

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF INDIA-ASEAN TIES: AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

India has more than two millennia old ties with the Southeast Asian countries, with a series of waves shaping its engagements with the 'East'. However, India's engagement with ASEAN begun only after the end of the Cold War. Since the launch of the Look East policy in 1992, by the then Indian prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, to 2018, when India and ASEAN have entered the twenty-sixth years of dialogue relations, their partnership has come a long way crossing several milestones. In the past twenty-five years, India has not only been able to re-socialise itself in the politico-security regional architecture of Asia, but has also been able to successfully join several regional groupings related to security, trade and economic cooperation. India's engagement with ASEAN has been elevated with Prime Minister Narendra Modi – led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's announcement of upgrading Look East Policy to the Act East policy at 12th India-ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar in November 2014. India-ASEAN dialogue partnership completed twenty-five years in the year 2017. The same year, India and ASEAN also completed fifteen years of Summit level partnership and five years of their Strategic Partnership. This paper assesses twenty-five years of India's engagement with ASEAN by analysing the level of institutional engagement between the two.

Keywords: India-ASEAN relations, Look East policy, Act East policy, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN Regional Forum, Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

Introduction¹

In 2017, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) completed twenty-five years of their relationship, which had started with India launching the Look East policy in 1992 under the leadership of then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. Over the years, the Look East policy has crossed several milestones in strengthening the India-ASEAN relations. In the process the Look East policy also underwent different phases; starting from phase I (1992 to 2002), to Phase II (2002-2014), and eventually transforming into the Act East policy- its current avatar, which was launched by Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2014. In the past quarter-a-century, India-ASEAN ties have achieved major feats, which have also led to wider acceptance of the Look East/Act East policy as one of the finest foreign policy success stories of India in recent years.

¹This section draws from author's paper entitled "India's Act East Policy and Southeast Asia" presented at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, on January 18, 2018.

The contrast between 1992 and 2018 is fairly visible: Before 1992, India was not a member of any Asian politico-security architecture or a multilateral security related forum; today it is an active member of the East Asia Summit (EAS), which is widely accepted as the highest table on politico-strategic issues (or the fulcrum of Asian Security Dialogue as Professor S.D. Muni terms it)², the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) (Mishra, R. 2018). Ironically, in the late 1980s, and early 1990s, India was perceived by many Southeast Asian countries as a threat- a factor which played a key role in the launch of the Look East policy (Naidu, 2000). In order to allay the apprehensions of countries such as Indonesia and Australia, India included the ‘maritime socialisation’ as an active component of the Look East policy in its initial years.

The contrast on economic issues is even sharper: From being an insulated moribund economy, which was on the verge of collapse in 1991, India is now a trillion-dollar economy with an active role to play in finalisation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, a mega-regional trade pact which involves the ten ASEAN countries and their six dialogue partners, namely: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. India has already implemented the ASEAN India Free Trade Agreement on Trade in Goods and Services, while also having finalised [bilateral] Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia, and is actively working on CECA/CEPA negotiations with Australia and New Zealand (Mishra, R. 2018).

Historical Background

While it seems fine to analyse India-ASEAN relations by way of looking at a span of twenty-five years, it would be unfair to confine India’s engagement with the Southeast and East Asian region to a small period of quarter-a-century. Cutting across domains of social milieu, India’s impact on the ‘East’ has been indelible on almost all the countries of the Southeast and East Asian region- from literature to linguistics; art to architecture; drama to dance, and; from religion to rituals, India’s influence has been incredible. Such has been India’s civilizational influence that before the term Southeast Asia came into vogue, the region was called as (in addition to British East Indies which anyway represented less than half of the region), Hinduised states of Southeast Asia, Greater India, Farther India, India beyond the Ganges etc. In the classical Indian literature, countries of the Southeast Asian region have been frequently mentioned as- Suvarnbhoomi, Balidipa, Jambudwipa, Brahmadesh etc.

