

Subject: International Relations**Title: Changing paradigms of India's South East Asia Policy****Author: Dr. Aashish Kumar Bariyar**
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Abstract: This study is an endeavour to present a comprehensive scrutiny of India's relations with the South East Asian countries taking cognizance of its evolution and enhanced dynamism in the backdrop of India's Foreign policy in the Cold War and post-Cold War years. The end of the Cold War in 1989 led to the emergence of a cataclysmic change in global politics in India- Southeast Asian relations in particular with emergent challenges and opportunities. This was symbolic on the part of India to adopt a conscious policy to re-engage with the countries of Southeast Asia and embrace the countries of East Asia and Asia-Pacific as reflected in the policy directives. It seeks to provide an analysis and underscores the role that powers like the United States, China, and ASEAN nations have played in the course of India's policy implementation towards Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Cold War, regional, dynamics, Look East**Introduction:**

India's relations with Southeast Asian countries may be traced back to pre-colonial history. It is remarkable to note that India has formulated its foreign policy postures towards this region based on the contemporary global and regional power equations. The post-Cold War global order, marked by the twin forces of globalization and economic liberalization has paved the way for economic interdependence, in the perspective of which, India and the countries of the Asia-Pacific region have formed a strengthened forum for negotiations in multilateral organizations to boost the spirit of Asian Resurgence. This prompted India's shift from 'Look East' to 'Act East Policy' which has resulted in further widening the range of its interactions with the ASEAN region, in addition to extending its policy ambit vis-à-vis the countries of East Asia and beyond. Moreover, India's participation in the East Asia Summit in 2005 accelerated this pace of regional coordination over a gamut of political, economic and strategic issues. In this context, the 'Act East' policy forms the backbone of analyzing India's relations with the countries of Southeast, East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. However, despite the progress made between South East Asian countries and India, their relations are not at their optimal and beset with challenges. In this context, both sides must take proactive approaches to ensure a brighter bilateral future. India's security and prosperity and more importantly its standing as a major power in Asia, are dependent on India's role in Southeast Asia. (Panikkar 1943) and this fact needs to be reiterated.

India and Southeast Asia relations- areas of convergence and divergence

India's relations with Southeast Asia date back a thousand years and characterized by significant cultural, religious and people-to-people linkages. Trade and commerce, cultural exchanges, language and religion had been the principal vehicles for propagating these civilizational ties. In the beginning India's Southeast Asia policy was based on sentiments of Asian solidarity and resurgence, which found expression through Asian Relations Conferences in New Delhi in 1947 and 1949 respectively. With the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the initiation of the Cold War era, India's relations with Southeast Asia took a downward plunge as Indian foreign policy was steered keeping the exigencies of the Cold War in view. At

the time of formation of ASEAN in 1967, India informally supported it. However, Chinese invasion of India in 1962 significantly affected the overall diplomatic architecture in the Asian region and made India lose the confidence of many countries in Southeast Asia. India's subsequent support to the Soviet-backed government in Kampuchea earned the displeasure of a majority of the countries of Southeast Asia. During that period, India's Cold War relations with Southeast Asia were considerably determined by Great Power equations and their involvement in Asian politics, resulting in a chapter of missed opportunities within the broader framework of the development of ties between India and ASEAN. (Sridharan 1996)

The end of the Cold War in 1991 meant that the most serious impediment to the India-Southeast Asia relations that had prevented closer and deeper integration between them since the 1960s was now history. (Ganguly 2012) The New Global Order hinged on the facets of globalization, liberalization and economic interdependence at the regional and international levels, prompted India to formally inaugurate the New Economic Policy in July 1991. There was a new welcome shift as reflected in India's 'Look East policy' which accorded greater priority to its Southeast Asian neighbours by PM P.V. Narasimha Rao. India's Look East policy may be explained in the context of India's pragmatic objective and willingness to promote the concept of regionalism. There was a paradigm shift as reflected in India's decision to give a special policy thrust to its relations with the ASEAN and with individual countries in the South East Asian region. In 1991- 92, India had embarked on a comprehensive Look East strategy and was seeking closer politico- military ties with Southeast Asia. (Tharoor 2012) With the early 1990s, India initiated the 'Look East' policy to further engage Southeast Asian countries India-ASEAN ties have progressed from a Sectoral Dialogue partnership in 1992 to Dialogue and Summit-level partnerships in 1996 and 2002 respectively. In 2012, commemorating two decades of relations, India and ASEAN elevated their ties to a strategic partnership. Trade and investment ties have also grown since the opening of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. In the changed global political and economic milieu of the post-Cold war era, South East Asia countries now consider India a reliable economic partner and an emerging regional market for expanding and diversifying trade and investment ties. They have undertaken a slew of measures to promote enhanced politico-economic linkages with India. Southeast as they have begun to look towards India as a potential balancer of Chinese power in the region. The 'Look East' policy of India has coincided with ASEAN's 'Look West', thereby inaugurating a new phase of re-discovery and revival in Indo-ASEAN relations. The First Phase of India's Look East policy focused on consolidating greater ties with the developed ASEAN members accompanied by India's sincere initiatives in establishing sub-regional organizations like the BIMSTEC and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation in 2000. On the other side of the spectrum, the Second Phase of the Look East (2002 onwards) embraced New Delhi's involvement with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

