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Page: 01-17

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## INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY (2014-2024): CATALYZING STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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### ABSTRACT:

India's Act East Policy (AEP), evolving from the Look East Policy (LEP), represents a pivotal strategic reorientation. This paper analyses AEP's role in catalysing India's strategic transformation within the Indo-Pacific region during the decade 2014-2024, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of strategic autonomy and multilateralism. It argues that AEP is not merely a continuation of LEP but a qualitatively distinct, proactive, and multifaceted strategy driven by the imperatives of a rising China, the United States' strategic rebalance, and India's own economic and security ambitions. Through enhanced defense diplomacy, financial integration, infrastructure connectivity, and robust multilateral engagement, particularly within ASEAN-centric frameworks and multilateral groupings like the Quad and AEP, India has significantly elevated its regional profile and influence. The policy demonstrates a sophisticated interplay between strategic autonomy, guiding India's independent decision-making and aversion to formal alliances, and multilateralism, enabling coalition-building to shape a rules-based regional order. While achieving substantial successes in deepening regional integration and asserting India's Indo-Pacific centrality, AEP faces persistent challenges, including implementation gaps, resource constraints, and navigating the internal cohesion of ASEAN, as well as the great power competition. This paper concludes that AEP has been instrumental in transforming India from a peripheral player to a consequential strategic actor in the Indo-Pacific, fundamentally reshaping regional dynamics and setting the course for India's future regional engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** Act East Policy, India, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Autonomy, Multilateralism, ASEAN, Quad, Strategic Transformation, China, Regional Security.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the "Indo-Pacific" as the dominant strategic paradigm in the 21st century signifies a fundamental geographic and geopolitical reconfiguration, placing India at the heart of global power dynamics (Medcalf, 2020). The conceptual emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a unified geopolitical construct represents a shift from the earlier Asia-Pacific paradigm. It reflects both the securitization of the maritime commons and the growing salience of the Indian Ocean in global power politics (Scott, 2018). India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is characterized by a deliberate attempt to shape, rather than merely respond to, the regional environment. Through initiatives like the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, India articulates a vision of cooperative security that diverges both from Chinese hegemony and U.S.-led exclusivist security frameworks (Pant & Joshi, 2022). For India, with its key geographical position spanning the Indian Ocean, this region presents both an exceptional opportunity and a challenging problem. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of an "Act East Policy" (AEP) in November 2014 represented a watershed moment in India's regional engagement. It represented an intentional shift away from the "Look East Policy" (LEP) launched in 1991, which, while successful in forging initial economic ties with ASEAN, remained essentially transactional and lacked strategic depth.

This paper argues that the AEP (2014-2024) transformed India's role from a peripheral, economically focused state to a proactive strategic architect of the Indo-Pacific region. Key drivers of this change include the urgent need to counter an assertive China, the importance of deepening economic integration and strengthening supply chains, the goal of achieving great power status, and the dedication to maintaining a multipolar regional balance. AEP outlined India's vision of a "free, open, inclusive, and rules-based" Indo-Pacific, anchored by the principle of "ASEAN Centrality" and guided domestically by the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, which emphasizes maritime security, sustainability, and regional capacity building. It encompasses a broader geographical canvas, extending from Southeast Asia across the wider Indo-Pacific to East Asia and the Pacific Islands, and a more comprehensive agenda that spans strategic, security, economic, connectivity, and cultural dimensions (Ghosh, 2019).

This transformation involves a shift from a relatively cautious, reactive, and regionally confined posture to a more proactive, influential, and system-shaping role. The core thesis is that AEP, operating within the framework of Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism, has

enabled India to improve its regional position greatly, strengthen integration, project power, and help shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order, thus marking a significant strategic shift. The paper will trace the progression from LEP to AEP, analyze the geopolitical factors, examine the main elements of AEP implementation through theoretical perspectives, evaluate tangible results, address challenges, and consider future direction.

