



Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's expanding neighbourhood

by Prabir De, New Delhi, KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020, 347 pp. & 380 pp., Rs 820, (PB), ISBN: 978-93-89137-30-9.9789389137309

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To cite this article: Nabam Tunia (2020) Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's expanding neighbourhood, *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 16:1, 131-133, DOI: [10.1080/09733159.2020.1783767](https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1783767)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1783767>



Published online: 01 Jul 2020.



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BOOK REVIEW

Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's expanding neighbourhood, by Prabir De, New Delhi, KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020, 347 pp. & 380 pp., Rs 820, (PB), ISBN: 978-93-89137-30-9.9789389137309

Dr Prabir De's work *Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's Expanding Neighbourhood* is a collection of the author's views on India's decade old Look East Policy, rechristened as "Act East Policy" in form of essays. The author has further elaborated his work, drawing in attention to the "Indo-Pacific" Region as an important attribute to India's economy and security, as it accounts for 62% of the world's GDP and 46% of the world's trade flows through this region. As such, it is only befitting that India expands and transforms its already existing policies. The aim of the work is to provide the readers with economic insights into India's Act East to Act Indo-Pacific, while drawing the attention of the readers to various multilateral organisations.

The author has broadly divided his work into ten broad themes: Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal (BBIN); Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC); South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN); Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC); Act East – India's Northeast; Bangladesh China India Myanmar forum for regional cooperation (BCIM); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Act Far – East; and the Indo-Pacific. The broad categorisation gives a clear impression and makes it easy for the readers to understand the conceptualisation of the book, i.e. understanding India's Act East or Indo-Pacific through multilateral relations within the neighbourhood and the expanded neighbourhood. The order of the chapters also gives an understanding as to how the author sees India's policies, expanding from its immediate neighbours to its expanded neighbourhood. The author's efforts in highlighting and briefing the chronology of the Look East Policy (LEP) to Indo-Pacific through graphs (p. 2) and thereby, tabling the various multilateral organisations (p. 4) within the larger ambit of LEP makes it easier for the reader to comprehend. In addition to this, it is also quite commendable, the effort of the author in a comprehensive compilation of all the existing projects taken up by India and its partners in all the multilateral organisations or through bilateral agreements as part of the organisational structure. The aim of the work is primarily targeted at providing economic insights to the readers and hence, the emphasis on connectivity, infrastructural development is very visible throughout the work and in all the themes mentioned in the book. Furthermore, the book has accomplished in providing significant recommendation while addressing the various themes and suggesting specific areas of improvement or development. When dealing with BBIN, the author has highlighted the importance of establishing a "secretariat" along with valuable input on the structure, role and functioning of the secretariat. Likewise, chapter 30 of the book suggests that India's Northeast can be developed as a medical tourist hub for neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

While the book has accomplished providing economic insights (as intended by the author) to its readers to a large extent, the work has also failed to shed light on various aspects which have relevant significance when one talks of India's Act East Policy (AEP) or the Indo-Pacific.

Firstly, the work is titled as *Act East to Act Indo-Pacific: India's Expanding Neighbourhood*. Here, it is vital to point out that the Act East Policy is a policy adopted by the Modi Government, Indo-Pacific on the other hand, can clearly be identified as a strategic geography

envisioned by several countries with no one particular definition. In doing so, it should also be mentioned that the work has clearly failed to mention what is Indo-Pacific in the Indian context? As addressed by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian concept of “Indo-Pacific” lies from the *Shores of East Africa to the Shores of Americas*. The project has solely emphasised on specific geographical locations, i.e. South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia (excluding both South and North Korea) but has interestingly addressed India–Russia relations, which was significantly refreshing. Therefore, it can be opined that title of the study is overarchingly ambitious as the content is significantly inadequate, if one has to incorporate India’s geo-strategic definition of Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, while, it is commendable that the study is a comprehensible compilation of the various projects undertaken or envisioned, the study fails to address the challenges of the working mechanism. If one looks at the recommendations with regards to the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) on pages 23–24, the author recommends the facilitation of sub-regional trade and the free movement of people. One needs to comprehend the feasibility of such proposal as the recommendation could be logistically handicapped. It should also be addressed that while the recommendation of the movement of people between these countries has been suggested for better trade relations, a fundamental question arises on the relations that these countries share. For example, the historical context of movement of the Nepalese from Nepal to Bhutan, the Bangladeshis to India’s Northeast are issues of sensitivity but also crucial, which the study has failed to address. While the primary aim of this work is focused on the economic aspects, it can be opined that economic and societal norms cannot be studied totally independent of each other. Similarly, on the theme of BIMSTEC, the author’s assessment on strengthening the functioning of the organisation, vaguely mentions about completing the project undertaken by member countries while failing to mention the challenges. Another recommendation suggests the formation of new committees for better functioning; however, one can argue along the lines of strengthening the existing committee or “BIMSTEC Secretariat” instead.

As mentioned earlier, the study has laid significant emphasis on India’s Act East Policy, therefore, the mention and study of India’s Northeast is inevitable. When the LEP was transformed as AEP, the Act mentions three “Cs” i.e. Commerce, Culture and Connectivity and this study has failed to highlight any aspect of cultural significance. Even as the author deals with connectivity within various countries (particularly, the immediate neighbours), one cannot help but emphasise the lack of assessment done in the study with regards to the connectivity within India and particularly India’s Northeast. Another important point to be noted is that, in the subject matter of India’s Northeast, the study repeatedly mentions just Guwahati and Imphal. The mention of other states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura is negligible. For a reader who may not be familiar with the region, one might easily assume that the India’s Northeast comprises of just Guwahati and Imphal. On page 220 of the book, the author asked a very relevant question and to quote “The question is, which way shall we drive our AEP to bring prosperity for common people?”; however, as one continues with the reading, it is rather a disappointment that such a significant question does not see any further analysis.

Thirdly, as mentioned in the preface of the book, the book is a collection of articles and essays by the author; however, in doing so, there is clearly a repetition of the exact sentences over and over and throughout the themes. This pattern tends to break the continuity of the context, thereby losing the interest of the reader. Furthermore, many essays in the book have abrupt endings and one liner comments, disrupting the interest of the reader.

Lastly, the book provides a holistic understanding of India’s Act East Policy. As mentioned earlier, the content is significantly inadequate as the title is misleading. Nevertheless, the study

is a good read for readers interested in enhancing one's knowledge of India's AEP, particularly if one is interested in familiarising oneself with the various projects undertaken or envisioned. The essays provide insights on the various projects within a particular theme. Although, some of the projects mentioned could have been more elaborate and descriptive rather than just mere mentions. Nevertheless, the book can prove to be a useful read for policy makers and academicians alike to focus on the recommendations and suggestions for India's expanding foreign policy, growing ambitions and better international cooperation, which is beneficial for all parties involved.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1783767>

