



ACT EAST POLICY: ITS KEY DIMENSIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT :

This article delves to explore and investigate objective, purpose, significance and vital implications of the 'Act East Policy'(AEP). This article further seeks to investigate strategic intentions and purposes of the AEP. The incumbent Modi government has adopted the AEP as dominant policy instrument to address eminent issues of the North Eastern Indian states. The AEP has been also deployed as an important framework for developing relationships with immediate neighbours and countries of Asia pacific regions. This article explores and evaluates key dimensions of the AEP. Finally, this article draws conclusion by stating key outcomes, success and failure of the AEP.



KEYWORDS : Act East Policy, Asia Pacific, North Eastern States

INTRODUCTION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore has revived the Indian Government's 'Look East' policy that had commenced a decade back. NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when came into power in 2014, stressed upon having a closer relationship with east and south-east Asian nations and the result was the 'Act East' policy (AEP). Under this policy the Indian Government valued the need to engage and act towards better economic cooperation with the east and South-east Asian countries (Sengar, 2018). The AEP is being recognised as herald of new economic development and growth for the Northern Eastern Region (NER) of India. Overall purpose of the AEP is to achieve economic integration of South East Asia in terms of investment, trade, commerce, tourism and connectivity (Bhagirathi, 2017). Furthermore, North Eastern Indian states facing eminent problems such as lack of connectivity, law and order and availability of finance for economic development. Preserving and redefining local culture has also remained major issue of North Eastern Indian states. Several separatist groups have surfaced eastern and north eastern Indian states in past 20 years which has resulted into insurgency in some north eastern and eastern Indian states. The AEP is also directed to address to address these domestic issues and problem (Ghosh, 2018).

This article seeks to explore and investigate strategic significance and relevance of the AEP. This article further explores and evaluates key dimensions of the AEP. This article finally investigates complexities that the AEP entail and how this policy is being deployed for addressing regional, national and international issues.

RATIONALE FOR ACT EAST POLICY

The North Eastern Region (NER) of India is comprised of eight states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. This region covers approximately 262179 sq.km geographical areas (Bhagirathi, 2017). The NER region approximately 8% of total geographical area of India but only 3.8% total population Indian population dwell in this region. This region is strategically important for India as it shares 5300 km long international borders (Wadhwa, 2018). It is also important to recognise that eastern neighbourhood has received little bilateral and diplomatic attention since independence. Immediately after independence, India focused its attention on moving away from colonial rule. Cold war motivated India to align with the erstwhile USSR (Parthasarathy, 2018). However, the disintegration of the former USSR had vital military and economic implications for India. China has emerged as a major global economic and military power in past few decades. Most of the countries either aligned with the US and China in post cold war regime. The much-hyped South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could not become successful in attaining economic integration of South Asian countries. More importantly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as stronger regional block and economic community in more recent times. India has strong cultural ties with South East nations. India can attain significant economic gain through increase flow of trade and investment by focusing on ASEAN (Bhagirathi, 2017). The AEP principally aims to serve India's strategic and economic interest in evolving geo-political and economic scenarios in the eastern part and neighbourhood of

KEY OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSES OF ACT EAST POLICY (AEP)

The primary objective of this policy is to have an extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. The 'Act East' policy further aims to promote economic, cultural and strategic relationships with the countries of Asia-Pacific region through consistent engagements at bilateral and multilateral levels. Under 'Act East' policy, India has shifted its focus from trade and development to strategic cooperation and consideration with other Indo-Pacific countries as well.

Furthermore, 'Look East' Policy was the initiative initially taken by Congress-led government in 1990s with an aim to make India's North-eastern states a gateway to the Asia-Pacific region and build a strong relationship with India's extended neighbourhood. The policy has been a consistent priority for successive governments, including the first National Democratic Alliance regime led by BJP veteran leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee from 1999 to 2004 (Javaid, 2018).

