

India-ASEAN relationship in a changing environment

V.L Chaka Hmar

Research Scholar,

Department of Political Science, Mizoram University.

Abstract

The relationship with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a key pillar of India's foreign policy and the foundation of the recent creation of the Act East Policy. The upgradation of the relationship into a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a natural progression to the ground covered since India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1992. To strengthen its engagement with ASEAN and ASEAN-centric processes, India has set up a separate mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, Indonesia in April 2015 which itself is a clear indication that India is vocal and serious about its relationships with ASEAN. India's relationship with ASEAN has improved to the extent that the regional grouping is now the anchor of India's Act East Policy. The rise of China has compelled India to put forth its best efforts to engage with ASEAN as a regional grouping. Moreover, the ASEAN countries have always looked to India for balancing against China. For India to be a regional power and eventually a global power, continuous enhancement of its relations with ASEAN countries in all spheres must be a priority with a new zeal of vigour and focus.

Keywords: cooperation, development, engagement, regional, ASEAN, India.

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is geo-political and economic organisation of countries located in Southeast Asia. It was originally formed out of an organisation called the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) which was an alliance consisted of the Malaysian, Philippines and Thailand formed in 1961. It was therefore that ASA can be credibly considered as the 'predecessor' to ASEAN.

It was on 8 August, 1967 that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) came into existence when the foreign ministers of five countries viz., Indonesia, Malaysian, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand met at the Thai department of foreign affairs building in Bangkok and signed ASEAN Declaration aka 'Bangkok Declaration'. The five foreign ministers— Adam Malik of Indonesia, Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Narciso Ramos of the Philippines, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Thanat Khoman of Thailand— are considered as the organisation's Founding Fathers. The founding fathers envisaged that the organisation would eventually encompass all countries in Southeast Asia. The motivations for the birth of ASEAN were so that its members' governing elite could concentrate on nation building, the common fear of communism, reduced faith in or mistrust of external powers in the 1960s, as well as a desire for economic development. Since its inception, it has sought to create regional stability and has evolved into a security as well as an economic community.

ASEAN has, for long, been the only official organization that pursued regional economic integration in East Asia. It is responsible for several economic integration initiatives in East Asia including the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS) and the ASEAN Investment Area (AIA).

The fundamental principles

The ASEAN member states have adopted the following fundamental principles for the guiding mantra of their relationship with one another, as contained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

- 1). Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations.
- ii). The right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion.
- iii). Non interference in the internal affairs of one another.
- iv). Settlement of differences of disputes by peaceful manner.
- v). Renunciation of the threat or use of violence.
- vi). Effective cooperation among themselves.

India has shared a close relationship with ASEAN countries since the time of its independence. It started expanding its influence in the Southeast Asian region during the 1950s by supporting the Indonesian struggle for independence and involving itself in the Indochina crisis in the 1960s. Both Indian and ASEAN have developed a mutual comprehensive understanding in terms of shared vulnerabilities, shared economic interests progress and common stakes in creating a peaceful and prosperous Asian Economic Community. The signing of Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and the signing of an ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) is the most obvious example of growing synergy between India and ASEAN.

ASEAN is therefore looking towards India to play an important role in influencing the course of geo-politics and economic development of the region. India's economic stability, its image as a benign regional power and commitment to the reform process has created a positive image across Southeast Asia. India and ASEAN countries have shared strong cultural and historical ties. In the immediate aftermath of Second World War, India emerged as the champion of the process of 'decolonisation' in Southeast Asian Countries, drawing recognition and appreciation for India's importance in the region. However, with the signing of an "India-Soviet Peace and Friendship Cooperation Treaty", relations between India and ASEAN took a downturn. Through the 1980s, relations between India and ASEAN were uncertain and plagued by various political and diplomatic differences which resulted in a compromise of economic relations between them.

However the situation began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As India embarked on the policy of Liberalisation and greater linkages with the global economy. It was in this spirit of liberalised economy, of the search for a viable alternative as a regional platform and its policy of greater integration with the global economy that India launched its 'Look East Policy'.