The cultural impact of India on the ‘East’ has been duly recorded in the ancient Indian and Southeast Asian art, architecture and literature. The Indian and Southeast Asian inscriptions also bear testimony to that. Buddhism is one of the most profound contributions of India to the Southeast and East Asian region. Even today, thousands of devout Buddhist pilgrims visit important Buddhist sites in India, including, but not confined to Sarnath, Bodh Gaya etc., to pay tributes to the Lord Buddha. To protect India’s collective heritage and historical monuments, the Archaeological Survey of India under the overall monitoring of the Ministry of External Affairs, has been tirelessly working to restore the ancient heritage sites in Southeast

²For details see, S. D. Muni, “East Asia Summit as the Fulcrum of Asian Security Dialogue: S. D. Muni”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBqdDUPjPuI>

Asia: The Angkor Wat temple (Cambodia), Vat Phou temple (Shiva temple in Laos), Borobudur (Indonesia), and the Ananda temple in Bagan (Myanmar) are just to name a few. Indonesian Wayang- the puppet shows which are based on the two great Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata- are the collective heritage of the peoples of India and Southeast Asia. Linguistic experts have proved it abundantly that Sanskrit has shaped and influenced the overall persona of almost all the Southeast Asian languages (except Vietnamese which has more Chinese influence). Ramayana is one of the most popular epics in the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, it is a part of the popular culture of Southeast Asia, with each country having its own variant.

During the Colonial period, India's linkages were cut-off, and it was the Colonial oppressors who had determined the overall nature of India's interaction with the region. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, the intellectuals and freedom fighters of India such as Rabindranath Tagore, Rash Behari Bose, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi immensely contributed to India's relinking with the 'East'. From the point of view of freedom struggle, India's engagement with countries falling on its east was remarkable. Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution to the anti-Colonial movements in Southeast Asia can never be overstated in that regard. He successfully organised the 'Southeast Asia Day' at Lucknow in October 1945, moved several resolutions in the Congress meetings in support of Indonesian freedom struggle. The relationship moved to the next level with India and Indonesia playing key roles in Asian solidarity, manifested through the Bandung Conference, which was held in 1955. India's contribution was best explained by none other than Soekarno himself, who, on the eve of proclamation of the United States of Indonesia said, "On the eve of the rebirth of our nation, I am trying vainly to measure the gratitude the Indonesian people owe to India and to her Prime Minister personally for the unflinching and brotherly support in our struggle in the past" (Mishra, R. 2017).

In terms of framing the regional, multilateral agenda, India had played a substantial role from 1940s until 1960. For instance, much before the ASEAN was formed in 1967, India played a key role in bringing Asian and African countries together through organising the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 and 1949, and the Bandung Conference in 1955. That India was not considered an outsider to Southeast Asia, or even a part of separate identity distinct from Southeast Asia (South Asia) is evident from the fact that India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were part of the team of Bandung Conference conveners, collectively called as *The Conference of Southeast Asian Prime Ministers* (Acharya, 2017). Thus, by virtue of being in close proximity to Southeast Asian region, countries of the region have always ranked high in India's diplomatic calculus, and even in terms of forming and shaping their regional institutional architecture.

As Acharya, A. (2017) argues, "The first important ideas about constructing Asia's regional architecture after the Second World War came from India- more precisely Jawaharlal Nehru. It was India's first prime minister who articulated the earliest vision of a regional order that emphasized Asian unity, advancement of decolonization and anti-racialism, and rejection of great power intervention. He hosted two of the initial intra-regional gatherings of Asian leaders, called the Asian Relations Conferences (ARCs), in 1947 and 1949. He was perhaps the most influential ideational force behind the holding of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955" (Acharya, 2017). When the ASEAN was formed in 1967, India did show interest in joining ASEAN. In May 1967, then External Affairs Minister of India, M. C. Chagla

visited Malaysia and Singapore. In Singapore, he remarked, “We will be very happy to have bilateral arrangement with Singapore, with regard to trade, commerce and economic cooperation. But if Singapore chooses to join any regional cooperation, we will be happy to join such a grouping, if other members want India to do so” (Saxena, 1986). Nevertheless, despite India’s interests, it could not join the ASEAN during the Cold War period. For India any military pact, such as the one formed by Southeast Asian countries in the form of Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was not detrimental to peace in Asia. On the other hand, ASEAN countries were not keen to work with India on Non Alignment Movement (NAM), and some of them were also apprehensive of India’s naval ambitions in the 1980s. New Delhi’s support for Vietnam following the Cambodian conflict in 1978 etc., further drifted India and much of Southeast Asia apart. Essentially, compulsions and constraints of the Cold War politics put India away from Southeast Asia and ‘from being a major champion of Asian regionalism, India almost became a political and diplomatic non-entity- if not a pariah- in Southeast Asia by 1980s’ (Acharya, 2017). Though one cannot deny the fact that then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had taken several steps to not only normalise the relations with China and Southeast Asia but also tried to reach out to Japan. However, his attempts were obstructed by the Cold War politics and limitations of India’s inward looking economy.

