

China Factor in India-ASEAN Relations of Twenty First Century

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Abstract

India has had close cultural and economic ties with Southeast Asian countries throughout the history. The significant changes that occurred in the world politics and economic scenario since the early 1990's and more importantly China's growing formidable economic and military presence in Southeast Asia compelled India to reform its policy towards ASEAN region. So, India in 1991 in order to revive its ties with South East Asia came with the vibrant policy of 'Look East'. This paper attempts to analyse the China Factor in the changing India-ASEAN Relations of Twenty First century.

Key Words: *Look East, Re-orientation, Dismantling barriers, Sectoral Dialogue Partner, Strategic Partner.*

Introduction

India's relations with the nations of Southeast Asia are installed in history and pathos. In the historical backdrop of International relations, the Southeast Asian region has been a blend of bunch cultures and religions; a region where different verifiable occasions have interwoven the constituent states into an incorporated, intriguing and multi-tinted fabric. It is also no doubt, an acknowledged fact that, in ancient, pre-colonial times, Indian social impacts spread to the nations lying its East, and this connection has always been more widespread and significant. For a significant part of history, it was customary among researchers and students of history to assign the Southeast Asian region as "Farther India" or "Greater India", subsequently recommending that the region was arranged inside the circle of Indian cultural influence.

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The Second World War immersed East Asia rather broadly. The war added a strategic dimension to India's (British India) links with Southeast Asia. The British grasped the strategic centrality of India in Asia and sustained their colonial presence "east of the Suez" incorporating into Southeast Asia, on the basis of their Indian empire. They constructed India as the fortress of their capacity and influence in Asia that secured their colonial holdings as far in the east as possible under the circumstances, up to Hong Kong.

After achieving independence from colonial rule, India has attached great importance to developing relations with ASEAN countries. In 1950's and 1960's, India actively expanded its influence in Southeast Asia, fully supporting Indonesia's struggle for national independence. The Bandung Conference was the high watermark in Indian diplomacy. Nehru, who was the architect of basic principles of Indian foreign policy like anti-colonialism and non-alignment, was also of the strong belief that India could play a meaningful role in the cold war period. India also was in favor of a peaceful solution to the problem in Indochina.

India-ASEAN Relations during Cold War

The Cold War would have an impact on the international relations of Asian countries despite India's stated commitment to nonalignment. India quietly distanced itself from the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia by its move towards the Soviet Union. Pro-western Southeast Asian Countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore saw India's closeness to the Soviet Union with significant unease. This pro-Soviet tilt in India's foreign policy drove a wedge between India and the Southeast Asian countries. Moreover ASEAN countries did not go down well with India's proposal for a security arrangement in the region, as it was seen to be part of the Soviet Union's attempts to bring the region under its influence. ASEAN also did not support India's cause during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

The divergence of interests was further aggravated by a progression of developments in the 1970s. In August 1971, India's marking of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation stressed ASEAN, which felt that the Moscow-New Delhi collusion would enable the Soviet Union to utilize its influential status in South Asia to

propel its interests in Southeast Asia, regardless of India's affirmations that the arrangement was not a defense settlement, but rather an agreement for peace and friendship. India appeared to practicing duplicity when it criticized American activities in Diego Garcia while backing the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean by claiming that it was "reactive development". Thus during much of the Cold War era, India's foreign and security policies were dictated by events not only in South Asia but also the world in general.

Resuming of India-ASEAN Relations in Post Cold War Era

The sudden demise of the cold war power structure and the disintegration of the USSR had serious implications not only for India's political-economic conditions but for its foreign policy also. The disintegration meant a loss of time tested friend and all who supported India at various issues, be it Kashmir, Goa and Indo-Pak wars, collapse of USSR meant loss of market for Indian goods also. In the aftermath of cold war both India and Russia faced serious political and economic crises. India's policy of Non-alignment became unnecessary to Russia's geo-strategic interest due to the emergence of a Unipolar world order and the economic rise of China in Asian continent. Moreover the resolution of the Cambodian conflict brought about a change in Indo-ASEAN relations. India extended support to ASEAN's efforts in establishing peace in Cambodia and bring the warring factions to the negotiating table at the Jakarta Informal Meeting because India perceived that China was using the Cambodian issue to increase its influence in the region. So, all these happenings has had a substantial impact on India's thinking.

