-eastern region had been known for its natural resources and maintained active trans-border trade with its neighbours during the pre-independence period. The region has been on the southern trails of the silk route. Françoise Pommet's review of historical literatures on ancient trade between Bhutan, Cooch Bihar and Assam reveals the clear picture of North-east India's place in these trade routes where he stated that, "Kamrupa (which denotes almost the whole of the present day North-east India) was on the trading route between Southwest China and India." N.K. Basu, wrote that "Assamese merchants went to Yunnan in China by the line of trade through Sadia, Bisha and across the Patkoi range of mountains." Captain Welsh, who led a British military expedition to the report that regional trade was very active. Apart from silk and other goods, the Silk Road also carried ideas, art and culture, thereby facilitating the spread of Buddhism across Asia. The marginalisation of North-east India in the past decades, "has to be understood only in historical terms as the product of changes brought about by powerful global forces including colonial and postcolonial geopolitics." The Partition of India in 1947 which marginalised the North-eastern region has not been conducive to the region's economic and political well-being and set its economy back by at least a quarter century." North-east India's place in trade along the southern Silk Route serves as a reminder that the region's recent history as remote, underdeveloped and troubled hinterland is neither inevitable nor unchangeable.

Although India has been generally be a future major power, an acknowledged to interesting and strange phenomenon emerged: India's negation of such a status and role. Perhaps one can find a similar tendency in the report *Nonalignment in 2012*, which has been regarded as a quasi-official document. In it, one might identify the basic principles used to guide India's foreign and strategic policy over the next decade. The report is filled with references to India as a major power, but is wary of this status, suggesting rather that the country should maintain its status of strategic autonomy. Subsequently, the report attracted severe criticism particularly from the strategic community in India. Its main argument can be summarized as emphasizing strategic autonomy and the means to realize.

India's wariness has been pointed out by Miller,

who observed that India's diplomatic elites tend to resist the rise of their own country. In a similar vein, M.K. Narayanan, India's Ex-National Security Advisor, has characterized India as a reluctant power. In addition, India has been characterized as using swing-state policies.

One can interpret such wariness from the historical tendency of India's strategically defensive posture. A similar analytical attempt has been made to explain the application of the strategic restraint concept to India's defense policy after its independence, which shows no clear-cut approach.

This has been the basis of China's external policy propounded by Deng Xiaoping and observed by Hu Jintao, but not currently by Xi Jinping. This approach is now taken only by the US. In short, India aspires to be a major power, but it continues to conceal its true objective. If India were to set out its aspiration of becoming a major power, it might elicit unfavorable situations and reactions. India looked to have adopted its *Taoguang Yanghui* under the prevailing circumstance then.

This makes it difficult to draw comparisons with other rising powers. The geopolitical condition that has driven Indian strategic thinking through the Cold War is *sui generis* in nature. For example, China adopted Deng Xiaoping's tenets, Japan mobilized its resources, and sought to become an economic power and achieve great power status under the *Yoshida Doctrine*. However, there remained several inconsistencies in Indian economic policies and security interests which compelled it to seek help from both the US and the Soviet Union at different times of crisis.

The Matrix has several characteristics. First, it constitutes the three tiers of levels: the Global level, the Regional (Indo-Pacific region) level, and the Local (South Asia region) level. Each level has specific and different objectives with corresponding measures.

The inconsistencies in Indian approaches at the three levels tend to puzzle outsiders, as India has always appeared to be playing off major powers to achieve its diverse interests. Perhaps such various differentiations make outsiders wonder at the objectives and contents of India's foreign policy. Unlike the non-alignment policy and the alliance with the Soviet Union. Japan's newspapers

tend to characterize India's foreign policy as omnidirectional, an overly superficial view. Even Indian experts have not analyzed their country's foreign policy structurally.

Second, from the standpoint of time sequence, the present and future objectives at the Global level are basically future aspirations to be achieved, particularly so, in the case of international order building capability. After the end of World War II, the US as the victorious nation, with its incomparable national power half of the global GDP and extraordinary military capabilities led the founding of political and economic institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF. For India, the present and future objectives of the Regional and Local Levels are crucially important areas to achieve the Global objectives in the present and beyond. Now, the outline of each level will be explained. The Global level is India's overall target to achieve.

The process of getting to that target would first be to establish multi-polarization of the international system and possibly at the same time to acquire its position as a pole in the international system in the coming years. Next, India's major and ultimate objectives and China's also is to acquire the capability of international order building. At the moment, China is striving to emulate the US by equipping itself with similar capabilities through the foundation of the Asian Infrastructure.

## CONCLUSION

To materialize these objectives, India cooperates with China and Russia vis-a-vis the US and other associated countries. India's full memberships at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the

BRICS summit signify its cooperation with Russia and China at the Global level. If one regards China, Russia, and India as revisionist powers, then the US and its associated countries could be termed status quo powers. For India, membership of the UN Security Council and other measures would be one of its first major gambits. Thus, India's foreign policy is neither unidirectional nor double-dealing. It is possible to point out in the coming one or two decades that the might transform its present three levels to two levels, commitment with changes of objectives and measure. Ultimately the characteristics of a future international order are expected to be based on the relationship between the major powers and their political ambitions.

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