Nevertheless, India has always been cognisant of the importance of countries on its eastern flank. India’s eastern front, which includes Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, is vital for India’s deep cultural roots, extended territorial expanse (Andaman and Nicobar Islands), common land and maritime boundaries, vast sea lanes of communication and growing economic engagement (Muni and Mun 2012). Former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during his Singapore lecture in 2002 highlighted this point. He said: “I speak today on ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific...This region is one of the focal points of India’s foreign policy, strategic concerns and economic interests...It is a fundamental fact of geography that India is in the immediate neighbourhood of Association of Southeast Asian Nations” (ASEAN, 2002).

India-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership

The end of the Cold War brought about several key changes in regional and global politics, and compelled countries across the world to change their foreign policy priorities to suit the new global realities. India, after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), found itself relatively isolated- a reality which compelled India to open-up to other countries and look for new friends and partners. With the launch of economic reforms in 1991, India began to look towards its eastern neighbours for trade and economic linkages. With that objective in mind, the Look East Policy was launched by Rao in 1992. At that point of time, the main objectives of the Look East Policy were threefold. First: To engage the countries of the Southeast Asian region. Given the size of the region and the economic potential of the ASEAN region, it became vital for India to engage these countries. Second: to institutionalise relations with the countries through the ASEAN mechanism. Third: to carve its own place in the rapidly rising region amid China’s growing strategic and economic footprints in the region. Since the initiation of the policy, these points have been the cornerstone of India’s engagement with the Asia’s most economically dynamic region (Naidu 2004, Pant 2011).

Factors such as the disintegration of the USSR, rise of the Asian Tigers, China's expanding influence in India's neighbourhood including Myanmar, and growing insurgency in the Northeastern states of India, led New Delhi to inject a new vigour to its policy towards eastern neighbours. This was driven equally by the imperatives of India's opening up of economy and foreign exchange crunch of 1991 (Rai, 2012). The beginning of India's formal dialogue with ASEAN begun on January 28, 1992 in Singapore during the fourth ASEAN Summit where India was granted the status of a sectoral partner. In December 1995, India graduated to the status of a Full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. Further on in that series, India and ASEAN became Summit partners in 2002, and finally turned into Strategic Partners in 2012. Over the past twenty-five years, India and the ten member countries ASEAN have engaged each other in as many as thirty dialogue mechanisms, India-ASEAN Summit, East Asia Summit, and seven Ministerial meetings in a wide range of sectors. According to Ministry of External Affairs statistics, "India participates in a series of consultative meetings with ASEAN under the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations, which include Summit, ministerial meetings, senior officials meetings, and meetings at the experts level, as well as dialogue and cooperation frameworks initiated by ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1, the East Asia Summit (EAS), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which help contribute to enhancing regional dialogue and accelerating regional integration" (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017*). Nine out of ten ASEAN countries were visited by Indian President, Prime Minister or Vice President since May 2014 (Kaur, 2017). While India has expanded the scope of the Act East Policy by including almost all the countries in its eastern neighbourhood, India-ASEAN relations remain at the core of the Act East Policy. During his address at the India-ASEAN Summit in September, 2016 in Vientiane, Laos, Prime Minister Modi reiterated this point and said, "ASEAN is central to India's 'Act East' policy" (*Narendamodi.in 2016*). In terms of dialogue relations, Table 1 depicts the major milestones achieved over past twenty-five years.

Table 1: Trajectory of India's Institutional Engagement with ASEAN

S.No.	Institutions	Date of Joining
1.	India-ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partnership	1992
2.	India-ASEAN Full Dialogue Partnership	1996
3.	ARF Membership	1996
4.	India-ASEAN Summit-Level Partnership	2002
5.	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation	2003
6.	ASEAN-India Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation	2003
7.	East Asia Summit membership	2005
8.	ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (Signing)	August 13, 2009
9.	ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (Entered into force)	January 1, 2010
10.	ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus membership	2010

S.No.	Institutions	Date of Joining
11.	Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) membership	2012
12.	India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership	2012
13.	ASEAN-India Trade in Services and Investment Agreements (signed)	September 8, 2014
14.	ASEAN-India Trade in Services and Investment Agreements (entered into force)	July 1, 2015
15.	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (negotiation state, yet to be finalised) negotiation partner	2012

Source: Compiled by the author, based on various government sources

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

ARF was the first regional grouping formed under the ASEAN umbrella. It was set up in 1994 as a dialogue mechanism for deliberations on regional security issues. In 1995, the ARF agreed to an evolutionary approach to effectively tackle security issues and adopted a 3-stage process namely, first stage – Confidence Building Measures (CBMs); second stage – development of preventive diplomacy; and third stage – elaboration of approaches to conflicts (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2012*). ARF, till date, is the largest grouping in terms of total number of members in an ASEAN driven regional body. It has 27 member states including the ten ASEAN member countries (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam); the ten ASEAN Dialogue Partners (Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States of America); and seven other countries, namely, Bangladesh, North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Sri Lanka.