However, despite the bonhomie noted above, it needs to be reiterated that relations between India and ASEAN are not optimal as they differ on several bilateral, regional, and international issues. South East Asia and India need to continue engaging each other to avoid any misunderstanding on these matters and to address them in a mutually beneficial manner. The RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) appears to be a key issue of divergence between India and ASEAN due to the latter's decision to withdraw from the trading bloc in 2019. The regional dynamics have been further complicated by the emergence of the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Initiative). ASEAN is not comfortable with the rise of the QUAD as a significant security institution in the region. It also does not like the idea of the Quad being viewed as a threat to ASEAN's centrality as well as ganging up against China. ASEAN does not wish to be entangled in a possible power transition taking place in the Indo-Pacific region. (Pardeshi 2012)

India as a Counterbalance to growing China-US rivalry in the region

The geopolitics of the Southeast Asian region has been radically transformed by the aggressive rise of China and the attempts made by US to contain such military overtures. ASEAN is finding it challenging to readjust to an evolving international order defined primarily by the Sino-U.S. contest in the region. Consequently, ASEAN has sought a 'Third party' regional power to hedge against the uncertainties of the U.S.-China rivalry. In the meanwhile, the world is witnessing the rising profile of India as a potential power in the region. Relations between India and ASEAN have been on a steady rise over the last three decades. These relations were elevated to Dialogue Partnership and Strategic Partnership respectively. In 2014, New Delhi revamped the Look East policy and rebranded it 'Act East' in acknowledgment of the need for a more proactive role in the Asia-Pacific. In November 2022, in recognition of the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India relations, ASEAN granted India the status of a Comprehensive Strategic Partner at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in Cambodia.

Both India and ASEAN are thus seemingly destined for closer relations moving forward. There are multiple areas through which India and Southeast Asia can promote further engagement. India is in a rather unique position in fostering people-to-people links with ASEAN through an emphasis on its historical and civilizational links with the region. India has sought to tap into its shared cultural heritage and historical connections to enhance bilateral relations with Southeast Asian nations. The presence of an Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia has also provided a substantial boost for promoting cultural diplomacy. As countries are seeking to diversify their production bases away from China, opportunities present themselves for greater integration between India and ASEAN. The increasingly resilient Indian economy alongside geopolitical realities provide opportunities for India and ASEAN to foster closer relations. India's comprehensive strategic engagement with Southeast Asia is reflected in its Look East and Act East Policy initiatives. While it is commonly believed that the underlying rationale behind India's engagement with Southeast Asia has been India's economic liberalization, it must be noted that India had begun to seek purposeful politico-military engagement with Southeast Asia almost simultaneously. India began to engage Southeast Asia in search of a larger role in Asia and to prevent the region from being dominated by Chinese economic and military power. (Devere 2006)

Conclusion

The future is bright for India-South East Asia ties. While the two sides have made tremendous progress in the last few decades and built strong linkages with each other, the potential for further growth and connections is immense. Both sides need to have greater e-commerce and digital connectivity. ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have booming digital economies with high growth and domestic innovation in various sectors. There is much scope for leveraging their respective competitive sectoral advantages, and in cooperation and mutual learning. They can cooperate on technologies and solutions to combat climate change, again leveraging competitive advantages in sectors such as renewable energy, waste management, pollution control, and disaster mitigation, among others. Lastly, both India and ASEAN are confronted with human security issues on account of cross-border crises and the frequency of regional natural disasters. This is an area of cooperation that can help to build goodwill and deepen existing relations between the governments and the people on both sides. (Ghoshal 1996) Southeast Asians may be beginning to view India as a welcome partner. This has been attributed to perceptions of India as a major non-aligned player, particularly in light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and India's position of quiet neutrality. India has also sought to rival China for leadership of the Global South, which was evident in India's hosting of the G-20 Summit in 2023. There is little doubt that the ASEAN-India relationship will grow from strength

to strength. However, efforts are needed on both sides in this respect. The relationship between South East Asian countries and India is a relationship between two vibrant economies and is unencumbered by major disputes or fault lines. There is a high degree of comfort and trust in the relationship which holds a promising future for both shared by mutual complementarities. India's policy of re-engagement with the countries of Southeast, East Asia and Asia-Pacific is based on pragmatism and enlightened self-interest and holds promising prospects for marching the spirit of Asian resurgence ahead. (Pangariya 2008).

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Citation in APA Style:

Dr. Aashish Kumar Bariyar. (2024). Changing paradigms of India's South East Asia Policy. Lyceum India Journal of Social Sciences, 1(4), 19–22. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14230221>