



## Relook at India's Act East Policy

### What is the issue?

Despite the best intentions of an Act East Policy, India's standing and image in Southeast Asia have suffered.

### What is the present scenario?

- Three developments over the past five years are testing Indian diplomacy in the region:
  1. the rising profile of China combined with growing China-India tensions
  2. disappointment in the region with India's economic under-performance
  3. rising concern in the region with India's approach towards its minorities, especially Muslims and Christians

### What does a rising China mean?

- China's rise and growing assertiveness of the Xi Jinping regime initially generated a strong pro-India sentiment in the South-east Asian region.
- Many ASEAN countries wanted India to balance China's enhanced power.
- But, India's economic slowdown and inward orientation (decision to stay out of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement) disappointed regional business.
- ASEAN and Indian governments tried to maintain good relations.
- But Southeast Asia's powerful business groups, mostly ethnic Chinese, began losing interest in India.
- However, as recently as 2017, during the Doklam stand-off between China and India, many ASEAN governments conveyed their quiet support for India.
- This was in the hope that a robust response from India would keep China's geopolitical ambitions in the region under check.
- But between Doklam and Galwan tensions, there has been a change in the Southeast Asian assessment of China and India.

- It could be due to a willingness to accommodate Chinese interests, a growing admiration for China's assertion of power within the ethnic Chinese community in the region.
- Or, it could be due to a disappointment with India.

### **How have civil society attitudes changed?**

- Ethnic Chinese loyalties define one segment of Southeast Asian civil society.
- And Islamic faith defines another large segment.
- In most ASEAN countries, ethnic Chinese practise Islam, Buddhism or Christianity.
- Given this, growing concern on Hindu majoritarianism in India has impacted civil society attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.
- India deployed the soft power of "Buddhist diplomacy."
- But, Southeast Asian states and civil society seem less impressed by Indian hard and soft power even as their fear and/or admiration of China has gone up.
- [India was successful till a few years ago in holding China's rising hard power back with its own hard and soft power.]
- Both China's direct influence and that of ethnic Chinese in the South Asian region are on the rise.

### **What is the larger impact?**

- All the above developments weakened the business-to-business (B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) connect between India and ASEAN.
- This was despite the best efforts of hard-pressed diplomats to maintain good government-to-government (G2G) relations.

### **What is the way forward?**

- Indian diplomacy must take a fresh look at its Act East policy.
- The constraints being imposed on it by unsatisfactory economic performance and sectarian and communal politics at home should be looked into.

**Source: The Indian Express**



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