India became a member of ARF in 1996. Highlighting the importance of ARF, the Ministry of External Affairs states (2012), “India’s participation in the ARF demonstrates its increasing engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, both in the politico-security and economic spheres and underlines our commitment to the objective of sustaining regional peace and stability. Its participation is consistent with our “Look East” policy, and development of closer links with the ASEAN as a full-dialogue partner. The ARF provides a venue for constructive dialogue on political and security cooperation in the region, with the ASEAN continuing to play a central role in the process” (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2012*).

However, criticising ARF for its waning influence, Professor G.V.C. Naidu (2000) states, “As far as the ARF and security of the Asia Pacific is concerned, except the initial enthusiasm to join the multilateral process so that it would not be left out of the developments of this important region, there does not seem to be much deliberation or thinking that has gone into the whole process of multilateral Institutionalism and its role in the future”. While it is true that ARF has not proved itself to be an effective forum for dealing with the major security challenges, it, nonetheless, provides an important multilateral platform for deliberations on issues of regional importance with India as one of its key members.

East Asia Summit (EAS)

The East Asia Summit is a manifestation of an idea originally propounded by Mahathir Mohammad, the former prime minister of Malaysia, in December 1990. What Mahathir had proposed as the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG), finally materialised as the East Asia Summit in 2005 with the adoption of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration. With the establishment of the East Asia Summit, “which has been seen by historically minded Indian policy makers as a redefined derivative of the old Nehruvian strategic concept of “Eastern Federation”, the scope of stronger Asian regionalism has certainly gone up” (Muni and Mun, 2012). In 2005, EAS comprised ASEAN and its six dialogue partners: Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. With the inclusion of Russia and the US, EAS now has 18 members. The decision to establish EAS was taken during the tenth ASEAN Summit and ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) Summit, 2004 in Laos. India was one of the founding members of the EAS. However, India’s membership to the EAS was initially opposed by China and a few other members. China opposed India’s membership because it was apprehensive that India was invited to counterbalance against China. There was another reservation by countries which just wanted it to be a mechanism between ASEAN member states and East Asian countries. However, India’s membership was made possible with the support of countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand.

India’s participation in the EAS allows it to engage not only the ASEAN countries but other major powers too. Muni (2006) argues that, “India’s stakes in building East Asian Community are indeed deep and there is a growing realization in the region that India’s participation in EAS is a positive factor”. From India’s perspective, the eagerness to join the EAS was underscored by clear strategic and economic motives and the fact that India is one of the major players, both economically and strategically, in the region makes it all the more important for the member countries of the EAS to focus attention towards India (Zamir, 2014).

ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) Plus

India is one of the founding members of ADMM Plus, which was initially confined to the ten ASEAN members as the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM). Consistent with the ADMM guiding principles of being an open and outward looking grouping, the second ADMM in Singapore in 2007 adopted the *Concept Paper* to establish the ADMM-Plus, which was a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region (*ADMM Plus-ASEAN, 2017*). The Inaugural ADMM-Plus was convened in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, on October 12, 2010 where the member countries decided to keep working together on five priority areas of cooperation, namely: Maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping operations and military medicine (*ADMM Plus-ASEAN, 2017*).

So far as India’s role and participation in the ADMM Plus is concerned, past seven years bear testimony to the fact that ‘India is no longer shying away from playing a role on the regional and international stages and is willing to don a bigger role in regional politics. It is showing traits of a responsible stakeholder in the regional security dynamics’ (Mishra, R. 2016). India has been playing an active role. In 2016, India hosted the *Exercise Force 18*, a six-day long joint multilateral exercise, conducted under the framework of the ADMM Plus, which was held

in March, 2016 at the Aundh military station at the headquarters of the southern command of the Indian Army at Pune. The Exercise Force 18 was themed around ‘Humanitarian mine action’ and ‘peacekeeping operations’ (Mishra, R. 2016). Later, India participated in the ADMM Plus Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism at Brunei and Singapore in May 2016. In consonance with its Act East Policy and Indian Navy’s constant endeavour to enhance maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, Indian Naval Ship (INS) Airavat arrived at Brunei for the exercise (*Public Information Bureau, 2016*).

Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)

As the name itself suggests, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) owes its origin to the ASEAN Maritime Forum. The first AMM meeting was held on July 28-29, 2010 in Surabaya, Indonesia. Comprising the ten ASEAN member countries and their dialogue partners (all members of the EAS), the EAMF is a Track 1.5 dialogue mechanism. The first EAMF was held in Manila, Philippines on October 5, 2012. The EAMF was convened in response to the statement of the ASEAN and EAS leaders who encouraged a “dialogue involving EAS participating countries to utilize opportunities and address common challenges on maritime issues building upon the existing ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF),” (*ASEAN Maritime Forum, 2017*), wherein they also “positively noted the proposal of convening an expanded AMF, back-to-back with the future meetings of the AMF, to include countries in the wider East Asia region” (*ASEAN Maritime Forum, 2017*). So far, five EAMF have taken place including the last EAMF meeting, which was organised in Jakarta, Indonesia in December 2017.

Economic Ties: Free Trade Agreements and Beyond

One of the major objectives of the Look East Policy was to strengthen economic ties with the ASEAN member states. According to Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India (2017), ASEAN is India’s fourth largest trading partner today, accounting for 10.2 percent of India’s total trade, whereas India is ASEAN’s seventh largest trading partner. Between “1993 and 2003, ASEAN-India bilateral trade grew at an annual rate of 11.2 per cent, from US\$ 2.9 billion in 1993 to US\$ 12.1 billion in 2003. At the tenth ASEAN-India Summit in November 2012, the Leaders set the target of US\$100 billion by 2015 for ASEAN- India merchandise trade. In 2015, however, the total merchandise trade only reached US\$ 58.7 billion, decreasing by 13.29 per cent from that of the previous year of US\$67.7 billion. During the same period, foreign direct investments (FDI) from India increased significantly by 164 per cent from US\$606 million in 2014 to US\$1.6 billion in 2015” (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017*). It is widely believed that full implementation of the FTA in goods between India and the ASEAN bloc will help boost trade between India and ASEAN (*Economic Times, 2018*).

India is a huge source of tourism for the ASEAN region. In 2015 alone, 3.3 million Indian tourists visited ASEAN, which showed an increase of 6.5 per cent from 3.1 million in 2014 (*ASEAN Tourism Statistics Dashboard, 2017*). The ASEAN-India Agreement on Trade in Service and Investments, to be initially implemented between seven ASEAN states and India, entered into force on July 1, 2015 after a hiatus of almost a decade. The FTA in services is definitely a step forward on promoting trade and economic cooperation through better linking

of economies of ASEAN with India. The FTA in services suitably complements the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement in Goods and Services which had come into force on January 1, 2010, and is likely to plug the trade gaps between India and ASEAN. In the absence of FTA in services, India was not able to optimally utilize its core competencies in trade, majority of which lie in the services sector. The Table 2 below shows the overall trade between India and the ten ASEAN members between 2012 and November 2015.

Table 2: India-ASEAN Trade, 2012-2016 (November) (in US\$ Million)

Country	2012-2013			2013-2014			2014-2015			2015-2016 (Apr-Nov.)		
	Export	Import	Total Trade	Export	Import	Total Trade	Export	Import	Total trade	Export	Import	Total trade
ASEAN												
Brunei	40.02	814.80	854.82	32.95	763.60	796.54	41.99	840.88	882.87	20.06	394.55	414.61
Cambodia	112.28	11.90	124.18	141.26	12.72	153.98	142.53	17.96	160.49	92.65	31.94	124.59
Indonesia	5,331.31	14,879.49	20,210.80	4,905.76	14,909.72	19,815.48	4,043.32	15,004.64	19,047.96	1,824.67	8,947.92	10,772.59
Lao PDR	28.91	138.64	167.56	49.89	91.20	141.10	67.31	85.28	152.59	30.53	101.35	131.88
Malaysia	4,444.10	9,951.06	14,395.15	4,196.32	9,211.42	13,407.75	5,816.55	11,117.74	16,934.29	2,686.84	6,280.16	8,967.00
Myanmar	544.66	1,412.69	1,957.35	784.58	1,392.14	2,176.72	773.24	1,231.54	2,004.78	458.23	774.48	1,232.71
Philippines	1,187.19	504.00	1,691.18	1,418.01	391.77	1,809.78	1,395.58	423.04	1,818.62	848.45	389.20	1,237.65
Singapore	13,619.31	7,486.38	21,105	12,509.84	6,773.85	19,283.69	9,809.36	7,124.47	16,933.83	4,470.04	5,012.83	9,482.87
Thailand	3,733.17	5,352.61	9,085.78	3,703.02	5,358.74	9,061.77	3,464.83	5,865.88	9,330.71	1,949.94	3,797.77	5,747.71
Vietnam	3,967.37	2,314.78	6,282.15	5,439.91	2,594.29	8,034.21	6,257.88	3,003.35	9,261.23	3,368.44	1,720.16	5,088.60
Total of ASEAN	33,008.31	42,866.36	75,874.67	33,181.55	41,499.46	74,681.01	31,812.58	44,714.77	76,527.35	15,749.86	27,450.36	43,200.22
% Share in India's total	10.99	8.74	9.86	10.61	9.22	9.91	10.25	9.98	10.09	9.13	10.52	9.97
India's Total	300,400.68	490,736.65	791,137.33	312,610.30	450,068.43	762,678.73	310,338.48	448,033.40	758,371.88	172,430.65	260,937.69	433,368.34