A re-orientation occurred in India in the mid-1990s which gradually prompted a "renaissance in relations" with Southeast Asia. At this period, Indian policy makers couldn't overlook this region, especially when India was in critical requirement for new opening for its 'liberalizing economy'. A number of changes, as a result, were brought about in the foreign policy domain. Subsequently, Indian policymakers took new initiative in the form of its "Look East Policy".

Look East Policy is mainly about India's relations with Asia Pacific in general and ASEAN in particular. The then Prime Minister of India P.V Narasimha Rao who

focused on forging links and improving cultural, economic, political and strategic cooperation with this region. He converted this important craving into India's foreign policy initiative that terminated in 'Look East Policy' which aims at dismantling barriers and to create confidence between India and Southeast Asia. The term "Look East Policy" was mentioned for the first time in the annual report of Ministry of External Affairs 1995-1996 under the tenure of Narasimha Rao. Look East Policy was also an attempt to carve a place for India in the larger Asia Pacific and it also meant to showcase India's economic potential for investments and trade.

India within the ambit of Look East Policy made considerable progress in political engagements with ASEAN member countries. Political engagements is of two dimensional: to establish institutional links and to target certain countries to elevate bilateral ties to a higher plane. In 1992, ASEAN decided to confer upon India first the Sectoral Dialogue Partner and then this partnership was so rewarding that in 1995, ASEAN decided to upgrade the Sectoral Dialogue Partnership into full dialogue partnership. At present both India and ASEAN are participating in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). Both India and ASEAN became Summit Partners in 2002, since 2002, the Indian-ASEAN Summit has become an annual affair and in 2012 both became Strategic Partners. Currently ASEAN and India have 30 platforms for engagement including an annual summit and seven ministerial meetings focusing on diverse range of sectors. In 2013 both India and ASEAN established ASEAN India Centre (AIC). The purpose for its establishment was to enhance the possibilities of India-ASEAN cooperation by bridging the existing knowledge gaps between the people of the two sides. It also enhanced the strategic partnership with special focus on policy recommendations, policy research and interactions among Think Tanks.

In the sphere of defence and security cooperation both India and ASEAN relations have been growing steadily which focuses on exchanges of high-level visits, strategic dialogues, training exchanges, port calls and some sources of defence equipment. India is the member of ASEAN Defence Ministers Meet Plus (ADMM+) and ARF. ADMM+

framework has been established to bring a cooperative security mechanism, especially in the areas of human assistance, disaster relief, counter terrorism, peace keeping operations and maritime cooperation. India has taken a number of confidence building measures that ushered a new era in maritime cooperation, India has also started periodic naval exercises with ASEAN countries e.g Milan.

On the economic front both India and ASEAN in October 2003 has taken their relationship a step higher with the signing of India ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation. The Framework Agreement laid a sound basis for the establishment of ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), which includes FTA in goods, investment and services at the 2nd ASEAN Summit. The Agreement on Trade and Goods was signed in 2009 and implemented in 2010, this agreement is the world's largest FTA. This agreement eliminate tariffs on 4000 products. The tariff on 4000 products was reduced by the year 2013 and tariff on 800 products was reduced by the year 2016. On 1, July 2015, India-ASEAN Agreement on Trade in Service and Investment come into force and with its entry India-ASEAN Free Trade Area got completed. This agreement resulted in the movement of manpower and investment between India and ASEAN countries and this agreement also confirms India's vision of having institutional architecture for economic ties with ASEAN.

The Look East Policy has now entered its third phase as the first phase of it was ASEAN centered and focus primarily on trade and investment linkages. The second phase of it get started from 2002 onwards and is characterized by the institutionalized of relations and expanded definition of 'east', extending from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN at its core. The third phase of Look East Policy was declared by India's present Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Shortly after his election in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the concept of the new 'Act East' Policy which focuses on working with ASEAN and other Asian countries in large perspective. India's foreign Minister Shushma Swaraj visited Vietnam on August 26, 2014, where she addressed the Indian heads of missions mentioned that India has to not just 'Look East' but 'Act East'. In 'Act East' policy, New Delhi- though not a member is no longer seen as a distant

neighbor, but rather a respected and active interlocutor, including its enlarged forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS).

