

During the five years of the New Southbound Policy, Taiwan's flagship foreign policy initiative, the nation has been successfully nurturing ties with the countries within the policy's framework. The new avatar of India's Act East Policy has completed seven years, and includes countries from East Asia to the Pacific Islands, with ASEAN at its core.

There is synergy between India's Act East Policy and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy. Both were borne of their respective needs to engage the countries in their immediate and extended neighborhood. A careful analysis of the two policies shows that they evolved to meet needs in a regional context.

The previous iterations of the Act East Policy (the "look east" policy of former Indian prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao) and the New Southbound Policy (the "go south" policy of former president Lee Teng-hui [蔣經國]) led to the establishment of representative offices in each other's capitals in 1995, and the beginning of unofficial relations between India and Taiwan. Initiated as moves to engage ASEAN member states, India and Taiwan have reoriented their policies to make them comprehensive and action-oriented.

In 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded India's engagement with its eastern neighbors by elevating the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy. In 2016, two years after India consolidated its eastward engagement, Taiwan initiated a foreign policy move to engage India purposefully with the New Southbound Policy. The "go south" policy did not include India and largely focused on engaging some ASEAN countries.

For the first time, Taiwan introduced an official policy for deepening engagement with India along with 17 other countries. Also, it is important to consider that, unlike previous Taiwanese administrations' efforts, the New Southbound Policy does not merely reduce dependence on China, but reaches out to countries of economic and strategic importance.

The New Southbound Policy is one of Taiwan's policy moves to secure its rightful place by engaging countries in its neighborhood. The introduction of the policy is a telltale sign of President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) emphasis on the significance of engaging South and Southeast Asian countries, along with other major stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region.

Policies enhance Indo-Pacific ties

Written by Sana Hashmi and Alan Yang

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Highlighting the seriousness of Tsai and her administration vis-a-vis the policy, she said at the 2018 Yushan Forum: “Taiwan helps Asia, Asia helps Taiwan” — a slogan that has come to shape Taiwan’s Asia strategy.

Similar vigor has been witnessed in Modi’s promotion of the Act East Policy and India’s Indo-Pacific vision.

Taiwan has placed ample emphasis on India’s importance in the policy. When COVID-19 created havoc in India in April and May, Taiwan extended solidarity by donating oxygen cylinders and concentrators. Seemingly, India, too, is rethinking its engagement with Taiwan.

With Meenakshi Lekhi as the newly appointed Indian minister of state for external affairs, Taiwan has an admirer. She was one of the two Bharatiya Janata Party lawmakers who attended Tsai’s swearing-in ceremony virtually last year and praised Taiwan for its democratic resilience.

The two countries have taken several steps to recalibrate the focus of collaboration. Last year, the Taipei-based thinktank Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation and India’s National Maritime Foundation signed a memorandum of understanding for promoting dialogue and collaboration between the seven pillars of India’s Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiatives and Taiwan’s five flagship programs of the New Southbound Policy.

Developmental cooperation is an inherent component in the Act East and New Southbound policies. India might also consider taking an active part in the Taiwan-led Global Cooperation Training Framework. This would help the two countries further intensify their cooperation and work toward shared interests.

The Act East Policy has been well received by regional countries. It remains one of India’s most successful foreign policy initiatives, representing its aspirations to reinforce strategic autonomy. While the New Southbound Policy is newer, it has the potential to strengthen Taiwan’s relations within Asia and promote regional cooperation. The two policies are complementary in nature, and it is only natural that Taiwan is officially included in the Act East Policy. Acknowledging Taiwan in the Act East Policy would give the policy an impetus.

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India and Taiwan have been proponents of a free, inclusive and rules-based order. As India has placed its Act East Policy within the broader context of its Indo-Pacific vision, Taiwan should also link its New Southbound Policy and the Indo-Pacific policy. The prospects of the Act East and New Southbound policies will be largely shaped by the two countries' willingness to expand and modify their respective policies.

The time is ripe for India and Taiwan to take additional steps to bolster their policies and solidify the rules-based order. Facing common challenges imposed by COVID-19, India and Taiwan need to work closely to chart out a prosperous and promising future for Indo-Pacific countries in the post-pandemic era, thereby deepening the prosperity of the region and safeguarding the welfare of Taiwanese and Indians as well.

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