However, under the 'Act East' policy, the government is more focussed on developing economic, cultural and strategic relationship with the countries in the Asia-Pacific region at bilateral and multi-lateral levels so that India would be able to get enhanced connectivity to its states of North Eastern region. Government's Act East policy has been taken with the aim to develop trade relationships between India's north eastern states and ASEAN region. The objective was to ensure development of north eastern states through people to people contact, border trade through border haats, cultural ties, infrastructure projects, for example, Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport project, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project, Rhi-Tiddim road project etc (Sengar, 2018).

The main objective of the policy has been the same whether it is named 'Look East' or 'Act East'. The policy highlights India's new approach to address political, economic and cultural dimensions or purposes through dialogue and cooperation with its extended neighbourhood. In this direction India has now strengthened its relations through strategic partnership with countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, Singapore and ASEAN. Not only on international level, India has actively participated through its regional initiatives such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Mekong Ganga cooperation (Sengar, 2018).

The ASEAN countries are not comfortable with the idea of forming Indo-Pacific group as they are worried more for taking side with the United States or China. It is, therefore, several ASEAN countries have shown a lukewarm response towards the Prime Minister's 'Act East' policy and raised questions about the viability of India's "ASEAN-centric" approach to the Indo-Pacific. The weaknesses of ASEAN are apparently visible when it comes to issues related to China. However, their success in regional economic integration is

undisputable but their failure in managing disputable political issues cannot be denied. So, division is deeper when it comes to issues related to China. It is still doubtful whether ASEAN will be able to handle the issues on South China Sea or matter related to China (Rajagopalan, 2018).

MAINTAINING FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURS

Developing and maintaining friendly and cordial relations with India's immediate eastern neighbours is one the primary objective of the AEP. It is demonstrated from the fact that Modi extended invitation to the head of states of the Asian subcontinent for his swearing-in ceremony. All head of states except the president of Myanmar were present on this occasion. Moreover, immediately after assuming the office of India's prime minister, Modi paid first visit to its immediate neighbour Bhutan. Importantly, 18th SAARC summit was held in November 2014 at Kathmandu, capital city of Nepal. Prime Minister Modi proposed his vision for South Asia at this submit by emphasising on important paradigms such as "shared opportunities" and "inter-linked destinies". He further elaborated his vision by stressing that future of India resides with entire region. It can be also argued that Modi has infused a new geographical realism in India's foreign policy coining and popularising the doctrine of 'Act East Policy'. Prime Minister Modi has also emphasised on 'neighbourhood first' policy which is regarded as complementary to 'Act East Policy'. Prime Minister Modi has paid significant attention to 'neighbourhood first' policy in order to stabilise India's relationship with its immediate neighbours. However, geopolitical dynamics in the indo pacific region is evolving and changing in dynamic manner. The strategic competition between two dominant power blocks such as the US and China to gain resources and access to new markets in Indo-pacific region have intensified in more recent times. So far India has taken backseat in rapidly changing and evolving geopolitical scenario. Even focus on India's immediate neighbour such as Myanmar has shifted more towards China. New Delhi has long term strategic interest in eastern neighbours. In this context, the AEP is seen as dominant policy instrument for the revival and attainment of India's strategic interest and priorities (Yhome, 2016)

