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India's Act East Policy: Embedding the Andamans

By Anit Mukherjee

Synopsis

India should rejuvenate its 'Act East policy' by exploiting the strategic location of the Andaman Islands and the waters around it.

Commentary

INDIA'S PRIME Minister, Narendra Modi, has been widely hailed for reinvigorating the country's foreign policy. Undertaking numerous visits, he has reset relations with great powers while simultaneously engaging countries in the near and far neighbourhood. From the perspective of South East Asia, he upgraded India's 'Look East' policy—which previously guided engagement with the region – to an 'Act East' policy—signalling a greater enthusiasm to do more.

However, two years into his term, many in the region are wondering whether the two policies are that much different. Prime Ministerial visits are important, but perhaps India needs to think up of new projects and initiatives to signal its willingness to 'Act East.' The Andaman Islands and the waters around it offer a potential opportunity.

Changed Dynamics of Act East Policy

To be sure, countries in South East Asia vastly appreciate the changed dynamics of the 'Act East' policy. Indian officials are now increasingly visible (although still reticent to play a 'leading role') at various diplomatic forums. Most notably, after a gap of four years, the Indian defence minister is expected to attend this year's Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore. In addition, in 2015, India established a diplomatic mission at the ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta. It has also enhanced

bilateral ties with countries in the region and has 'strategic partnerships' with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and ASEAN.

Despite these initiatives there are voices in the region that are calling upon India to do more. At one level, these are indicative of rising geopolitical tensions, especially concerns stemming from China's activities in the region. The limits of what India can, or will, do in the disputes arising in the South China Sea are well known but there is a sentiment that enhanced ties between ASEAN and India is good for the region.

Diplomatically, India has done well to consistently support the notion of ASEAN unity and centrality and has also called for countries to adhere to UNCLOS and maintain freedom of navigation in the South China Sea—an implicit criticism of China's nine dash line claims. However, there are further initiatives that India can take to energise its engagement with the region.

The Andaman Islands and Southeast Asia

India needs to develop the Andaman and Nicobar islands as part of its 'Act East policy'. The strategic location of the island chain—with its ability to overlook and dominate prominent shipping lanes—has long fetched international interest. However India's unique (and arguably enlightened) approach to developing the islands has prevented its full exploitation—strategically as well as economically.

In addition to being home to perhaps one of the last 'isolated tribes' in Asia—the Jarawas - the islands also have a rich and delicate biodiversity. In an attempt to protect both the Jarawas (currently numbering around 400 or so) and the environment the Indian government has controlled access and curtailed development on the islands. As a result only 7% of the land area on the islands is available for development and the rest is considered reserved or protected forests.

While these sentiments are laudable, many argue that this has prevented India from taking advantage of the island chain. For instance, the waters around the Andaman Islands constitute 30% of India's total Exclusive Economic Zone, which it is unable to adequately exploit. There have been calls therefore for allowing infrastructure development in the islands including ports, roads and other facilities—like a cold storage chain for development of fisheries. One can encourage high-end environmentally responsible tourism by, among other means, restricting tourist access and charging special access levies that can, in turn, be used to finance environmental protection projects.

In addition, India should allow limited international flights from ASEAN countries, Singapore being an obvious candidate, to Port Blair (currently there are none). All these activities can be undertaken while setting aside substantial areas for the Jarawas, thereby preserving their seclusion.

In sum, environmental protection and development need not be a zero sum game, and creating facilities for tourism and economic progress on the islands will bring India closer to South East Asia. In all these projects India can also explore partnering with like-minded countries. For instance, according to some reports, the Japanese

are willing to invest in infrastructure projects on the islands. Such opportunities must be exploited.

Underdeveloped Military Potential

The military potential of the islands is well known, but equally underdeveloped. India created its first joint command on these islands in 2003 called the Andaman and Nicobar Joint Command. The hope then was that this would be an experiment leading to more joint commands. However, not only have the services resisted this idea but have quietly undermined this joint command by starving it of assets and support.

Their opposition reflects the single service mentality that dominates the Indian military and is indicative of their fear of jointness. In addition, at the time of its creation, there was a proposal to create an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) around these islands. This proposal, perhaps due to a paucity of means and enforcement, was not acted upon. Now is the time to revisit that decision, especially with the increasing prominence of the Bay of Bengal, which has led some analysts to argue that it is the 'new locus for strategic competition in Asia.' In short, India should strengthen the joint command and revisit its relative strategic neglect of the island chain.

The Bay of Bengal also provides a potential opportunity for enhancing India's leadership role in the region. For instance, in light of the current tensions in the South China Sea, India could offer to host an ADMM-plus naval exercise in the Andaman Sea. The focus of the exercise could be on a contemporarily relevant topic—like jointly evolving a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). Doing so will enable countries to engage in a confidence building measure while removed from the tensions associated with exercising in the South China Sea. Such a measure will enhance India's standing both with ASEAN and the Indian Ocean island states.

Indicative of a renewed sense of purpose, Prime Minister Modi claimed that India should strive to be a 'leading power'. By definition, leading powers have to shape global events and narratives. Embracing the full potential of the Andaman Islands will bring India closer to the region. Inherently, this may work to the economic and strategic benefit of all ASEAN countries. Such an achievement would be in line with the prime minister's wishes to be a 'leading power'.

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