## **2. Research Objectives**

- To analyze the strategic drivers that reshaped India's Act East Policy (AEP) from its predecessor, the Look East Policy (LEP), focusing on China's assertiveness, India's economic ambitions, and the pursuit of multipolarity.
- To identify and evaluate the key initiatives that defined India's economic, connectivity, and security engagement under the AEP during 2014–2024.
- To investigate how the AEP synergized with and advanced India's broader Indo-Pacific vision, particularly through ASEAN frameworks and the evolution of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).
- To measure the tangible impacts of the AEP and assess enduring challenges that constrained its full potential, including resource limitations, ASEAN cohesion issues, and great power competition.

## **3. Research Questions:**

- How did strategic drivers (China's assertiveness, India's economic ambitions, and the pursuit of multipolarity) reshape the AEP from its predecessor (LEP)?
- What key initiatives defined India's economic, connectivity, and security engagement under the AEP (2014-2024)?
- How did the AEP synergize with and advance India's broader Indo-Pacific vision and the evolution of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)?
- What were the measurable impacts of the AEP, and what enduring challenges constrained its full potential?

## **4. Methodology: This study employs the Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism Frames**

Strategic autonomy and multilateralism represent two pivotal concepts in contemporary international relations. Strategic autonomy refers to a state's ability to pursue its interests independently, relying on its own capabilities and decision-making processes, without undue external influence (Tocci, 2018). Multilateralism, conversely, emphasizes cooperative

frameworks in which states collaborate through institutions and agreements to address global issues, such as climate change, security, and trade. Scholars debate whether strategic autonomy and multilateralism are inherently compatible. Realists argue that strategic autonomy aligns with a zero-sum view of international relations, where self-reliance is prioritized over cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2014). Liberal institutionalists counter that autonomy can enhance multilateralism by enabling states to negotiate from a position of strength (Ikenberry, 2018). Constructivists add that shared norms and identities, such as the EU's commitment to multilateralism, can reconcile these approaches by fostering a collective sense of purpose (Ruggie, 1992).

Strategic autonomy emerged as a prominent concept in the European Union's (EU) foreign policy discourse, particularly in the context of security and defense. It denotes the capacity of a state or a group of states to act independently in areas such as defense, trade, and technology, reducing reliance on external powers (European Council, 2016). For instance, the EU's push for strategic autonomy reflects a desire to mitigate dependence on the United States for security and on China for critical supply chains (Helwig, 2020). However, strategic autonomy is not without critique. Some scholars contend that it risks fostering protectionism or undermining alliances, as it may prioritize national interests over collective goals (Biscop, 2019). Others view it as a pragmatic response to a multipolar world, where shifting power dynamics necessitate greater self-sufficiency (Grevi, 2019). The concept is thus debated as both a shield against vulnerabilities and a potential barrier to global cooperation. Strategic Autonomy denotes a state or bloc's capacity to independently define and pursue its core national interests across critical domains, such as defense, technology, economics, and foreign policy, without excessive reliance on external actors. Rooted in realist traditions emphasizing sovereignty and self-preservation, it prioritizes resilience against systemic vulnerabilities (Waltz, 1979). Core Principles include: Sovereignty (Protecting decision-making freedom from external coercion); (Self-Reliance) Reducing dependencies in strategic sectors, exemplified by India's Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative and the EU's quest for semiconductor autonomy (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019); (Resilience) Building capacity to withstand global shocks, such as supply chain disruptions exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2021). Critics argue that strategic autonomy risks devolving into protectionism, undermines global cooperation, and is often economically unfeasible in interconnected systems (Rodrik, 2018).

The Western interpretation of multilateralism is based on liberal internationalism. G. John Ikenberry argues that the logic of liberal internationalism is ‘captured in a cluster of five conditions: openness in terms of trade and exchange; commitment to a rules-based set of relations; some form of security cooperation; the idea that power politics can be ‘tamed’ by building stable relations in pursuit of mutual gains; and finally, liberal internationalism will foster the spread of liberal democracy (Ikenberry, 2018). Multilateralism consists of formal organizations, ad-hoc arrangements, international law, and regimes. Together, they form the international rules-based order. Stephen D. Krasner defined international regimes as “Implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations” (Krasner, 1983). Defined as the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states through ad hoc arrangements or formal institutions (Keohane, 1990; Ruggie, 1992), multilateralism provides a key mechanism for states to pursue shared goals, manage interdependence, and build legitimacy for their actions. Multilateralism is grounded in liberal institutionalism, which posits that international cooperation through institutions reduces transaction costs and fosters trust among states (Keohane, 1990). It involves multiple states working together within frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as regional organizations, to address shared challenges. Multilateralism assumes that collective action is more effective than unilateral or bilateral approaches in tackling transnational issues such as pandemics or nuclear proliferation (Ruggie, 1992).