Strategic cooperation and relationship in the post-cold war era

Both India and ASEAN have attached great importance to each other and this is manifested in the number of high level visits that the leaders have undertaken. ASEAN decided to confer upon India, first Sectoral Dialogue Partnership (SDP) in 1992 and then Full Dialogue Partnership (FDP) in 1995. This have enabled India to have greater economic interactions with the ASEAN countries, and also provided an ambience or environment for the leader to interact and to arrive at common approaches to many regional and international issues. India's attendance at the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila has resulted in building trust and confidence among the partners.

New Delhi participation in the ARF is significant for it facilitated her entry into multilateral security deliberations, offering an opportunity to develop proximity on strategic and security related issues. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a formal, official, multilateral dialogue in Asia Pacific region established in 1993 by the ASEAN ministerial meeting. India participated in a number of ARF activities relating to confidence building measures, non-proliferation, and preventive diplomacy and found them productive and useful. In the post-cold war period for India and the ASEAN countries new security issues have emerged based on cooperation.

The nature of India-ASIAN cooperation covers not only regional and bilateral level engagement through ASEAN but also sub-regional initiatives such as Mekong Ganga Cooperation, Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Politico Strategic and Security Relationship

With the withdrawal of US troops from strategic locations in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Southeast Asian countries deemed it appropriate to guard against Chinese influence by setting up vital sea-lanes of communications such as the Taiwan, Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits. Accordingly, ASEAN countries justifiably perceive India, with the largest Naval forces in the Indian Ocean and nuclear capabilities, a strategic partner to balance China's growing power in the region.

Conversely, there have also been apprehensions within ASEAN regarding India's Navy and nuclear capabilities as India itself possesses the ability to yield substantial influence and power in the region. But India's willingness to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and its endorsement of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) has gone a long way in assuring the region of India's intent. The ASEAN looks at India's security needs more as a factor emanating from the compulsions of the geopolitical position that India holds, rather than being a derivative of any hegemonic designs on India's part.

Much of the strategic and security cooperation between India and ASEAN has been taking place at two levels:

- i). At ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).
- ii). At ASEAN –India summit level meetings.

In order to deliberate on security and strategic issues in the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN had spearheaded the formation of the ARF in 1994 with the membership covering ASEAN members and its dialogue partners. Since 1996, India has been taking part in both the wings of the Forum on issues related mainly to transnational organised crimes such as drug trafficking, terrorism and counter-terrorism, maritime piracy, illegal movement of nuclear, chemical, biological and other deadly materials. The ARF underline similarity of strategic perceptions of both India and ASEAN in case of the need for preventive diplomacy and cooperative security.

Besides its participation in the ARF deliberations, India has also been engaged with ASEAN in discussions on security issues through the summit level meeting. India and ASEAN signed a joint Declaration for Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism in October 2003 as they share common interests with regard to regional peace and security. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, terrorism has become a new threat to global and regional security. Both ASEAN and India are faced with grave vulnerabilities with regard to terrorism and it is in their common interest to work together to build peace and security in the region.

In the second India-ASEAN summit level meeting in October 2003, India also signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), expressing its adherence to the ASEAN goal of regional peace and security. And Framework on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Joint Declaration against Terrorism were also signed in this summit.

For ASEAN, India is relevant and significant. India is seen as a counterweight to the other major powers especially China and Japan. The Indian technological cooperation with the Southeast Asian states in the military and civilian sectors serves an alternative as well as an additional source of purchase of sophisticated military technology and equipment for defence establishment in Southeast Asia.

Economic Engagements and Trade Relationship

As China's dominance in Southeast Asia became a great cause of concern for India. China has provided military support to all of India's neighbours and significant assistance to Pakistan for its nuclear programme. This has been a serious destabilizing factor for India. Further, China's rising presence in Southeast Asia has posed serious security concerns for India. A country in control of the Indo-China region would threaten India's security, as many Southeast Asian states have adjoining borders with India. As a consequence, India has attempted to improve its interaction with Southeast Asia by rebuilding its long lost ties with ASEAN.

During the 1990 to 2005, the total value of trade between India and ASEAN countries has gone up from US \$ 2.4 – 23 billion, registering an almost ten-fold increase. India's own Economic growth and the recovery of ASEAN economies have given a major boost to the economic and trade links.

