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**INDIA'S EVOLVING STRATEGY:
TRANSITIONING FROM ACT EAST TO
INDO-PACIFIC FOCUS**

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India's Evolving Strategy: Transitioning from Act East to Indo-Pacific Focus

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India's Act East Policy (AEP) was introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi following his government's ascension in 2014 and was formally announced at the ASEAN-India Summit in Myanmar. This policy marked a departure from the earlier Look East Policy (LEP), which had been launched in 1992 by the UPA government.¹ The LEP was seen as a strategic pivot in Indian foreign policy, aiming to deepen economic integration with eastern neighbors as part of India's evolving Realpolitik. The AEP expanded this focus beyond economic and security integration to encompass both Southeast and East Asia.

Under the AEP, India's maritime engagement has notably surpassed its land-based outreach. Initiatives such as the biennial Milan joint naval exercises, the Mausam cultural project which seeks to establish cultural ties with maritime neighbors, and the Malabar Exercises with the United States, Japan, and Australia, underscore India's active presence in the Indian Ocean region. The central question now is whether the AEP has set a precedent for Prime Minister Modi's broader strategy to counter China's regional dominance and bolster India's standing in the region. As China's influence increases, India's Indo-Pacific policy appears to serve as a counterbalance, promoting a rules-based international order and reinforcing regional alliances.

The AEP is evolving into a bridge between the Indo-Pacific and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Scholars suggest that the regional framework is shifting from the Asia-Pacific to a broader Indo-Pacific construct, which presents significant challenges. As noted by Khurana, the "Indo" in Indo-Pacific refers more to the Indian Ocean than to India itself; nevertheless, India is expected to play a crucial role in regional maritime security.² At the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Modi advocated for a "free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region (FOIIP),"³ calling for

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¹ Nalanda Roy, "Is India Retreating from its Act East to Act Indo-Pacific Policy?," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 35:1 (2022), 43–57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27146666>

² Mercy A. Kuo, "The Origin of "Indo-Pacific" as Geopolitical Construct: Insight from Gurpreet Khurana," *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

³ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury. "Modi spells out free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific Policy," IISS, 7 August 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2018/08/modi-free-open-inclusive/>

commitments grounded in shared values and principles. This raises the question of whether the Act East trajectory is transforming into an Act Indo-Pacific approach. In collaboration with India, Japan set forth the “four pillars of cooperation for FOIP” to further develop the vision for a strong future for the Indo-Pacific.⁴ It appears that the four pillars such as principles for peace and rules for prosperity; addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way, a multi-layered connectivity, and finally extending efforts for security and safe use of the “Sea” to the “Air” will be helpful in leading the international community towards cooperation and collective engagement.

India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects its strategic interest in balancing the influence of major powers like China. By focusing on the Indo-Pacific, India aims to better address its interests in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which are critical to its security and economic priorities. Despite the Modi government’s success in enhancing regional institutional cooperation, capability, and connectivity, progress on many Act East projects has been slow, with several either delayed or still in conceptual stages. Additionally, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world’s largest trading bloc encompassing nearly a third of the global economy, poses challenges to India’s strategic position in the region.

In summary, India’s shift from an “Act East” to an “Act Indo-Pacific” policy signifies a strategic adaptation to the evolving geopolitical landscape. This transition highlights India’s ambition to play a more prominent role in regional and global affairs, addressing both its established interests in East Asia and its growing concerns and opportunities in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

⁴ “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’: Policy Speech by PM Kishida,” 19 May 2023, https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2023/05/new_plan_for_free_and_open_indo-pacific.html