ACT EAST POLICY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF EASTERN AND NORTH EASTERN INDIAN STATES

The AEP has also remained targeted to foster the economic growth and development of north-eastern Indian states. Presently, state of economic development of most of the north eastern Indian state are significantly lower than other the Indian states. This is evident from the fact that per capita income of India is \$2000 but per capita income of north-eastern state such as Assam is only \$1000. This rather interesting that India's prime minister, Narendra Modi has lately invited other developing Southeast Asian nations to invest in another developing country like India under act east strategy. Lobbying other developing countries mostly from ASEAN forum to invest in India is good idea because India is a vast country having massive regional disparities. Many eastern and north eastern Indian states can receive significant economic spillovers from ASEAN economy. However, only China has significant capability to make investment in India because other neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and others have their own economic problems. They would be more interested in addressing their domestic economic problem rather than committing investment in Indian regions like Manipur, Assam or others. Therefore, encouraging other developing economies from ASEAN to make investment in India can be only perceived as wishful thinking. More importantly, India has strained relationship with China. Last year, tension between Indian and China heightened because of China's road building project on Doklam plateau. Tension was diffused only when China backed from project after spending several months on this plateau (Babones, 2018). This envisages maintaining peaceful and cordial relation with China is essential for the economic development and progress of eastern and north eastern regions of India.

ACT EAST POLICY AND ASEAN

The importance of ASEAN under Indian government's Act east policy is evident from the recurrent visits of the respective head of the states during the last several months. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Singapore to attend the State funeral of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, in March

2015. He again travelled to Singapore in November 2015 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of having bilateral relationship with Singapore and also to establish a strategic partnership. Before going to Singapore, Modi had travelled to Myanmar to take part in the East Asia Summit and the India-ASEAN Summit in November 2014. He also travelled to Malaysia in November 2015 for a bilateral visit as well as to attend the East Asia and the India ASEAN summits. Mrs Sushma Swaraj, the External Affairs Minister, had also visited countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar during the same period. The ASEAN leaders, too, had visited India. The Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng visited India in October 2014 and Singapore's President Tony Tan, also visited India to celebrate the 50th anniversary of a successful diplomatic relationship with India (Sajjanhar, 2016).

According to External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, India intends to build a regional architecture that is based on twin principles of shared prosperity and shared security. She maintains that the AEP will become a vital instrument of promoting shared security, shared prosperity and deeper economic integration with ASEAN region. She also inaugurated 5th round table of ASEAN where she emphasised on strengthening of maritime security, investment, trade, education and cultural ties with ASEAN nations. She further argued "*These are important markers in our engagement with South East Asia, in enhancing our strategic ties with ASEAN across 3 Cs. These 3Cs are commerce, connectivity and culture,*" (Business Standard, 2018). Therefore, one of the purposes of AEP is to foster bilateral strategic cooperation and diplomatic relationships between India and nations represented by ASEAN forum. Besides focusing adequately on improving the diplomatic relationship between India and ASEAN nations, the AEP has provided adequate thrust on strengthening counter terrorism operations, cyber-security and maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN. The AEP has remained directed to share best counter terrorism practices, information, capacity building and enforcement mechanism between India and ASEAN. In addition, cyber security capacity building, confidence building measures, policy coordination and better use of information technology have also remained on the forefront of AEP. Scope of the AEP also extends to enhanced maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN. New mechanism such as expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) has been deployed for attaining better coordination in rescue, search, prevention and management of accidents or incidents at sea (Singh, 2018).

FOCUS ON CONNECTIVITY AND TRADE

The ASEAN represents for the association of 10 nations. Two-way trade between Indian and Asian stood at \$65.1 billion in financial year 2015-16 but it surged to \$71.6 billion in financial year 2016-17 which represents for more than 10% increase in trade flow. Surprisingly, two-way trade flow between China and ASEAN stood at \$452.31 billion in 2016. Pertinent trend in trade flow evidently underlines that India has not been successful in harnessing the trade potential of ASEAN. The AEP is also directed at fostering trade between India and ASEAN (Gupta, 2018). Rightly, the AEP is directed at improving the connectivity through land, air and sea that eventually help in cutting down of costs of logistics or movement of goods and services between India and ASEAN. The incumbent Indian government has initiated several projects for fostering connectivity between India and ASEAN nations. Notable among them is four lane trilateral highways that will link India (Manipur), Thailand (Mae Sot), Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. This proposed highway can greatly enhance movement of goods and economic activity between North Eastern Region of India and ASEAN. The AEP has been also paying enough attention to develop multimodal transport system to enhance flow of trade and economic activities between Indian and ASEAN. The Indian government has initiated the Kaladan multi-modal transport project that will link Kolkata, Mizoram and Sittwe port (Myanmar) via land and river route (Singh, 2018).

