



# NDA@3: Act East a mainstay of India's foreign policy

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## HIGHLIGHTS

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- India's fast growing relationship with Japan, with special focus on defence and security, is central to India's Act East policy.
- Act East has helped India to be seen internationally as being integral to the Indo-Pacific region and the Asian order



*Narendra Modi with Japan PM Shinzo Abe*

NEW DELHI: It was in 2002 that then PM Atal Behari Vajpayee had declared, while delivering a lecture in [Singapore](#), that India's position in the Asia-Pacific was a geographical reality and a political fact. In many ways, the Narendra Modi government has worked in the past 3 years to fructify that perceptive declaration made by Vajpayee.

A few months into his government, Modi sought to start with a bang by renaming India's [Look East](#) Policy as Act East Policy. After it was launched in 1992, then finance minister [Manmohan Singh](#) had described as not just an external

engagement with Asean but also as marking a strategic shift in the way India viewed the world.

Unlike Look East which was Asean-centric, Act East is an outreach to the wider Asia Pacific extending from Japan to countries in South Pacific. The Act East is also different in the sense that it is not limited to economic engagement but also focuses on enhancing defence and security ties with countries in the region.

Nowhere has this been made more manifest than in the way in which India has sought to deepen its security links with Japan and Vietnam. Defence cooperation is now seen as major pillar of India's strategic partnership with Vietnam with Indian naval ships making frequent friendly port calls to the country.

After it announced a \$ 500 million line of credit for Vietnam to boost defence cooperation between the 2 countries, India was also said to have discussed earlier this year supply of Akash surface-to-air missiles to the country. China's Global Times responded by declaring that Beijing would not sit with its arms crossed if India went ahead with supply of missiles to Vietnam.

Similarly, India's fast growing relationship with Japan, with special focus on defence and security, also central to India's Act East Policy.

According to strategic affairs expert Brahma Chellaney, the Act East has helped India to be seen internationally as being integral to the Indo-Pacific region and the Asian order.

"India needs to treat Myanmar as part of its immediate neighbourhood and add greater strategic content to its warming relationship with Vietnam. It also must build closer ties with Indonesia, with which it shares a sea frontier," he says.

With India seeking to raise its profile in the region, the government also has sought to internationalise the South China Sea (SCS) disputes by name-checking SCS in bilateral documents with bilateral partners like the US and Japan.

With the Trump administration mired in internal conflict, and its foreign policy largely unintelligible, the government may be faced with its toughest challenge in executing its Asia Pacific outreach. Until now, Act East converged almost seamlessly with the US Rebalance to Asia as both sought sustainable balance of power in the region.

Any dilution of the Rebalance under Trump could change all that leaving India, as some believe, to plough a lonely furrow. As former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal warns, a US withdrawal from the region would mark the end of the US as world's pre-eminent power and that to hedge against it India needs to further deepen its relations with Japan.

India's already strained ties with China will continue to be further exacerbated by Beijing's intransigence on 3 issues in the near future, namely Pakistan based terrorist Masood Azhar, CPEC and NSG. With India still being seen as acting in cahoots with the US by China, Beijing is unlikely to relent on any of these issues.

Be that as it may, India's Act East Policy rightly seeks to realign Indian foreign policy along its historical axis. As Chellaney says, historically, invaders and plunderers came from the west but India never faced any such attacks from the east. "While India still confronts important security threats from the west, its economic interests, like in the past, are eastward oriented," he says