Critics of multilateralism argue that it can be inefficient, slowed by bureaucratic processes or veto powers, as seen in the UN Security Council's frequent gridlock (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). Additionally, the rise of populist and nationalist movements has challenged multilateral frameworks, with states like the United States, under certain administrations, withdrawing from agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord (Bordoff, 2017). Despite these challenges, proponents assert that multilateralism remains essential for managing global interdependence (Ikenberry, 2018). Theoretical Foundations include: (Liberal Institutionalism) Institutions reduce transaction costs, mitigate anarchy, and foster trust via repeated interactions (Keohane & Nye, 1977); (Constructivism) Shared norms reshape state identities, making cooperation a socially embedded practice (Wendt, 1992); (Diffuse Reciprocity) Benefits derive from long-term collective gains, not immediate quid pro quo (Keohane, 1986). Its strength lies in providing predictability and legitimizing collective action (Ikenberry, 2001). Power asymmetries (e.g., UNSC veto rights), institutional inertia,

and resurgent nationalism erode its efficacy (Acharya, 2017). States increasingly pursue "qualified multilateralism", leveraging autonomy within cooperative frameworks. Examples include the EU's development of defense autonomy (PESCO), while reinforcing NATO (Fiott, 2019), and India's championing of strategic autonomy in technology, as well as its engagement in climate multilateralism (Jaishankar, 2020).

Strategic autonomy and multilateralism represent divergent yet intertwined logics in global politics. While autonomy prioritizes sovereign control in an uncertain world, multilateralism advances shared solutions to transnational threats. Contemporary statecraft navigates a hybrid approach: states build resilience in critical sectors (autonomy) while cooperating on issues requiring collective action (multilateralism). The future of global governance hinges on balancing these imperatives without lapsing into fragmentation or hegemony (Nye, 2022).

### **5. From Look East to Act East: Evolution and Strategic Reframing**

The Look East Policy, initiated under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao amidst the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, was primarily driven by economic imperatives. It aimed to integrate India with the booming economies of Southeast Asia, access new markets, attract investment, and learn from the region's development models (Acharya, 2017; Panda, 2017). AEP emerged as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), border incursions (Joshi, 2020), and the U.S. "pivot to Asia" (Pant & Super, 2015). It reframed engagement as a proactive strategy for a "Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), integrating security and developmental goals for Northeast India (Government of India, MEA, 2015; Modi, 2018). Engagement was largely focused on ASEAN, culminating in India becoming a Sectoral Partner in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996, and a Summit-level Partner in 2002. While LEP achieved notable successes in building economic linkages and establishing political dialogues, its limitations became increasingly apparent by the late 2000s. The launch of the Act East Policy in 2014, therefore, was not merely a rebranding but a fundamental recalibration, driven by several converging factors.

Increasingly assertive Chinese actions in the South China Sea, along the India-China border, and through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) traversing Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, heightened India's strategic anxieties (Pant & Super, 2015). AEP became a critical component of India's strategy to counterbalance Chinese influence. The US strategic rebalance to Asia provided India with opportunities for deeper strategic convergence. The crystallization of the "Indo-Pacific"

concept, emphasizing the strategic linkage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, inherently elevated India's geopolitical significance (Medcalf, 2020). AEP positioned India to capitalize on this. India's growing economic weight and military capabilities instilled greater confidence in pursuing a more ambitious regional role (Khilnani, 2012). Integrating India's geographically isolated and underdeveloped Northeastern states with Southeast Asia became a core economic and strategic objective of AEP, enhancing their development and securing the region (Government of India, MEA, 2015). The Modi government sought a more dynamic, results-oriented foreign policy, moving beyond the perceived inertia of the past.

