



SHIFTING TRENDS IN INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

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Abstract: *India's Relations have passed through many phases and experienced ups and downs with Southeast Asia, a region which has indeed occupied a place in India's foreign policy. But the options and capabilities that were required to achieve desired goals and objectives were never put into operation until recently when India suddenly felt a sense of envy for the overall development and progress that region had accomplished within a period of three decades, and evolved to the extent of helping India to integrate itself with the global economy. That the line of thinking in India's relations towards Southeast Asia found its expression more concretely in the then India's Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Singapore lecture in 1994, the precursor of what is now known as India's Look East policy. From that time onwards, India mobilized its diplomatic, political and economic resources to its optimal level so much as to achieve a multi-dimensional relation with the countries of Southeast Asia.*

Had India realized two decades earlier the importance and the potentialities of the region and the opportunities that it could provide to it, India's relations with the region would have been more firm and mature than what they are now. To get a proper perspective on India's relations towards Southeast Asia and the forces and the circumstances that shaped those attitudes, it is necessary to have an introspection of the history of India-Southeast relations. When the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken a special interest in making better the relation with the south east by changing the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy, this paper deals with the evolution of relations between India and ASEAN and retrospect the major treaties with the south east.

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INTRODUCTION:

Southeast Asia, lying across the Bay of Bengal and sharing with India the littoral status in the Indian Ocean region, has been an integral part of the Indian consciousness throughout the history. Its religions, languages and culture are highly indebted to India. Trade relations between the western parts of Southeast Asia and eastern parts of India go back to the prehistoric period and continued until the advent of European rule in early seventeenth century; since when, India as well as the countries of Southeast Asia had succumbed to the western domination. During the colonial period, trade between the two regions declined as it was more oriented towards the mother countries of respective colonial masters in Europe. The process of decolonization during post-World war II set the stage on reviving the efforts to bring the two regions close.

INDIA'S SOUTHEAST ASIA POLICY: HISTORICAL SETTING

The basic principles of independent India's foreign policy have been anti-colonialism, anti-racialism and anti-imperialism. Pursuing of an independent policy without joining either of the power groups and extending support to the freedom movements, India aimed at freeing the world from the scourges of domination, and exploitation, and enabling Asia to gain its due importance in world affairs by extending its unqualified support to the UN.¹

Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of the Philippines which attained its Independence in 1946 and Thailand which retained its independence throughout its history, were under colonial rule. Save Indonesia, all other countries of Southeast Asia are small in size and hardly conscious of their importance in the international sphere, despite being endowed with rich resources.

Independent India began displaying keen interest in reviving its ties with Southeast Asia snapped during the colonial period, especially because Indian leaders were aware that the developments in a proximate area such as Southeast Asia would have a bearing on the peace and stability in the region. Since the climate of peace was the prerequisite for development, India sought cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries to establish and enlarge an 'area of peace'². Nehru proclaimed: "We in India have ventured to talk about an area of peace; we have thought one of the major areas of peace might be Southeast Asia".³ As a logical corollary, India not only championed the cause of independence of the



Southeast Asian countries but was also deeply concerned about their political stability and economic development.

Even though Indian nationalist leaders expressed keen interest in the improvement of relations with the Southeast Asian countries, their thoughts and plans centered on Asia as a whole, since India and Southeast Asia could not be expected to march ahead in isolation from the rest of Asia. Further, the needs of Asian countries being similar, the future of India was tied up with the future of Asia. Nehru therefore talked about a future 'Asian Federation' and India's possible leadership in it. Those ideas found manifestation in India's decision to convene the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 to bring the Asian countries closer to each other and strive for their bright future.

New Delhi called Conference on Indonesia in January 1949 in fulfillment of its yet another foreign policy goal of anti-colonialism. As Prof. Suryanarayan has pointed out, "India's crowning glory in support of Indonesian independence was the convening of a Conference on Indonesia in New Delhi from January 20-23, 1949".⁴ That India was also active as a peace-maker in Southeast Asia was evident when it acted as the chairman of the International Control Commission on Indochina, set up after the 1954 Geneva Accord.

