

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SOUTH EAST ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

India is located in South Asia. It is because of India's largest size in this region that this particular region is called as Indian subcontinent. South East Asia as a geographical region encompasses countries of Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Timor Leste and Brunei.

South East Asia is strategically located as it connects two great oceans i.e. Pacific and Indian Ocean and trade from east to west or vice versa pass from this particular region. This region is situated between two giant Asian powers i.e. India and China. India which is largest country of South Asia and South East Asia as a region are two important platform of international politics in the current century. These two region has gained more importance in the context of End of cold war, collapse of Soviet Union and hence emergence of single superpower.

In Post-cold war era when the so called superpower is engulfed in crisis of maintaining her hegemony at international political arena, relationship between India and countries of South East Asia has become of special importance. Post-cold war era is also characterised by interplay of state and non- state actors in international political arena. In the light of new emerging dynamics of world political scenario relation between India and South East Asian nations has become of special importance not for these nation alone but for the other countries of world also.

MANIFESTATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Post-Cold-War Engagement

End of Cold-War coincided with the adoption of LPG (i.e., Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) model by India. At this juncture India decided to take inspiration from development model of South-East Asian countries. India has also realised that level of her political stature at international level is closely associated with her economic development. On the other hand, the End of Cold-War had made South-East Asian

countries to leave their defensive stance and open their doors to non-South-East Asian countries.

Thus, India under the premiership of Narasimha Rao adopted an active Foreign Policy towards South-East Asian countries. The then Indian PM P.V. Narasimha Rao announced India's Look-East policy (LEP) for South-East Asia region. India's Look-East Policy has evolved from 'Look-East' (from 1990 to 2002) to 'Move East' (from 2003 to 2014) to 'Act East' (after 2014 till today). A brief explanation of these phases is given below as:

Phase I (1990-2002)- In 1994, the PM P.V. Narasimha Rao during his visit to the Institute of South-East Asian Studies in Singapore delivered a speech which reflected basic idea behind the India's Look-East Policy (LEP). Later, the concept of 'extended neighbourhood' gained popularity in India under the leadership of I.K. Gujral. The LEP was thought-out and calculated policy which aimed at building closer relations (at tall levels whether political, strategic, economics or cultural) with these countries. It was envisaged as a multifaceted and multi-pronged policy with the objective to develop deep strategic linkages with individual country of this region as well as to strengthen closer political interaction with South-East Asian countries. This policy was devised to create a place for India in the Asia-Pacific region. Evolution of this policy exhibited India's interest in this region as well as India's sensitivity towards smaller countries of this region.

In the first phase main aspects of India's LEP as enunciated by the then PM in his speech were: "expanding Indian influence over the sea, space and external area surrounding Indian territory; utilizing the resources in India's development process; increasing mutual understanding, cooperation and cultural exchange between India and South-East Asia and promoting mutual cooperation in economic and political fields". The central thrust of policy in this phase was to strengthen India-South-East Asia relation in trade, investment and political matters.

Phase II (2003-2014)- The Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, in September 2003 had talked about two phases of India's LEP in his

speech at Harvard University. He also talked about differences between these two phases. He said that “the first phase of India’s LEP was ASEAN centred and focused mainly on trade and investment relations. But in its new phase the policy has expanded definition of its area. The policy in its new phase also shifted focus from trade to larger economic and security issues including united efforts to protect the sea lines of communication and counter terrorism activities.

Mr. Yashwant Sinha also highlighted features of LEP in its second phase as geographical reach of New LEP has expanded to include region stretches from the Suez Canal in the west to the South-China Sea in the east i.e. it encompasses within its ambit west Asia, the Persian Gulf, central Asia, South and South-East Asia, East Asia, Indian Ocean region and Asia-pacific region.’ He said that LEP in its first phase focused on different single issues but in its second phase focus will be on comprehensive issues. In its second phase frequencies of joint exercises between India and South-East Asian will be increased as compared to first phase. Many defence cooperation agreements were signed between two sides during this phase. This phase witnessed increase in cooperation in infrastructure and transportation between countries. For instance, construction of trilateral highway which will connect India, Myanmar and Thailand was materialised in this phase.