Source: Annual Report, 2013-14, 2016-17, Department of Commerce, *Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India*

India-ASEAN Cooperation in Agriculture and Forestry¹

Most of the ASEAN member countries and India have agriculture as the mainstay of their economy. To further widen and deepen bilateral cooperation in that area, India and member countries of ASEAN have institutionalised cooperation at the ministerial level called the India-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Agriculture Cooperation and Forestry. An annual ASEAN-India Agriculture Ministers Meeting (AIMMAF) has been formalized, and since 2011 three meetings have been held. The fourth ministerial meeting was held in New Delhi in January 2017. The ASEAN-India ministerial meeting gains salience in view of the fact that both India and ASEAN member states are monsoon system economies; with most of them still dependent on agriculture and all of them vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change and price volatility of food supplies. Thus, the need to gain more resilience in fighting food vulnerability and resultant sustainable development of agriculture, food processing, agro-marine processing, and forestry becomes a top priority for policymakers from India and ASEAN countries alike (Mishra, R. 2018a). Additionally, Climate change and the vagaries of weather obligate India and ASEAN not only to share their best practices but also join hands for finding viable long-term solutions. “Both ASEAN member countries and India need to effectively address the challenge of putting agriculture back as the backbone of their bilateral trade as also improve the overall standard of their farmers. Agricultural trade is a key driver of rural prosperity and economic well-being, and should play a more important role in shaping the trade relations between ASEAN and India” (Mishra, R. 2018a). ASEAN and India have several such platforms in other domains such as tourism, science and technology, renewable energy etc.

ASEAN- India Business Council (AIBC)

Realizing that India-ASEAN cooperation cannot attain its full strength without the participation of industry captains, the ASEAN India Business Council (AIBC) was set up in March 2003 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia at the ASEAN-India second Senior Economic Official Meeting. AIBC is essentially a CEOs group institutionalised by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India. The AIBC aims to provide inject the much-needed industry perspective so as to widen and deepen the economic linkages between ASEAN and India. To meet the objective of strengthening India-ASEAN trade and commercial ties, the AIBC holds the AIBC Business Forum, which focusses on significant areas such as: Promoting Regional Connectivity - Infrastructure & Digital; Youth, Innovation & Technology; Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals; Women Entrepreneurs; Education & Skill development; Developing New Markets (FICCI, 2018)

Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP)

In order to move forward in terms of integrating with other Asian economies, India decided to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2012. So far as RCEP itself is concerned, it was conceptualized in 2011. The formal launch of RCEP took place in Phnom

¹This section draws from author’s earlier work, “India-ASAEAN Cooperation in Agriculture and Forestry”, Commentary, *External Services Division, All India Radio*, January 16, 2018, <http://airworldservice.org/english/archives/category/commentary>

Penh, Cambodia in November 2012 during the East Asia Summit meeting. The RCEP involves the ten ASEAN member countries, and their six partners, namely, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India. Later, in 2013, it was decided by the members to set up the RCEP Trade Negotiations Committee as the apex negotiating body for RCEP. “The RCEP is an ambitious project which for the first time intends to bring in Asia’s three biggest economies: China, India and Japan, into a regional trade arrangement. Concomitantly, the proposed trade area will be the largest in terms of population, with a combined GDP of around US\$ 19 trillion and when fully established, it will become the largest trade bloc in the world” (Mishra, R. 2013). RCEP is a vital component of ASEAN vision of realising the ASEAN Economic Community.

India’s ASEAN Policy: From Look East to Act East

At his first India-ASEAN Summit address in 2014, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi ‘upgraded’ Look East policy into the Act East Policy. He remarked, “A new era of economic development, industrialisation and trade has begun in India. Externally, India’s Look East Policy has become Act East Policy... Today the world and the region need a strong India-ASEAN partnership. That is why we believe that we are entering in a new era in the India-ASEAN partnership” (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2014*).