One of the classical examples of India's commitment to its self-prophesied neutrality was its strident opposition to the US – inspired military alliances, in particular the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Despite unflinching efforts by the Western powers to draw India into this military alliance, India not only opposed SEATO but also took initiatives to expose the redundancy of the Manila Pact. India hence concluded Panchsheel Agreement with China in April 1954.⁵ Appadorai and Rajan described the Afro-Asian Conference as "India's response to the challenge posed by the American military – pact approach".⁶ At the Afro-Asian Conference sponsored by the five Colombo Powers, held at Bandung on April 18-24, 1955,⁷ Nehru wanted the international behavior to be governed by the principle of peaceful co-existence for building up and preserving independence and peace in Asia and Africa. Just as at the Geneva Conference ten months earlier, at Bandung India played a significant role in "Private talks" which helped to clear the clouds of Southeast Asian apprehensions about China's intensions.

Hence, Nehru not only arranged meetings between the leaders of China and the Southeast Asian countries but also introduced Premier Chou En-lai to the leaders of Indonesia,



Myanmar (Burma), Ceylon, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Myanmar followed the Indian line of peaceful approach towards China and proclaimed their adherence to 'Panchsheel' and peaceful co-existence with China.⁸ In India's perception, the pledges of peaceful co-existence and non-interference by the leaders of China and North Vietnam represented "a non-military defense system for Southeast-Asia".⁹

It is a paradox that the Bandung Conference marked the pinnacle as well as the beginning of decline of India's influence in Southeast Asia. The Philippine Foreign Minister General Romulo who participated in the conference, resented the role of "mother hen" India played in introducing Chou En-lai to various leaders, particularly those of Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Nehru's outbursts in the open sessions of the Bandung Conference against SEATO were retaliated by the two Southeast Asia members of the Manila pact--the Philippines and Thailand. While Nehru's indiscreet remarks irritated some of the Asian leaders, including Sukarno and Chou En-lai, his diplomatic dexterity had however impressed many of the Asian leaders. Nehru's assertion that "classical colonialism is gone and dead" and that the "old imperialisms are fading away", was not shared by Sukarno who insisted that "colonialism is not yet dead".¹¹ India's image in the eyes of the Southeast Asian countries took a nosedive following the India - China war of 1962. The one and only Southeast Asian country which, "unreservedly and unmistakably" supported India against China during the war was Malaysia. Tengku Abdul Rehaman, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia setup a fund called, "Save Democracy Fund", of which he himself was the Chairman, to assist India.¹² India's diminishing interest in Southeast Asia was reflected in Nehru's failure to reciprocate the visits of the leaders of the Southeast Asian countries to India.¹³ It was at this time when India's attention and role in Southeast Asia were on the slide that the efforts were being made to a setup viable regional cooperation mechanism by the Southeast Asian countries.

MOVES AT REGIONAL CORPORATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND INDIA'S RESPONSE

ASA and MAPHILINDO which met with failure created internationally an impression that the Southeast Asian countries were not yet ready for sailing together for mutual benefit. However, far from dampening the zeal of the regional states the failure of the early attempts drove them to move forward in realizing the daunting task of achieving regional



integration. Their persistence was paid rich dividends when a viable cooperative mechanism came into existence as ASEAN.

INDIA'S EARLY RESPONSE TO ASEAN

With the signing of the Bangkok Declaration, on August, 1967, the Foreign Ministers of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines formally proclaimed the birth of ASEAN.¹⁴ India's ruling elite perhaps thought that the new grouping in the region might also go the same way as its predecessors -- ASA and MAPHILINDO.

India also failed to respond to the solicitation of the ASEAN countries, even those the economic and strategic stakes demanded due consideration of the issue of India-Southeast Asia Partnership. Deploring this lapse on the part of India, J.N.Dixit, India's former Foreign Secretary, in his book, *Across Borders: Fifty years of India's Foreign Policy*, has explained the predicament of India towards ASEAN. To quote him:

... It was between 1965 and 1967 that the initiative to create ASEAN was taken. This regional grouping, as originally envisaged by the Southeast Asian countries, wanted India also to be a full member of ASEAN.