China Factor in India-ASEAN Relations

The discussion on India-ASEAN Relations is not completed without mentioning the China factor in it. The growing economic rise of China is an important factor for rebirth of India-ASEAN relations of 21st century. The emergence of China as a major power in Asia bordering both India and Southeast Asia added an important dimension to Southeast Asia's strategic importance for India. ASEAN's unease over China's rapid rise is one of the key factors bringing India and ASEAN closer to each other.

In the 21st century India is equally concerned about the competition and threat from an emerging China at all levels, from South Asia and Southeast Asia. China's future role, interests, capabilities and influence have been a major concern to India as it has been to ASEAN. At present both India and ASEAN aim to establish a rules-based security architecture for peaceful development in the region, in contrast to China's aggressive policies. Like India, several ASEAN members such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei have territorial disputes with China. All this has resulted in making the China factor the most critical determinant in India's Southeast Asia policy. Likewise from ASEAN side, their vision of China threat has clearly been the most critical factor determining their policy postures in engaging Indian leadership from time to time.

In 1980 China liberalize its economy and the open door policy of India in the 1990 resulted in the rise of two emerging economic giants in Asia (China and India). China competes with India in the political, economic and military sphere and most importantly for economic influence in the region of Southeast Asia. China is virtually dominating the Southeast Asia region. The China-ASEAN FTA established in 2010 (CAFTA), CAFTA will not only symbolize China's economic ascendancy in East Asia, but will also foster its economic integration with the ASEAN countries. In this backdrop India's efforts to enhance economic linkages with ASEAN countries is a part of the overall efforts of New Delhi to work with ASEAN to balance the increasing influence

that China might yield into FTA within ASEAN. Indian Ministry of External Affairs was of the perspective that India's engagement with Southeast Asia was in line with India's strategic policy to meet the growing threat to China in the region. Moreover, India's joint naval exercise with the countries of ASEAN were also a strategy of India to curb Chinese influence and to safeguard the waterways such as Taiwan, Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits. China's rise as an economic giant and its increasing trade with ASEAN countries gives India all the more reason to set up its collaborative efforts vis-à-vis ASEAN. So it is necessary for both India and ASEAN to keep China's Factor in view while formulating its foreign policy and act accordingly in order to preserve a stable balance of power in the region. Moreover India's initiation of sub-regional level groups like Mekong Ganga Cooperation (India and five ASEAN countries-Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand) underscoring its intention to elbow out China's influence from this area.

China knows that India is the only country that could possibly challenge its ascendancy and potential hegemony in Asia. Therefore, it makes sense to keep India under pressure. In particular, territorial and border issues remain obstinate specifically the disputes over the South China Sea Islands. ASEAN has sought to restrain Chinese power. To do that, it has cultivated India as an alternative both in the economic sphere for trade and investments, and on the security plan to balance both sides. ASEAN had no defence related problem with India, but was conscious of China's ambitions and intentions.

China's emergence as a major economic and military power together with its irredentist claims over the whole of South China Sea and exclusive economic zones that has brought it into conflict with some of its neighbouring countries in Southeast and East Asia, particularly over the Spratly islands, have created anxieties in Asia about China's future ambitions and intentions. This had facilitated setting the ground for India's security role as a balancer to China in Asia. This fact has also acknowledged by Chinese scholar LiLi, "As concerns for China's dominance in East Asia gathers due to China's persistent rising, India has found a chance to act as a balancer in the region'.

ASEAN countries justifiably perceive India, with the largest naval force in the Indian Ocean and nuclear capabilities, a strategic partner to balance China's growing power in the region. Lastly, due to China and India's own share of mutual suspicions and misconceptions they will continue to provide a major scope for the Southeast Asian countries to try and play one against the other all the time. Thus, the China factor has been the most critical and persistent factor in India-ASEAN relations of 21st century.

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