Furthermore, growth and development of India's northeast region is significantly dependent on greater connectivity of this region with eastern neighbours. Enhanced connectivity of this region with neighbouring countries via roadways, airways, railways, waterways and information ways can promote economic growth and development of this region remarkably (The Economic Times, 2018).

BALANCING THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND THE US

Many experts believe that the AEP is largely targeted at balancing the growing influence of China in this region. According to Director, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Mira Rapp Hooper, China has continued to invest in its military power at high speed and India's act east policy is targeted at counter balancing the growing military strength and influence of China in East Asia Region. Hooper further asserts that India intends to build stronger ties with neighbours such as nations represented by ASEAN forum. However, scope of the AEP goes beyond maintaining stronger ties with neighbours. At East Asia and ASEAN summit of 2014 Indian officials raised key issues such freedom of navigation in at South China Sea, importance for international law and peaceful resolution of disputes. In September 2014, India and Vietnam issued a joint communiqué that opposed threats of coercion and freedom of navigation in South China Sea. India and the US have signed a defence framework that includes provision of creating capability and securing freedom of navigation across sea lanes (The Economic Times, 2018a).

The AEP has started showing some positive outcomes. Some South East countries have doubts about China as well the US. Therefore, they are favouring India. For example, Vietnam has come closer to New Delhi in past years as country is backing India on key issue such as South China Sea and defence deals. Moreover, many experts believe that Washington and Beijing have remained dominant powers in Southeast Asia but China influence has grown remarkably in recent times. On the other hand, perception about white house is only unpredictable. More importantly, Southeast Asian region is the home of world's fastest growing economies. Many Southeast Asian economies are currently seeking to diversify their strategic interest and they intend to go beyond obvious binary choice between Washington and Beijing. In such an evolving scenario India could potential become obvious choice for many Southeast Asian states. However, some Southeast Asian states are looking towards Australia as potential partner. Interestingly, most of the ASEAN leaders want New Delhi to play greater and assertive role in Indo-pacific region. Countries such as Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia have conceptually agreed that India should play more active and assertive role in Southeast Asia. However, countries such as Philippines and Malaysia have failed to demonstrate their obvious intention on the matter (Chandran, 2018)

KEY CONTENTIOUS ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE ACT EAST POLICY

The Northeast, joined to the mainland, as a thin strip of land, is often called the Chicken's Neck, has been the land of insurgencies and exotic tribes. Because of the successive governments' policies to suppress insurgencies with military action and force, the region has been left alienated with the main land. And the successive Northeast policies of the UPA and NDA governments tried to improve the situation and bring out positive changes in the development-deprived region. As said by one of the senior officials of Home Ministry, *"The (Act East) policy serves two purposes for the government. Stronger trade and business ties with other South East Asian countries and development opportunities to the north-east states. And development is the best anecdote to insurgency."* It is evident from the government data that the militancy in the northeast region is on decline. From 1,024-odd insurgency-related incidents across the region in 2012, the number came down to 308 in 2017. The data continued improving as claimed by Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijju — who himself hails from Arunachal Pradesh. According to him the insurgency-related incidents declined by 63% since 2014, the year the BJP came to power at the Centre. However, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), which leads the oldest-running insurgency in the country, has other opinion. They think the government at the centre is "vitiating the environment of negotiation." But the BJP-led government claims to be confident to solve the decade-long impasse through the "framework agreement" signed between the NSCN (I-M) and the Centre in August, 2015. The agreement sought to build a consensus for the modalities of the final Naga peace accord. Terms of the agreement have not yet been made public which the opposition parties repeatedly demanded for. While on the other hand the government authorities say that it is the NSCN-IM which is keen on keeping the agreement a secret and they are respecting their demand.