The East Asian financial crisis highlighted the need for effective prevention, management, and resolution of financial crises and contagion/infection. There was growing dissatisfaction with the way the IMF (International Monetary Fund) handled the crisis and a need was felt for the establishment of a self-help mechanism between the East Asian economies, one that would include information exchange, policy dialogue, a regional liquidity support arrangement, financial sector development, and joint policy making in critical areas such as exchange rate policy coordination

In order to expand and diversify the economic linkages, India and ASEAN have set up various institutional mechanisms through which negotiations are being conducted and the two parties are making efforts to overcome the barriers in deepening interactions. India ASEAN economic cooperation is being managed and supervised through the following institutional arrangement at the official levels.

- i).ASEAN-India Business Summit.
- ii).ASEAN-India Business Council.
- iii).ASEAN-India Economic Minister' meetings.
- iv).ASEAN-India Trade Negotiation Committee.

v).ASEAN-India Working Group on Trade and Investment.

The ASEAN-India Business summit has since 2002 acted as the apex body in dealing with trade and business negotiations. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) constitutes another important area for economic cooperation between India and ASEAN. India's Liberalisation programme has created a suitable atmosphere for ASEAN FDI in sectors such as infrastructure, hotel and tourism services etc.

The institutionalization of ASEAN-India relations came with the First ASEAN-India Summit in Pnhom Penh on 5 November 2002 and was perceived as the success of India's Look East Policy. It was considered an acknowledgement of India's emergence as a key player in the Asia Pacific Region. This breakthrough came after a long and arduous effort on the part of the Indian diplomacy to convince ASEAN countries to hold a separate ASEAN-India summit.

One of the objectives of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation signed between ASEAN and India is to "facilitate the more effective economic integration of the new ASEAN member states and the bridging of development gap among the parties." There is growing awareness that regional disparities need to be addressed and cooperation increased, to broaden the range of countries that derive benefits from growth in the region.

By achieving a free flow of goods, investment, services and a reduction in poverty and socio-economic disparity across the region, it hopes to develop into a single market and production base in the near future.

Scientific and Technological Relationship

The Growing partnership between India and ASEAN is further evident from their multi-sectoral scientific and technological cooperation. A number of agreements have been signed covering areas like space technology, info-tech, biotechnology, pharmaceutical and tele-medicines. The two sides also agreed to set up India-ASEAN Institute for Intellectual Property and inter link India's Tsunami Early Warning System with the Malaysian network for quicker dissemination of information.

India-ASEAN have also decided to establish an India-ASEAN Institute of Biotechnology in Jakarta and develop an ASEAN-India Digital Archive. The two sides have also set up an ASEAN e-network Project Establishing a VSAT based Tele-Medicine Network to connect Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam.

Cultural Relationship

India and ASEAN countries share strong cultural relations. India is the birthplace of Buddhism, which is practice by a large number of people in mainland Southeast Asia and India merchants and traders from Gujarat are known to have brought Islam to the Southeast Asian coasts during their trading visits. In order to revive historical cultural relations, Singapore has proposed reviving Nalanda University in Bihar and India is engaged in developing road and rail transport system. India and ASEAN have also been working on linking Indian higher educational institutions with the ASEAN University Network.

The Indian Government has been organising Indian Education Fairs in ASEAN countries and has also offered to establish Centres for English Language Training.

The increasing importance of maritime trade and energy security for India has made it imperative to ensure the safety of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC's) in Southeast Asia. Maritime piracy has large implications for security in the economic sphere and in the Malacca Straits, is a common threat to India and the ASEAN region. With India being dependent on sea ways for over 97 per cent of its global trade, the safety of sea lanes around

the ASEAN region is of vital importance to India. India understands that a prosperous and stable ASEAN that safeguards vital sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans will serve its best interests. Coordination between India and ASEAN in safeguarding their shared marine environment and its resources, promoting the safety and security of navigation in their common ocean areas, and ensuring legitimate, peaceful and sustainable uses of the oceans, can contribute to both maritime development and maritime security in the region.