Overtures made by the Southeast Asian nations in 1967 were however rebuffed by New Delhi because India had structured its Southeast Asia policy on the basis of its overall view of the Cold War, the situation in Vietnam and its suspicions and apprehensions about the US involvement in Southeast Asia. Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh conveyed the general response that India could not get involved with a group which was part of the American scheme of things.¹⁵

FACTORS INHIBITING INDIA'S ASSOCIATION WITH THE FOUNDING OF ASEAN

Contrary to the view of J. N. Dixit, Indian Government's official reaction seems to be somewhat perplexing. A month after the inception of ASEAN, Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister, during her visit to Ceylon in September 1967, told a news conference that India had not been asked to join the ASEAN.¹⁶ Minister for External Affairs M.C. Chagla also informed the Lok Sabha that "since India was not invited to join this economic group, the question of Indian Government's reaction to the Southeast Asian move does not arise".¹⁷ Even though the government of India did not greet officially the new-born Southeast Asian grouping, Indira Gandhi during her visit to Australia in 1968 said that India welcomed the "new drive towards regional cooperation that was taking place in Southeast Asia".¹⁸



Obviously hurt by its marginalization by the ASEAN countries, Indira Gandhi avoided any direct reference to ASEAN during her entire tour of Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand in 1968. The perceptual gap between India and ASEAN was further widened by Indo-Soviet Treaty of August 1971 and India's involvement in Bangladesh crisis.

Indira Gandhi Government perceived ASEAN members to be pro-Western. Malaysia and Singapore were members of Five Power Defense Agreement (FPDA), while Thailand and the Philippines were the two members of the American-sponsored SEATO. Even though India was not critical of the membership of Malaysia and Singapore in FPDA given the fact that they were its colleagues in the Commonwealth, the membership of Thailand and the Philippines in ASEAN prompted New Delhi to consider the new grouping as "a substitute for SEATO". At a banquet given in her honor by the Malaysian Premier Tunku Abdul Rahman on May 30, 1968, i.e. hardly ten months after the formation of ASEAN, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stated:

We must resist the temptation to introduce a Cold War atmosphere by forming antagonistic blocs in the region. India believes that the answer to the threat of subversion and sabotage lies in strengthening the economic and political stability of the region, and not through the formation of military alliances which may lead to counter – military alliances.¹⁹

When some opposition members in the Indian parliament became highly critical of India's indifference to the issue of Southeast Asian security, Indira Gandhi sharply reacted thus:

"The security of South and Southeast Asia will not be made more secure by alliances or treaties. We believe that security will grow out of mutual cooperation and the growth of identity of interests and on our part we have been doing everything possible to explore all avenues to such mutual cooperation in economic and other fields".²⁰

Minister of State for External Affairs, B.R. Bhagat, gave yet another explanation for India's inability to take on a military role in Southeast Asia. In a statement made in the Parliament Bhagat ruled out India entering into defense arrangements with the countries of Southeast Asia, because India's security forces were fully committed to the defense of its own borders and of some of its immediate neighbours. Further, he was apprehensive that such arrangements might provoke greater tension in the region.²¹

The response of the pro-American ASEAN states to the Indo-Soviet Treaty was on the expected lines. Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik said curtly: "We do not need a



Treaty like that one". Indirectly questioning India's credentials as a non-aligned country in the wake of conclusion of the Indo-Soviet Treaty, Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Razak observed that any such treaty with a big power like the Soviet Union would have to be considered in the context of Malaysia's non-aligned policy.

As the non-communist Southeast Asia was fuming at the Indo-Soviet Treaty, India's military intervention in Bangladesh in December 1971 further strained India's ties with the ASEAN countries. When India's ties with the ASEAN states were going through a sticky patch, India's positive response to ASEAN's Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) initiative served to cool a bit the tempers of the ASEAN countries.²² At the same time, India showed a surprisingly high degree of support for the 1976 ASEAN Summit held in Bali.²³

The first ever non-Congress government after India's independence, formed in 1977 by a coalition government of Janata Party led by Moraji desai, who succeeded Indira Gandhi, made sincere efforts to develop India's relations with the countries of ASEAN. Pleased by the positive policy of the Janata government towards ASEAN, Southeast Asian leaders paid official visits to India.²⁴ Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmed Rithauddeen visited India in March 1978 and the Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in December 1978.