The NSCN showed their frustration, by boycotting the assembly polls in Nagaland, on not getting a permanent solution of the impasse. The BJP-led government tried to resolve the issue. With the help of Nationalist Democratic People's Party, it formed the government in the state. However, a permanent solution is still too far and quite a challenging task.

There are other issues such as the implementation of the 1985 Assam Accord, and other agreements that the government signed with the military outfits of Assam such as the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Dima-Halam-Daogah (DHD). Furthermore, there are other militant groups that are active in the northeast region but their strengths have been severely diminished, as one of the senior paramilitary officials claims, "In Assam, for instance, the main militant group is ULFA (Independence) which has been limited to northern parts of the state. In Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, active militant groups such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA), Kangleipak Communist Party and so on have been suffered irreversible losses." As per the government official sources more than 830 suspected militants have been killed since 2012 and many militant groups are willing to hold talks with the government to reach a peaceful conclusion. But the situation is still not under control and continues to be fragile because of the inter-state border disputes, ethnic tensions and tension due to immigration issues, etc. According to the HT media report, "*The terrain, the state of socio-economic development and historical factors such as language, ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources and a widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation have resulted in a fragile security situation in the north eastern states.*" They further added that it often results in violence and diverse demands. The demands from Indian insurgent groups (IIGs) vary from sovereignty in some cases to independent state or homeland or simply better conditions for ethnic groups.

Importantly, the issues related to illegal migration from Bangladesh have divided people on religious and linguistic lines and sparked the worst communal riots in the country. These riots have culminated into the massacre of more than 2,000 Muslims by ethnic tribal people on February 18, 1983 in the small hamlet of Nellie in Morigaon district. The unofficial count put the number of dead at more than 10,000. The decision of Central Government to amend Citizenship Act to grant Indian citizenship to Hindu migrants from Bangladesh have annoyed the BJP's ruling partner, the Asom Gana Parishad, in the state. Another point of dispute has been the ongoing process to update the National Register of Citizens that caused unrest in a section of the state because they thought that the state government conspired to leave out genuine Indian citizens on the basis of their religion. Nationalistic groups claim that the names of illegal migrants are being included in the NRC that defeats the very utility of the process.

The issues related to migration have also caused disputes and unrest in other states too, including Tripura. Over 35,000 Bru tribals have migrated to Tripura from the villages of Mizoram, following the ethnic clashes in October 1997, and they have been staying in six relief camps for about 17 years. Some of the groups in Mizoram have opposed their return and resettlement.

Similar issues of granting Indian citizenship to at least one lakh Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh, staying in Arunachal Pradesh for more than 50 years, have caused serious problems and unrest among the people of the state. The case of Rohingya Muslims, who fled from Myanmar and settled in different states, has posed a major problem for the government. A large number of these refugees have been arrested and kept in detention centres of different states. Because of the sensitive nature of the issue, it has put the government in a great fix (Javaid, 2018).

SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF ACT EAST POLICY

Buddhist outreach has remained key element of India's act east policy. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made several efforts that demonstrate his attention of reclaiming and leveraging upon Buddhist legacy. In 2017, Prime Minister Modi paid visit to St Petersburg Buddhist temple and presented a unique edition to Uraga Kanjur, a sacred Buddhist text, to the head of priest. Prime Minister Modi was also invited as chief guest on for the international Vesak Day celebration in Colombo mid May 2017 (Chaudhury, 2017).