Clearly, since 2014, India’s engagement with countries of Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, Mongolia, Australia, New Zealand, PIC (Pacific Island Countries), and regional and sub-regional organizations thereof, have been included within the ambit of the Act East policy. Sometimes, deepening engagement with Bangladesh is also included as a part of the Act East policy (*Business Standard, 2014*). The emerging concept of Indo-Pacific has further widened its scope, with the US and Japan actively supporting and encouraging India to play a bigger role as an international stakeholder. Narendra Modi hinted at widening the scope of India’s eastward engagement by reaching out even to the western shores of the US, thus signaling that India’s eastward engagement should reach up to the US. On January, 2015 addressing the India-U.S. Business Summit, Modi said, “when I look towards the East, I see the western shores of the United States” (*Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, January 26, 2015*). Since 2014, the Act East policy has been projected as India’s flagship policy to engage countries of the East; with a definite objective to move India’s eastward engagement to the next level by making it wider, more multi-dimensional and action oriented. As stated by General V. K. Singh, the Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs, in response to a parliamentary question in March 2016, “in the second half of 2014, LEP was upgraded to Act East Policy” (*Lok Sabha, 2016*). Since 2014, the government has been projecting Act East policy as a fine blend of India’s diplomatic outreach, economic and trade partnerships, and strategic collaboration with countries of the Southeast Asia and wider Asia-Pacific region.

Following the trends set during the Look East policy years, Act East gives high priority to ASEAN and its member countries. That ASEAN is and will remain central to India’s eastward engagement is also evident from the fact that in 2013, during the eleventh India-ASEAN Summit in Brunei, the former prime minister Manmohan Singh had announced that India would establish its Permanent Mission and a separate Ambassador to ASEAN. Subsequently, India’s Permanent Mission to ASEAN was established, and was officially inaugurated by the current External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj on April 23, 2015.

In terms of making sense of India-ASEAN engagement, the year 2017 holds a special place. In 2017, ASEAN completed fifty years of its existence. The same year, India and ASEAN completed twenty-fifth anniversary of their dialogue relations, fifteen years of summit-level partnership, five years of India-ASEAN strategic partnership, and of course, if seen in continuity from 1992, the Look East policy itself has completed twenty-five years.

At the symbolic level, in order to bring the relationship to the next level, India invited the Heads of States from all ten ASEAN countries as Chief Guests for the 2018 Republic Day parade. During the Commemorative Summit held on January 25, 2018, the Delhi Declaration was also signed, which will serve as the roadmap for India-ASEAN ties. With the objective to sync their priorities for greater mutual benefits, India and the ASEAN member countries had adopted the ASEAN-India Plan of Action, 2016-2020 in August 2015, to focus on the three pillars of politico-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation and take new initiatives in widening and deepening cooperation in these areas. The three pillars i.e. ASEAN political, economic, and socio-cultural community, are central to ASEAN's medium to long-term priorities.

The Road Ahead

Several key factors have shaped India-ASEAN ties from the beginning, while some of the factors are still shaping its course. In that context, following are some of the key direct or indirect shapers of India-ASEAN relations which will influence the broad contours of the relationship.

The rise of China has been a major factor shaping India's engagement with ASEAN. China's rise as an economic giant and its increasing trade with the ASEAN countries has given India all the more reasons to step up its collaborative efforts vis-à-vis ASEAN (Hong, 2006). An increasingly assertive China has become a shared concern, yet neither India nor ASEAN will publicly address the dichotomy of their dependence on China. "With China-ASEAN ties under stress due to Beijing's aggressive territorial claims, New Delhi has been trying to fill the void by emphasizing its credentials as a responsible regional stakeholder- freedom of navigation but also access to resources in accordance with principles of international law" (Pant & Deb, 2017). For India, the key challenge has been to prove that it is economically competitive and strategically reliable- a challenge which will only get more intense and crucial with time.

The Non-Traditional Security Challenges, whether related to the terror networks in the region or those pertaining to terror finance, pose grave challenges to India and ASEAN. Both India and ASEAN member countries have to tirelessly work together on that front. For the multicultural societies of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand etc., this is as prominent a challenge as it is for India.

Being the littoral countries of Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region, India and the ASEAN member countries are vulnerable to common challenges especially those emanating from the Oceans: natural disasters, human trafficking, narcotics, gun running, and maritime piracy. While India and ASEAN have been working together in meeting the challenges effectively, more coordinated efforts will be needed as India and ASEAN move forward.