Earlier, pleased with the return gestures from the ASEAN countries, New Delhi instructed its Ambassador in Jakarta in December 1976 to request for a formal relationship with ASEAN.²⁵ ASEAN obliged by sending its secretary General Ali Bin Abdullah of Malaysia to India on a preliminary survey mission in November 1978. It may be mentioned that Indonesia played a significant role in shaping ASEAN's responses to India's request.²⁶ On June 11, 1979 Kassim Hussain, Director General of ASEAN's National Secretariat in Malaysia, said that the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN nations would take a decision on India's request for dialogue partnership which would be the first of its kind with a developing country.²⁷

IMPACT OF CAMBODIAN IMBROGLIO ON INDIA'S GROWING TIES WITH ASEAN

The origins of the Cambodian crisis could be traced to the Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978 leading to the ousting of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) led by Pol Pot and the inauguration of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) under the leadership of Heng Samrin in January 1979. ASEAN countries lambasted Vietnam for its blatant interference in the affairs of its neighbour. Given Hanoi's special relationship with



Moscow, ASEAN–Five was haunted by “the specter of a Soviet intervention.”²⁸ ASEAN, therefore, sought India’s cooperation to bring pressure on Vietnam to pull out its troops from Cambodia by subjecting Hanoi to international isolation. Conscious of India’s traditionally warm relations with Vietnam and Indira Gandhi’s election promise that if voted to power her government would recognize the PRK, ASEAN dispatched Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in January 1980 to restrain India from recognizing the Heng Samrin government. ASEAN also invited India to Kuala Lumpur in May 1980 for talks on the issue of “Dialogue Partner”. As the Foreign Minister of Singapore, Dhanabalan, has pointed out, one of the chief objectives of ASEAN’s meeting with India was “to persuade the Indian government not to recognize the PRK”.²⁹ In any case, the Indian Minister for External Affairs, P.V. Narasimha Rao cancelled his visit to Kuala Lumpur at the last minute on the grounds of illness of his mother.³⁰ For the ASEAN-5, whose diplomatic dexterity was well known, Rao’s failure to turn up in Kuala Lumpur was a sufficient indication of India’s impending recognition of the Vietnam–backed PRK. In fact, Singaporean leader Rajaratnam had warned that India’s recognition of the PRK would have grave consequences and would tantamount to India’s tacit approval of Vietnam’s aggression and the establishment of the puppet regime of Heng Samrin. He, therefore, counselled India to defer the recognition of the PRK and steer clear of the Cambodian muddle.³¹

Seen from the perspective of the Indira Gandhi Government, recognition of the PRK was inevitable in view of its election promise. On July 7, 1980, the Government of India recognized the PRK by notifying the Parliament of the same.³² Expectedly ASEAN countries took an extremely critical view of India’s recognition of the PRK. Recognition of the PRK heightened ASEAN states sense of alienation from India.³³

In a bid to pacify the ASEAN-5 enraged by its Cambodian policy, India explained the ASEAN Ambassadors based in New Delhi that its recognition of Cambodian regime was not at all a move designed to hurt ASEAN. An official spokesman said that in recognizing the Heng Samrin regime India was chiefly motivated by the fact that the PRK government exercised effective control over the country.³⁴ In recognizing the PRK, India took into account the overarching security scenario, India-Soviet Union friendship and also uneasy relations between India and China and the closeness between India and Vietnam.