AEP thus reframed India's eastern engagement with a distinct strategic character: proactive, security-conscious, geographically expansive, and deeply intertwined with India's vision for a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Modi, 2018).

## **6. Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism in Tandem**

### **6.1 Strategic Autonomy:**

This concept, deeply embedded in Indian strategic thought since independence (Hall, 2019), emphasizes independence in foreign policy decision-making, freedom from external pressure or domination, and the avoidance of formal military alliances that could compromise sovereign choices (Jaishankar, 2020). It prioritizes national interest and the ability to manoeuvre flexibly in the international system. Strategic Autonomy remains India's guiding principle, emphasizing independence from formal alliances and self-defined national interest (Jaishankar, 2020; Pant & Saha, 2020). India's foreign policy decisions, including within AEP, are ultimately guided by a self-defined national interest, free from coercion or pressure by major powers (Hall, 2019). This stems from historical non-alignment and a deep-seated desire for strategic independence. India consistently resists formal military alliances (e.g., rejecting NATO-like structures for the Quad), preserving freedom of action (Jaishankar, 2020). While countering Chinese assertiveness is a major AEP driver, India maintains direct diplomatic channels with China, engages in border talks, and participates in forums like BRICS and SCO, refusing to be simplistically drawn into a US-led containment bloc (Mohan, 2022). India builds coalitions on specific issues (maritime security, connectivity standards, HADR) without overarching, binding commitments that might limit autonomy. The Quad's evolution reflects this, moving from dialogue to practical cooperation without a treaty. AEP emphasizes deepening ties with multiple regional players (Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, ASEAN states) to avoid over-reliance on any single power and



create strategic options. This pragmatic approach involves simultaneously engaging with various powers and blocs (US, Russia, France, Japan, ASEAN) based on converging interests in specific domains, maximizing leverage, and preserving choice (Hall, 2019).

## **6.2 Multilateralism:**

For India, engaging through regional institutions and multilateral groupings is crucial for amplifying its voice and shaping norms. Under AEP, this manifests in "Multi alignment", diversifying partnerships while resisting bloc politics (Hall, 2019). Simultaneously, Multilateralism enables India to amplify its influence through institutions like ASEAN and mini-lateral groups like the Quad (Keohane, 1990; Mohan, 2023). This synergy allows India to pursue coalition-based goals without sacrificing autonomy (Ruggie, 1992; Hall, 2019). Recognizing the limits of unilateral action in a complex, interconnected region, India leverages multilateral platforms to amplify its voice, build consensus, legitimize its actions, share burdens, and shape regional norms and institutions (Keohane, 1990; Ruggie, 1992). India consistently affirms ASEAN's central role in the regional architecture (Government of India, MEA, 2019). Deepening engagement through the annual Summit, ADMM-Plus, EAS, and ARF is a cornerstone of AEP, providing legitimacy and a platform for broader Indo-Pacific engagement. India actively participates in this premier leaders-led forum for strategic dialogue in the Indo-Pacific, advocating its FOIP vision. India enthusiastically embraces flexible multilateral arrangements. Revived in 2017, the Quad (India, US, Japan, Australia) has become the most potent symbol of India's strategic shift under AEP. Focused on practical cooperation in HADR, maritime security, vaccine diplomacy, climate, critical technologies, and infrastructure, it allows India to pool resources and influence without a formal alliance (Mohan, 2021). Its success exemplifies the synergy of autonomy (India sets its level of commitment) and multilateralism (achieving shared goals). India actively pursues trilateral dialogues (e.g., India-Japan-US, India-Japan-Australia, India-France-Australia, India-Indonesia-Australia) to address specific regional concerns and build issue-based coalitions. Active participation in BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal), IORA (Indian Ocean), and FIPIC (Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation) extends AEP's reach and builds multilateral support for India's regional vision. Through these forums, India advocates for adherence to international law (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and transparent, sustainable connectivity initiatives, directly countering models perceived as coercive or debt-trap diplomacy.