Complimenting the extent of strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN, the scope for stronger economic relations between them has also been steadily rising. There is tremendous potential between India and ASEAN in various fields including trade and investment, science and technology, tourism, human resource and infrastructure development. Such cooperation contains the scope for greater economic integration between the two and potentially large economic benefits for the people of all the countries involved.

India needs to attract foreign capital and direct investment from abroad and the ASEAN countries are a good resource for them. Initiatives towards integration of capital markets between countries will go a long way in facilitating the same. The limited export import financing which proves a hindrance to trade between the countries can be overcome by the setting up of an association of export and import banks in the region. The development of an Asian Bond market would also be beneficial to India due to the stability in foreign exchange prices that it would achieve through it. Therefore, there is tremendous potential for benefits from financial and monetary integration between India and ASEAN.

However ASEAN is not free from criticism that Non-ASEAN countries have criticised as being too soft in its approach to promoting human rights and democracy in the junta-led Myanmar. The policy of 'constructive engagement' with the oppressive government of Myanmar exposed the political timidity of ASEAN, particularly in the light of the suppression of anti-government protest in 2007 and the insular or narrow-minded response to cyclone Nargis in 2008. Despite global outrage at the military crack-down on peaceful protesters in Yangon, ASEAN has refused to suspend Myanmar as a member and also rejects proposals for economic sanctions. International observers view it as a "talk shop", which implies that the organisation is "big on words but small on action". During the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, several activist groups staged anti-globalisation and anti-Arroyo rallies. According to the activists, the agenda of economic integration would negatively affect industries in the Philippines and would cause thousands of Filipinos to lose their jobs. They also viewed the organisation as imperialistic that threatens the country's sovereignty.

Despite various whatsoever criticism put forward or cast upon ASEAN on its working or of its functional aspects, ASEAN proves effective and enormous in solving conflicts and building ties with its member and non member countries as Philippines' Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo also asserted that ASEAN would be a 'workshop' not a 'talk shop'. It has shown its capability in manoeuvring and settling Indochina crisis in 1980s, hence it emerged as a successful 'diplomatic community'.

Conclusion

Thus one may argue that ASEAN-India relations have come a long way since their turbulent Cold War phase. The 1990s have seen a distinct rise in their interaction along with firm measures to integrate and cooperate in the economic as well as political spheres. There is a clear sense that ASEAN intends to integrate the East Asian region into one consolidated regional bloc and it is certain of the importance of having India as a part of it. ASEAN sees India as an emerging power in Asia and is keen to develop relations with it that would be beneficial to countries within ASEAN and to the region as a whole. There is a lot that ASEAN can gain from India's development in its service sector and it looks to develop wide ranging economic partnership with her.

India understands that the ASEAN grouping consists of countries which have achieved significant development in the past 20 years. It is in its interest to establish beneficial linkages with the countries to benefit from their past experience and current standing. There is large potential in the synergies between its economy and that of the

ASEAN countries and is keen to strengthen its economic ties with them. The ASEAN-India partnership holds ample potential for a successful future. While there are definite challenges to be addressed before achieving a consolidated East Asian Community, it is evident that conscious efforts are being made on both the sides in developing synergies for the shared prosperity and mutual benefit of India, ASEAN and the Asian region at large.

References

Chhibber, Bharti. (2009) Political and Military Dimensions Of Regional Security – A study of ASIAN and SAARC. The Journal of International Issues. World Affairs. 13.2.

McLean, Iain., McMillan, Alistair. (2009). The Concise Dictionary of Politics. New York: Oxford University Press.

Suri, Kapil .(2007). ASEAN: Towards new Horizon. New Delhi: Cyber Tech.

ASEAN. Retrieved 4 May, 2020. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASEAN>.

Shekhar, Vibhanshu. (2007). India-ASEAN Relations: An Overview. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), Special Report.

Anand, Mohit. (2009). India-ASEAN Relations: Analysing regional implications. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), Special Report.

Reddy, K Raja. (2005). India and ASEAN: foreign Policy dimensions for the 21st Century. New Delhi: New Century.

Revising India-ASEAN Relations. Retrieved 6 May 2020. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2017/11/revisiting-asean-india-relations/>.

India-ASEAN Relations. Retrieved 7 May 2020. <https://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/20-years.htm>.