Thus, the divergent stands on the issue of Cambodia caused enormous gulf between India and ASEAN. Interestingly, the same Cambodian issue which marred the growing trend of understanding and friendship between India and ASEAN helped India to regain ASEAN confidence. India associated itself deeply with the Cambodian peace parleys so as to bring the Cambodian crisis to an early end. Throughout the period of peace talks India was in close touch with the ASEAN countries. In fact, when the Cambodian conflict was raging Thai Premier Prem Tinsulanond urged India to use its “immense prestige and moral influence” in resolving the Cambodian problem. India rose to the expectations of ASEAN. India’s benign role, in bringing the vexed Cambodian issue to an end with the signing of the Paris accords in 1991, was duly acknowledged and appreciated by the ASEAN states.³⁵ Thus the stage was set for India-ASEAN partnership.

LOOK EAST POLICY

India’s post Cold War foreign policy towards Southeast Asia underwent a strategic shift. India’s outward looking policies and economic reforms lurch of facilitated the engagement of New Delhi’s economic engagement of ASEAN nations.³⁶ It was India made a determined bid for renewing and revitalizing the traditional linkages with the countries of Southeast Asia. Though diplomatic and economic efforts were made by India to join ASEAN since 1987, these countries expressed reservations due to India’s support to the Heng Samrin regime.³⁷ Moreover, they were apprehensive that Pakistan would also seek membership of ASEAN in which case, ASEAN would become a platform for a spat between India and Pakistan. Nonetheless convinced of the veracity of Indian economic reforms in 1992 ASEAN accorded India the status of “Sectoral Dialogue Partner” with focus on tourism, commerce, investments, and science and technology. India sharpened it’s a focus on ASEAN countries by launching the Look East policy.³⁸ In the second half of 1992 a new position of Secretary was created in the Ministry of External Affairs to pay due attention to the countries lying to its east. In October 1995 Secretary for Economic Affairs in the Ministry of External Affairs declared that ASEAN is at the heart of India’s reworked strategy. Due to New Delhi’s vigorous efforts, India was given the status of a “Full Dialogue Partner” of ASEAN in 1995 and membership of ARF in 1996.

From 1992 onwards, successive Indian Prime Ministers visited these countries regularly accompanied by large business delegations. In 1992 Narasimha Rao visited Indonesia very



next year he paid official visits to Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and South Korea. Indian Prime Minister again visited Singapore in 1994 and Malaysia in 1995. These visits provided many opportunities to interact with policy makers in the Southeast Asian countries. In 1996 India participated for the first time in the Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) of ASEAN in Jakarta and in the meeting of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which deliberates on the security and political concerns of the Asia Pacific.³⁹ India tried after 1999 for a summit level relationship with ASEAN. At the 7th ASEAN Summit, held in November 2001, at Darussalam (Brunei), the organization decided to upgrade its interaction with India to Summit level; India signed the Treaty of Amity of Cooperation in 2003. India was chosen to be part of the East Asian Summit (EAS) ever since its inception in 2005. New Delhi has also inked bilateral free trade agreements with Singapore and Thailand and joined sub-regional groupings like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi - Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong - Ganga Cooperation (MGC). In May 2009 ASEAN and India have also concluded an ASEAN – India Free Trade Agreement in Goods (AIFTA). All these development trends clearly signify the realization of the importance of the each other.

The first phase of the Look East Policy focused on developing commercial relations and institutional links with ASEAN and in the second phase India aimed at political partnership, physical connectivity through road and rail links, free trade arrangements, and defense cooperation. During this phase India strived to build strategic partnership by holding joint naval exercises called MILAN with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, and also with Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam. These annual naval exercises symbolize regular interaction and cooperation between the navies of India and the Southeast Asian countries.⁴⁰ India also signed MoUs on defense cooperation, provided training to MiG-29 fighter pilots, supplied spare parts and services these air crafts.⁴¹ India thus initiated measures to develop cooperation at the ASEAN-level and at the level of individual countries of Southeast Asia.