For both ASEAN and its dialogue partners, keeping economic growth intact and the idea of regional economic integration appealing, would perhaps be the major challenges in times to come. However, if these twin challenges are met with successfully, that can open a new range of opportunities for the entire region. RCEP is an important tool in that regard. It is beyond doubt that RCEP has the potential to further integrate India into the regional economic and trade architecture. However, with RCEP, there still exist some bottlenecks. India's Foreign Secretary, Dr. S. Jaishankar's comments before the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce underscore that "though larger FTAs are important for getting preferential access to the markets, it is important to be cautious about the manner in which such arrangements work out in respect of our imports as well as on our efforts to increase the share of manufacturing sector in our economy" (Haidar & Arun, 2017).

For long, India was criticised for focussing obsessively on its western neighbour and ignoring its eastern neighbours. That has substantially changed over the past twenty-five years. India has become an active participant in the region. Stronger ASEAN is in India's interest for several reasons. The 'three Cs': Commerce, Connectivity, and Culture are poised to play a key role in that regard. In that context the revival of the Nalanda University holds immense importance. Nalanda was a great source of learning for countries across Southeast and East Asia during the ancient times. India has, with active support of countries such as Japan, Singapore, Australia, South Korea and Indonesia, resurrected and revitalized the Nalanda University to make it once again the hub of knowledge and higher learning in the world.

For the ASEAN and its member countries, India is not perceived as a threat anymore. Common interests and threats emanating from the same sources bind India and ASEAN together. During the fifteenth India-ASEAN Summit held in Manila, Philippines in November 2017, a range of initiatives were taken, which have the potential to bring India-ASEAN relations to new heights (*Indian Mission to ASEAN, 2018*):

- a) Enhance our strategic partnership by designating security and economic cooperation in maritime domain as a focus area.
- b) Offer of joint exercises and fleet review by navies of ASEAN countries and India.
- c) Offer of coordinated patrols to address traditional and non-traditional maritime threats and undertake exercises to effectively coordinate our response to natural disasters.
- d) Offer of stepping up our economic cooperation in shared maritime domain by enhancing maritime connectivity and by working towards a Protocol on Blue Economy.
- e) Organize a Start Up Festival in India to encourage digital commerce among ASEAN-India youth
- f) Organize an ASEAN-India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas on the theme, "Ancient Route, New Journey: Diaspora in the Dynamic ASEAN-India Partnership"
- g) Host a Business Summit and an ASEAN India Business Council event in January 2018.
- h) Host ASEAN India Connectivity Summit in India.
- i) Host the first working group meeting on Civil Aviation at New Delhi.

Connectivity- digital, physical, economic, and people-to-people- all remain essential in shaping India's relations with ASEAN. When the Look East policy was started, one of the reasons pertaining to the Northeastern states of India was that India was under dire need of curbing insurgency in the region. The support of Myanmar was of key importance at that point. A

decade later, when the Phase II of Look East policy begun, the situation in India's Northeastern states had improved. Initiatives such as Kaladan Multimodal project, India-Myanmar- Thailand trilateral highway were conceptualized and launched at that time. However, the region, which was marred by decades of insurgency and neglect, could not get back on the track in such a short time. It would be an exaggeration to state that the level of physical, digital and economic connectivity in the Northeastern states of India is the same as mainstream India. Over the past twenty-five years, however, the situation has improved, just as the rest of India and the level of economic growth and development of other states has also improved since 1991.

Nevertheless, a lot needs to be done to bring the Northeastern states of India to the level where they could attempt to link with countries of the ASEAN region. Here, an element of logical fallacy catches the analysts who wish to compare Look East with the Act East policy. The fundamental difference on this count is that Look East is assessed for what it delivered over a period of twenty-two years, within its limited role in shaping domestic agenda in the age of coalition governments.

The Act East however, is more akin to a promissory note, the real action of which is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, on the basis of initial trends it can be said that Northeastern states are attracting more attention of the central government of India than ever before, regardless of reasons electoral or developmental. "The North East of India has been a priority in the Act East Policy. AEP provides an interface between North East India including the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the ASEAN region" (*Press Information Bureau, 2015*).

The ASEAN-India plan of action, 2016-2020, which is the third plan of action in the series, jointly designed lists out a clear roadmap for India and ASEAN to work together. Through mechanisms such as ASEAN-India Fund, ASEAN-India Science & Technology Fund, ASEAN-India Green Fund, ASEAN-India Project Development Fund, India has been working on some of these ideas, while some still need to be implemented comprehensively.

While India and ASEAN have certainly benefitted from each other in the past twenty-five years, they are yet to become the Central pillars in shaping each other's future. The time has come to earnestly strive for achieving long-term tangibles gains.

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