Buddhist tourism has immense potential to boost economic and diplomatic relationships between India and its eastern neighbours. So far India has followed the path of self reliance and import substitution. India has played little attention to build relations with its eastern neighbours based on trade and investment. More importantly, capability of developing economic relationships based on trade and investment with its eastern neighbours is only limited. However, the Indian economy has attained higher order of integration with entire eastern neighbourhood over the past three decades. Trade and investment ties with eastern neighbours have been increasing gradually. Interestingly, India's most of the eastern neighbours share common spiritual legacy which relates Buddhism. The spirituality and philosophy of Buddhism transcend beyond India's eastern border and extend to countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and few others. The message of Lord Buddha is reliant on two central premise renunciation and abhorrence of war. Emperor Ashoka promoted religious teachings and philosophy of Buddhism after the Kalinga conflict. Gradually, Buddhism as a religion and central religious philosophy transcended to other parts of world. Importantly, India's eastern neighbours have been following Buddhism for many centuries. Presently, Buddhism is extensively followed in eastern neighbouring countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, South Korea, and Sri Lanka. Laos, Mongolia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

India has never considered Buddhism as a viable alternative to develop and maintain people to people contact with neighbouring countries. Promoting Buddhism pilgrimage can attract vast number of tourists across the world as India is largely recognised as the land of Lord Buddha (Parthasarathy, 2018).

There is strong rationale for promoting and maintaining relationship with neighbours along with spirituality and philosophy of Buddhism because this religion originated in India. Moreover, India has many sites that belong to Buddhist faiths and they are places such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Nalanda and many others. India has strong connection with Tibetan Buddhism as India has granted asylum to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament-in-exile mainly operate from the city of Dharamshala. Tibetan Buddhism has strong historical links to Theravada Buddhism. This envisages that India can achieve deeper engagement with countries following Buddhism (Kishwar, 2018).

The incumbent Indian government has made some effort to promote Buddhism tourism in country by promoting the concept of Buddhist circuit. India can connect important Buddhist places such as Bodh Gaya (Bihar state) Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), and the Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh) with Buddhist sites in Myanmar. The Modi government has demonstrated its intention to promote Buddhism as soft power in order to provide a boost to the AEP (Maini, 2017)

Furthermore, India can be developed as an important knowledge centre of Buddhism philosophy and religion. The incumbent government has undertaken some preliminary steps to revive Nalanda university project. Importantly, Buddhist studies have remained a well-established discipline across the Indian universities. Many Indian universities have initiated Buddhist scholarship. However, promoting the study of ancient languages like Pali is necessary for the development of Buddhist academia in India as number of Buddhist text have been written in this language (Kishwar, 2018). In short, India has used Buddhism to fulfil some notable objectives of the AEP. However, this dimension of the AEP has largely remained unexplored.

CONCLUSION

The Act East Policy' adopted by Modi government in 2014 is in fact amended and rebranded version of 'Look East' policy that actually commenced a decade ago. Successive Indian governments have provided adequate thrust upon either act 'Look East Policy' or 'Act East Policy' because of strategic significance of north eastern Indian states and neighbourhood. The AEP is principally targeted at fostering the economic development, progress and integration of North Eastern Indian states with New Delhi. The AEP is also targeted at promoting bilateral and multi-lateral levels talks and dialogues with countries in the Asia Pacific region. This policy is also increasingly being used by the Indian government to counter domestically grown insurgencies in North Eastern Indian state and for developing strategic and diplomatic relationship with enamouring countries. The AEP has contributed significantly in building relationships with countries represented by ASEAN forum. Experts also argue that the AEP has been used by India to

check the growing influence of China and the US in Asia Pacific Region. India has partially become successful in gaining support of countries such as Iran, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia. However, other ASEAN nations are still apprehensive about India leadership role in Asia Pacific region. The AEP has also offered only limited dividend in terms of promoting trade and investment flows between India and its North Eastern neighbours. However, the AEP has paid some notable dividend in terms of fostering connectivity of New Delhi with North Eastern states and immediate neighbours. Ironically, the AEP has paid only limited dividend in terms of checking home grown insurgencies. More importantly, spirituality of Buddhism can become unifying force Asia Pacific region but the AEP has not leveraged true potential of Buddhist tourism to develop people to people contact with its neighbours. In conclusion, the AEP needs to adopt a holistic approach that can help in addressing imperative strategic interests of India.

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