AEP shows that Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism are not at odds but work together in India's approach. India pursues multilateralism on its terms, carefully balancing to avoid entangling alliances while increasing influence and reaching shared goals aligned with India's independent view of its national interest. Multilateral formats like the Quad are especially appealing because they provide flexibility and effectiveness without the perceived restrictions of large, formal institutions

## **7. Pillars of Act East Policy: Catalyzing Transformation (2014-27.**

### **1. Security and Defense Cooperation**

Military interoperability surged through exercises like MALABAR (Quad) and AUSINDEX (Peri, 2021). Unprecedented frequency of high-level exchanges, port visits, joint exercises, and training. Exercises like MALABAR (Quad navies), AUSINDEX (India-Australia), SIMBEX (India-Singapore), and bilateral exercises with Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Japan have significantly enhanced interoperability and trust (Scott, 2019). Defense pacts with Japan (US2i aircraft), Australia (MLSA), Vietnam (patrol vessels), and the Philippines (Brahmos missiles) deepened deterrence against Chinese coercion (Singh, 2022; Thayer, 2022). Maritime security leadership expanded via the Information Fusion Center (IFCIOR) and Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) (Brewster, 2020; Quad Leaders' Joint Statement, 2022). Crucial defense partners in Southeast Asia, with India providing training, patrol vessels (e.g., to Vietnam), and Brahmos missile system discussions (with the Philippines). Significant defense ties, including training and equipment supply. A central pillar. Enhanced naval deployments, information sharing (e.g., through the Information Fusion Center Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram), capacity building for smaller states, and active advocacy for UNCLOS and FOIP principles. Participation in regional maritime security initiatives like the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security group. Maritime security leadership expanded via the Information Fusion Center (IFCIOR) and Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) (Brewster, 2020; Quad Leaders' Joint Statement, 2022). Enhanced cooperation, particularly with ASEAN members, on counter-terrorism, radicalization, and maritime domain awareness. Security cooperation under AEP embodies Strategic Autonomy through independent choices of partners and scope, while leveraging Multilateralism (exercises, ADMM-Plus, Quad working groups) to build capability and deterrence collectively against common threats, notably maritime coercion

## 7.2. Economic Integration and Connectivity:

India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019, citing concerns about Chinese market access and the need to protect its domestic industry. This was a significant decision, reflecting India's prioritization of perceived national economic interests over multilateral trade integration, which was seen as disadvantageous (Sachdeva, 2020). RCEP withdrawal (2019) maintained strategic autonomy (Sachdeva, 2020), while the Australia-India CECA (2022) promoted alternatives (Roche, 2022), and revived efforts with partners like Australia (CECA signed in 2022), the UAE, and ongoing negotiations with the UK, EU, and Canada, partly driven by AEP's diversification strategy. It also encourages Indian investment in Southeast Asia and attracts FDI from Japan, South Korea, and Singapore into India. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, which links Kolkata to Sittwe (Myanmar) and then to Mizoram (India), faces delays but remains a flagship project for enhancing connectivity in the Northeast. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, a long-delayed project now receiving renewed momentum under AEP, aims to extend to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Chabahar Port (Iran) offers India an alternative access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan, and enhances strategic autonomy in regional connectivity. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan promotes "quality infrastructure" as a BRI alternative (Baruah, 2020; Chaturvedi, 2019). Launched in 2017, the AAGC is a joint initiative with Japan aimed at promoting quality infrastructure and connectivity in Africa and the Indo-Pacific as a transparent alternative to BRI. Partnerships include collaboration with Japan and ASEAN on the digital economy, cybersecurity, and digital payment systems. Although connectivity initiatives experience delays, such as those involving Kaladan and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway, projects like Chabahar Port offer counter-BRI leverage (Kaushik, 2023; Sibal, 2023). Northeast India is positioned as a gateway, with significant infrastructure development, including roads, rail, air connectivity, and border crossings—aimed at facilitating trade and movement with Southeast Asia (Government of India, MEA, 2015). Economic engagement balances multilateral efforts (such as ASEAN FTA and AAGC with Japan) with strategic autonomy (evident in RCEP withdrawal and focus on Chabahar). Connectivity projects seek to enhance India's regional economic integration while reducing dependence on specific routes or models, aligning with the goal of autonomy and offering alternatives through cooperative frameworks, whether multilateral or mini-lateral.