Phase III (from November 2014 to till date)-In 2014, under the Primer ship of Narendra Modi, ‘Look-East’ has been renamed as ‘Act East’. The transformation of ‘Look-East’ to ‘Act East’ as announced by Indian PM at ASEAN Summit in November 2014 confirmed intention of New Delhi to pursue a more action oriented Foreign Policy towards South-East Asian nations. The ‘Act East’ policy is basically an action-oriented policy which put emphasis on ‘actions’. This policy illustrated that India needs to become an active player in South-East Asia. This policy does emphasis on strengthening strategic partnership between India, Japan and the United States in the Asia- Pacific region thereby creating a space for India to emerge as a global power i.e. reinforcing the status of India as a regional power.

In this phase Indian government has broaden the agenda of economic development. The Indian PM Mr. Narendra Modi has widened the geographical scope of ‘Act East Policy’ as he become the first Indian PM in November 2014 to visit Australia after a gap of 28 years and to Fiji after a gap of 33 years. Under his leadership, Indian establishment is focusing on promotion of India’s soft image in

this region through her diaspora and through increasing cultural and spiritual connections with these countries.

India – ASEAN Summit

Frist ever Summit between India and ASEAN held in 2002, which heralded a new era in India-ASEAN engagement. This Summit was the result of dialogue process which was started a decade ago between the two. In response to LEP of India, dialogue process between the two culminated in India becoming summit level partner of ASEAN in 2002. A close analysis of his process suggests that, “closer evolution and greater interest on both sides on each other’s potential and capabilities while keeping in mind limitations and vulnerabilities of their engagement”. It was argued that if India and ASEAN can intensify their interactions and can synchronise their actions in the world forum, they could together form a strong force which can work for global peace and security and social justice.

First Summit between India and ASEAN was attended by the then Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee who held that, “the Summit has marked a watershed in our efforts but closer integration with our eastern neighbourhood. It is a logical corollary of our ‘Look-East Policy’ that Indian should reinforce our strong bilateral relations with the countries of South-East Asia with an institutional relationship”.

The Indian PM held that, “an early review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement is very much required, he further held that there is requirement of diversification of supply chains for post-COVID economic recovery”. On this occasion India also announced a donation of U.S. \$ 1 million to the Response Fund of ASEAN for Covid-19 pandemic. At this platform two sides adopted a new ASEAN-India Plan of Action for 2021-2025. Other areas on which discussion held in this summit were: promotion of peace, security & stability in the South-China Sea and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight.

ASEAN Regional Forum and India

The ARF was primarily based on ASEAN’s model of cooperative security. ARF was an ASEAN’s effort to enhance its security approach to Asia-Pacific area and to evolve power-balancing mechanism. In Post Cold-War era, ASEAN countries accepted the fact that “a reduced US regional deployment might give rise to regional instability and increase in assertiveness of China”. Thus ARF emerged amid the changing security scenario in Post Cold-War era. Presently ARF has 27 members including ten ASEAN stales,

Australia, India, China, Canada, Japan, European Union, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, Russian, Timor Leste, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the USA.

The very objectives of the ARF was outlined by its chairman in his first address. He held that ARF aimed at “fostering the habit of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concerns and to work towards confidence building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia Pacific Region”. In July 1996, the ARF adopted criteria for its membership. This criteria states that all the new participant country must work for achieving the key goals of ARF a fully accepts the earlier decision of ARF. All the member of ASEAN automatically became member of ARF. Secondly only those country can become member of ARF who have impact on stability, security and peace of Northeast India and South-East Asia and Oceania region. Thirdly number of participants should be limited to optimum level so that effectiveness of ARF is maintained. Fourthly, all the applications for participation should be submitted to the chairman of the ARF, so that he can evolve consent of all other participants about the admission of new member.

India's participation in ARF reflects its increased politico-security engagement with the ASEAN countries. India's presence in ARF confers additional legitimacy and credibility to the organization. It does bring recognition and acceptance to India as a significant Asian power. Presence of other powers in the ARF well expands India's circles of engagement with world level.

ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting and India

The meeting of ASEAN countries' Defense Minister was launched in 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In its inaugural meeting its objectives were outlined. Key objectives of ADMM were to faster peace and stability in region by dialogues. To advice senior Defense and military official on cooperation within member of ADMM. It also aimed at creation of the then ASEAN Political-Security Community, one of three pillars of the broader vision-2015 (two other pillar are: Economic Community & Socio-Cultural Community).

In 2020, 14th ASEAN Defense Minister's meeting organized online at Hanoi, Vietnam. During this meeting Indian Defense Minister admitted that “Indo-Pacific Region faces many traditional and non-traditional security threats. Here he drawn parallel between India's IPOI (Indo-Pacific Ocean

Initiative) and ASEAN outlook on Indian Pacific as both brings opportunities for cooperation”.

India's accession to ADMM puts is the recognition of her as a player of new security architecture. Under ADMM+ framework actual exercise has been held in the field of disaster relief, counter terrorism and anti-piracy domain. The ADMM plays operate in accordance to the rules and regulation of ASEAN. It aimed at evolving consensus among participating countries and preventing any outside power from acquiring predominant role in the organization. ADMM+ is the topmost Defense collaborative and consultative mechanism for regional security matters.

India South-East Asia Economic Relations

In the context of conclusion of cold-war and implementation of economic reforms by India, there begun the process of rapprochement between S-E Asian nations and India, which are geographically proximate but were at distance due to Cold-War politics. At this juncture, Indian Government launched her 'Look-East' policy. This policy set the notion which ultimately led India's integration in regional organizations of South-East Asian countries.

India's “Look-East Policy” as regarded by analysts was more guided by economic imperatives and less by political rhetoric. This policy was a tool for New Delhi to search new trade entryway. On the other hand, the partial withdrawal of mixed economy system by India and introduction of New Economic Policy (NEP) attracted many South-East Asian countries to have close economic & strategic ties with India. This shift in India's approach resulted in India's admission as a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN (A regional organization of South-East Asian countries) nations at sectoral level in January 1992. India's stature was further enhanced to dialogue partner in in all areas in 1995.

Thus 'LEP' has given boost to India's economic engagement with S-E Asian countries. Since then many mechanisms at institutional level has been established to enhance mutual exchanges at economic front. These mechanism includes Joint Business Commission (Earlier known as Joint Trade Committee), the ASEAN-India Business Council & Joint Management Committee of ASEAN-India. Apart from multilateral engagement, India and individual country of South-East Asia have various mechanism of promoting their economic partnership.

CONCLUSION

The above description of India and South-East Asian nations are related to each other at various level – culture, communities and commerce are transmitted from one area to another. These countries are almost similar in terms of geo-climate condition. Language, culture, religion, living standard of people, form of government etc. are by the large similar across the region. Countries of South-East Asia and India have long experience of colonialism. Colonial masters have used resources of these countries in their own interest. During colonial period relation between India and countries of South-East Asia were modified as per colonial interests. Freedom fighters of these countries took inspiration from freedom struggle of others country. These countries obtained independence after the end of second world war. So their relation was subject to impact of Cold-War politics.

After her independence India under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru took many initiatives to develop friendly relation with her South-East Asian neighbors like organization of Asian relation conference 1946, Bandung conference 1955 etc. During even Cold-War some countries of South-East Asia like Vietnam has very close relation. India relation with countries of this region were affected by some domestic issues (like rule of military Junta in Myanmar, signing of Indo-Soviet treaty in 1971 etc.) and international issues (like India-China war in 1962, India-Pakistan war in 1965 and 71, Bangladesh liberation war, Vietnam issue, Kampuchea issue formation of SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation), NAM (Non-alignment Movement), ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) etc. But End of Cold-War has provided new reason for engagement to both sides.

India's relations with South-East Asian countries has been discussed in detail. Different aspects viz. historical political, strategic and economic of their relations are discussed in a very comprehensive way. These aspects are discussed through bilateral (i.e. with individual countries of South-East Asia) framework as well as through the framework of multilateral associations.

Both India and South-East Asian countries should encourage people to people contacts by promoting exchanges among scholars, academicians, journalists, business tycoons and policymakers. Both sides also need to promote mass media

cooperation. For such exchanges to happen, funds are required, so there is need to expand ASEAN-India cooperation fund.

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