

How Does India's Look East Policy Look after 25 Years?

Deepa M. Ollapally

The long arc of India's Look East policy has coincided with dramatic economic and strategic power shifts in Asia. Introduced in 1991 at the end of the Cold War, Look East is no longer just a policy instrument constructed to lift the country out of an immediate foreign and economic crisis. India's re-engagement eastward initially was focused on developing trade and investment opportunities and finding new strategic partners in Southeast Asia, but it has evolved into a multilayered approach that now reaches all the way to Australia. The Look East policy today is also intertwined with the big ideas of the United States on Asia—the concept of the Indo-Pacific and the erstwhile rebalance strategy to counter the rise of China.

There is a high degree of strategic uncertainty in Asia, ranging from concerns about U.S. alliance commitments and the nature of China's ambitions to questions about what countries like India and Vietnam are willing to contribute to making sure that the regional order does not become fully China-centric. The environment is further complicated by the reality that most regional states cannot resist economic interdependence with China at the same time that they want strategic interdependence with the United States. Although none of them want to see a direct conflict between the United States and China, many do want the United States to assert its dominance. This has given rise over the last decade to some form of hedging or soft balancing against China by key regional states.

India has been no exception, but for it the contradictions have become sharper than for others. On the one hand, India has no ally in the traditional sense. It has a near obsession with "strategic autonomy" and is the only regional actor that can envision itself as a peer-competitor of China in the future. On the other hand, China's recent assertiveness in India's neighborhood, especially the Indian Ocean, is coming well before India can effectively narrow the considerable economic and military power gap between the two countries. India's Look East policy might then seem like a logical, multifaceted organizing principle to meet what appears to be a growing Chinese threat without tipping the balance decisively

DEEPA M. OLLAPALLY is Research Professor of International Affairs and Director of the Rising Powers Initiative in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. She can be reached at <deepao@gwu.edu>.

toward conflict. But then, are we asking too much of Look East (or the Act East policy, in its new avatar) and overestimating what the policy can realistically deliver?

Given the enormous uncertainty and ongoing power shifts in Asia, it takes someone with intimate knowledge of India and international security to successfully chart the long course of the Look East policy in a way that explains how it interacts with both regional actors and the United States and affects regional security dynamics and architecture. Frédéric Grare's new book, *India Turns East: International Engagement and U.S.-China Rivalry*, provides a comprehensive and insightful account of the Look East saga and what the policy can and cannot be expected to do for India as well as its partners. His main focus is on the India-U.S.-China triangle and whether the Look East policy can be an effective instrument to address Indian concerns about China. Other important considerations are how congruent Indian and U.S. objectives are and to what extent the Look East policy and rebalance strategy are complementary. The book is thoroughly researched and carefully argued, giving alternative explanations a good sounding along the way.

The timing of the book is somewhat unfortunate, given that the Trump administration has now put the rebalance in abeyance, if not jettisoned it altogether. The new National Security Strategy announced in December 2017 presents an Asia policy that is clearly more militarily edged than the rebalance. The changes in the U.S. political circumstances could call into question some of Grare's findings and recommendations. To his credit however, the book's most important recommendations remain quite pertinent, even if made more demanding under President Donald Trump. Grare rightly warns against the United States "overmilitarizing" its relations with India for a variety of reasons. This is an excellent recommendation that should hold even as the National Security Strategy essentially concludes that China is already a "revisionist" power seeking to "project power worldwide" and calls on India to be a "stronger strategic and defense partner" for the United States.

Grare's conclusion is sound because he understands the mixed history of the U.S.-India relationship so well. While Washington's sharper characterization of China is no doubt welcome to India, it is equally true that New Delhi remains loathe to join any open containment of China with the United States and its treaty allies. This long-standing reluctance on India's part is a structural (and I would add ideational) limitation to U.S.-India defense ties. Grare offers a compelling discussion on how the structural

impediment plays out between the U.S. rebalance and the Look East Policy. He correctly notes that the latter “is an attempt to neutralize China by inserting India into a web of relationships while hyphenating its own strategic interests to those of the United States without ever losing its autonomy” (p. 201). Without a direct military conflict between India and China, which Grare and most observers find unlikely in the short term, India’s attachment to strategic autonomy and aversion to alliances will not change.

We can surmise that although the new National Security Strategy strongly implies that the United States will now seek to actively contain a revisionist China (rather than counter and manage an assertive China, as the Obama administration’s rebalance strategy sought to do), India would still prefer to neutralize China rather than try to contain its rival. This is because India wants to leverage the U.S. relationship against an increasingly assertive China, but at the same it is keenly aware of the need to avert any overt conflict with its much more powerful neighbor, especially one stimulated by a Sino-U.S. confrontation. The latter outcome could lead to a permanent Sino-Indian rupture, seriously complicating India’s security calculus and potentially derailing the country’s economic growth.

In Grare’s telling, the Look East policy has created a web of relationships for India that keeps expanding and multiplying. He describes the policy as having sprung from a combination of economic and strategic imperatives, along with a desire to reclaim India’s lost status in Asia during the Cold War years. One gets the impression from the focus of the subsequent discussion that Grare gives much greater weight to the strategic, which can be challenged. India’s security and military ties with Southeast Asia remain undeveloped and rhetorical. For example, despite efforts, India’s arms exports to the region are almost zero.

Over several chapters, Grare offers an extensive discussion of India’s relations with each country that falls into the Look East ambit in Southeast Asia and East Asia. The list is exhaustive and detailed (leading to exhausting reading at times) and includes assessments of India’s lesser studied relationships with countries like Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand, and Australia. The book’s best analysis, however, is of the India-U.S.-China triangle. Grare displays a fine-tuned understanding of the strategic mindsets of India and the United States and of how China figures into their bilateral relationship. He is correct to point out that it is at the multilateral level where we find some of the biggest differences between India and the United States, as well as the biggest commonalities between India and China.

Another triangle growing in importance and deserving of greater attention is the India-U.S.-Japan relationship, which can also demonstrate the resilience of the Look East policy, especially on the India-Japan leg. This is because the strategic and economic aspects of the policy come together so well in their bilateral diplomacy, epitomized by the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. This initiative not only stands as a soft strategic parallel to China's Belt and Road Initiative but also could serve India's and the Indian Ocean littoral states' critical need for infrastructure connectivity and integration into regional and global supply chains.

The longevity of the Look East Policy, adopted by both the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party, is itself a testimony to its utility for Indian policymakers. It could be argued that Look East is an especially useful discursive foreign policy tool—an idea that does not figure much in Grare's analysis. As for one of his central questions about how effective the policy will be as a complement to U.S. strategic interests, Grare argues that its success will ultimately depend on how quickly India is able to reform economically and institutionally to make itself more attractive as a partner to the United States.

It is indeed welcome to see that Grare ultimately circles back to the economics of the Look East policy in his conclusion, despite seeming to privilege the strategic drivers in much of his earlier discussion. One could make a strong argument that the leading edge of India's strategic orientation eastward continues to be economics, even under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has put forward a more forceful vision for India to meet the growing China threat. The fact is that becoming a developed country remains India's foremost ambition, strategic flux or not. This will require deft balancing to take advantage of the benefits of the U.S. security partnership without incurring unacceptable costs of conflict with China triggered by that same partnership, which could knock India off its upward trajectory. In *India Turns East*, Grare offers a masterful exposition of this critical triangle and India's dilemma. ♦