### **7.3. Multilateral Fora and Mini-Lateral Engagements:**

Under AEP, ASEAN Centrality and the East Asia Summit (EAS) participation across all ASEAN-led mechanisms, and summits (2018, 2022) became more substantive, focusing on connectivity, maritime security, counter-terrorism, enhanced summits focused on maritime security, and digital economy (Ghosh, 2019), though internal divisions challenge cohesion (Pongsudhirak, 2023). India actively shapes the EAS agenda, consistently advocating its FOIP vision and principles of inclusivity, the rule of law, and ASEAN centrality. From its revival in 2017 to the first Leaders' Summit in 2021 and subsequent annual summits, the Quad has become the most visible manifestation of India's strategic intent under AEP. Its agenda has expanded significantly. From dialogue (2017) to leaders' summits (2021 to present), driving cooperation in vaccines, critical tech, and infrastructure (Medcalf, 2020; Basrur & Sullivan, 2022). [Critical during COVID-19 (manufacturing and distribution), Clean energy initiatives and adaptation, Cooperation on semiconductors, 5G/6G, AI standards, coordinating on sustainable infrastructure development in the region, Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative launched in 2022.] Proliferation of India-US-Japan, India-Japan-Australia, India-France-Australia, India-Indonesia-Australia trilaterals, focusing on specific regional security and economic concerns. India-Japan-Australia and India-France-Australia groupings addressed niche security concerns (Mohan, 2023). Increased focus on, Bay of Bengal grouping as a vehicle for sub-regional cooperation, partly due to SAARC stagnation, engagement to secure the wider Indian Ocean and Pacific Island regions. Expanded engagement secured Indian Ocean and Pacific Island interests (Chaudhury, 2023)

This pillar is the clearest expression of the Strategic Autonomy-Multilateralism synergy. India uses ASEAN institutions for broad legitimacy and normative influence. Simultaneously, it leverages flexible Mini laterals like the Quad and trilaterals, formats that respect its autonomy by being non-treaty-based and focused on specific, practical cooperation to achieve tangible strategic outcomes and counterbalance power dynamics collectively. This allows India to "punch above its weight" without sacrificing independence.

### **8. Assessing the Transformation: Outcomes and Impact (2014-2024)**

India is now widely recognized as a critical, indispensable actor in the Indo-Pacific, consulted by all major powers and regional states. Its voice carries significant weight on regional security and economic architecture (Medcalf, 2020). AEP elevated India to a "consequential

strategic actor" (Medcalf, 2020), evidenced by, Quad's institutionalization as a counterbalance to China (Peri, 2021). Deepened political, economic, and security ties across Southeast Asia and with key partners like Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Vietnam. India is more embedded in regional networks than ever before. While not solely about containment, AEP has provided regional states with a credible alternative partner, contributing to a multipolar balance of power and constraining unilateral Chinese actions. The Quad's growth is a direct consequence. Leadership in HADR (e.g., 2015 Nepal earthquake) and maritime security (Brewster, 2014) Increased naval presence, HADR leadership (e.g., during the 2015 Nepal earthquake, 2004 Tsunami, Fiji Cyclone Winston 2016), and capacity building (training, patrol vessels for Vietnam, Mauritius, Seychelles etc.) have established India as a net security provider, particularly in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2014). While challenges remain (RCEP, trade deficits), AEP has diversified trade and investment partners, spurred domestic infrastructure development (especially Northeast), and opened new markets. FOIP norm adoption across ASEAN-led forums (Government of India, MEA, 2019). India has been instrumental in promoting and institutionalizing the FOIP concept, emphasizing rules, transparency, sustainability, and ASEAN centrality, directly challenging alternative visions based on coercion or exclusion (Government of India, MEA, 2019). AEP reflects and reinforces a newfound assertiveness in Indian foreign policy, willing to take calculated risks and proactively shape its environment.

### **9. Persistent Challenges and Constraints: Navigating the Limits of Ambition**

Slow progress on flagship connectivity projects (Kaladan, IMTT Highway) due to bureaucratic hurdles, funding issues, and complexities in partner countries (especially Myanmar's instability) remains a major concern (Panda, 2017). Kaladan/IMTT Highway delays due to Myanmar's instability (Haidar, 2023; Panda, 2017). Matching ambitions (naval deployments, development assistance, infrastructure funding) with budgetary realities is a constant challenge. Divergent threat perceptions of China weaken collective action (Thayer, 2022; Pongsudhirak, 2023). ASEAN's internal divisions and varying threat perceptions regarding China complicate unified responses and challenge the operational effectiveness of ASEAN centrality (Thayer, 2022). Balancing U.S.-led Quad with Russia ties/complex China engagement (Pant & Passi, 2022; Mohan, 2021). Balancing relations with the US (and Quad partners) against ties with Russia (a major defense supplier) and managing the complex relationship with China requires constant, delicate diplomacy to preserve autonomy. India's ability to be an economic engine for the region is constrained by domestic reforms needed to

boost manufacturing, exports, and attract higher FDI. Naval ambitions outpace budget growth (Brewster, 2020). The post-coup crisis in Myanmar severely disrupts key land connectivity routes and poses a complex diplomatic and security challenge on India's doorstep. Continued tensions with Pakistan limit overland connectivity options westward, reinforcing the importance of maritime and southeastern routes.

#### **10. The Future Trajectory: Consolidation and Evolution**

As AEP enters its second decade, its core tenets are likely to endure, but with evolving emphases. Quad will deepen tech, supply chain, and maritime security cooperation (Basrur & Sullivan, 2022). The Quad will remain central, likely deepening cooperation in critical technologies, supply chain resilience, maritime security, and infrastructure. Other trilaterals will proliferate. Bridging the gap between promise and delivery on connectivity (especially with Myanmar alternatives explored) and economic agreements will be paramount. Pacific Islands engagement expands via FIPIC (Chaudhury, 2023). Deeper engagement with the Pacific Islands (FIPIC) and strengthening ties with South Korea and Taiwan (unofficially) will continue. Quad will deepen tech, supply chain, and maritime security cooperation (Basrur & Sullivan, 2022). Greater emphasis on resilient supply chains, clean energy transitions, digital economy rules, and critical minerals security aligns with the Quad and other partners. Enhanced capabilities and partnerships (like IPMDA) for comprehensive maritime surveillance. Despite challenges, ASEAN centrality is a diplomatic imperative while pursuing practical cooperation with willing partners bilaterally and multilaterally. "Offensive connectivity" to bypass Myanmar bottlenecks (Baruah, 2020). Ensuring seamless strategic vision and capability across the entire Indo-Pacific theatre, recognizing the IOR's critical importance to India. IPOI (Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative) gains multilateral buy-in (Singh, 2023)

#### **11. CONCLUSION**

India's Act East Policy (AEP, 2014-2024) served as the defining catalyst for the nation's strategic transformation, elevating it from a regional bystander to a central architect of the Indo-Pacific order. Driven by China's rise, the US pivot, and India's ascendance, AEP moved decisively beyond the economic focus of its predecessor (Look East) to adopt a proactive, security-conscious approach. Its core effectiveness stemmed from synergizing Strategic Autonomy with maintaining decision-making independence, avoiding formal alliances, balancing major powers (especially China), and pursuing interest-driven partnerships, all

within a proactive Multilateralism. This involved leveraging ASEAN institutions for normative legitimacy and broad engagement while embracing flexible mini-laterals, notably the Quad, to achieve concrete strategic outcomes, amplify influence, and collectively shape a rules-based order. This synergy enabled India to project power, deepen security cooperation, promote economic integration, and champion its Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision without sacrificing independence. The results were transformative: fundamentally elevated stature as a consequential actor, sought-after partner, net security provider, and key regional architect; dramatically deepened security ties; diversified economic links; advancing connectivity; and anchoring FOIP norms. The revitalized Quad symbolizes India's centrality. Crucially, AEP demonstrated that middle powers can shape great-power contests. Despite persistent challenges, project delays, resource constraints, ASEAN fragmentation, Myanmar instability, and the need to navigate intense US-China rivalry, AEP's legacy is secure. It irrevocably shifted India from the periphery to the centre stage of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, securing national interests while catalyzing a more multipolar, rules-based, and contested strategic environment, laying the foundation for India's enduring role as a leading power.

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