THE BIST-EC TO BIMSTEC, THE BAY OF BENGAL COMMUNITY

Another dimension of India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia was the creation of BIMSTEC --The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Historically, the communities and nations around Bay of Bengal had interacted



and established multifarious strands of relationships. Like many other post-coldwar initiatives, a new sub-regional grouping called BIST-EC --Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand-Economic Cooperation was formed on June 6, 1997 in Bangkok. The main areas of cooperation included cooperation in trade, investment, industry, transportation, infrastructure, science and technology, human resources development, energy, fisheries, agriculture, natural resources, and tourism.⁴² With the admission of Myanmar on December 22, 1997, the grouping came to be known as BIMST-EC-- Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand-Economic Cooperation. Again this name was re-christened to be BIMSTEC i.e. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. At the conclusion of the first Summit its members Elaborating the policy, objectives and areas of cooperation, BIMSTIC members said at the conclusion of their first summit thus:

Convinced, that the geographical location of our countries and our rich natural and human resources provide a sound basis for mutually beneficial cooperation; Recognized, that the pluralist nature of our societies, our shared cultural heritage and the rich diversity of languages, arts, crafts and traditions provide ample opportunity for multi-dimensional cooperation within our region; Resolved, to foster a sense of community that will lead to the economic and social, development of the entire region. Agreed, to explore the expansion of BIMSTEC cooperation into the areas of culture, education, public health, protection of biodiversity and traditional knowledge, rural community development, small and medium scale enterprise, construction, environment, information and communications technology, biotechnology, weather & climate research, natural disaster mitigation & management. Agreed, to create a BIMSTEC free trade area, year-long Plan of Action on tourism, establishment of BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce...⁴³

The BIMSTEC has indirectly met the aspirations of some of the smaller countries of South Asia which have been clamoring for a large economic and political space in a world of rapid global integration. This can be seen another Indian effort to link itself with the heart of ASEAN through Myanmar and Thailand. As China and Pakistan do not belong to the Bay of Bengal Community, India is in a more comfortable position to play unchallenged leader of this formation. The BIMSTEC represents 1.3 billion people comprising 21 per cent of the world population, a combined GDP of 750 billion US dollars and has the potential of 43 to 59 billion dollar trade annually.



THE MEKONG-GANGA COOPERATION

The shared histories and geographical contiguity with India accord a strategic value to the area lying between the peninsular region of India and China comprising Mekong basin countries. For India, Mekong-riparian countries provide a strategic accessibility to reach the heartland of Asia-Pacific. These countries are relatively poor and underdeveloped than other countries of Southeast Asia. As Indian economy was registering spectacular growth, its entrepreneurs had fairly good chances of profitable investment and economic cooperation there. For the fulfillment of this objective, India announced at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in July 2000 the formation of a new cooperative forum with five of its eastern neighbours –Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam- called the Mekong- Ganga Cooperation (MGC) forum.⁴⁴

The MGC aims at increasing cooperation in tourism, culture and education, transportation and communication. The six countries also undertook to develop transportation networks including the East-West Corridor project and the trans-Asian highway. This is India's major cooperative venture in its Southeast Asian neighborhood after the end of Cold war which offers immense scope to create linkages with the Mekong countries by connecting them to the Indian Northeast. This organization also has the potential to counterbalance China in the region. By exploiting the historically driven natural connectivity, India has added powerful cultural dimension to its economic diplomacy by encouraging business contacts between the people residing on the banks of Mekong and Ganga. These over-land linkages have the potential to provide new opportunity to speed up economic development of India's northeast. One of the projects called the Asian Highway Project under MGC is expected to link up Singapore with New Delhi via Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Ho Chin Minh City (formerly Saigon), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Bangkok (Thailand), Vientiane (Laos), Chiang Mai (Thailand), Yangon and Mandalay, Kalemmyo (Myanmar), Tamu, Dhaka and Calcutta (India). India has already taken up the building of road linking Tamu (Manipur) to Kalemmyo, a key communication junction in the center of Myanmar.⁴⁵ This connectivity will prove fruitful in promoting border trade between India's northeast with the adjoining Myanmar and the Mekong region countries. Mekong Ganga Cooperation Initiative has therefore become a pillar of India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in recent years.



RELEVANCE OF NEW SOUTHEAST ASIA POLICY

India's foreign policy has undergone a sea change in the post-Cold War period. If India wants to keep the pace of its economic development, it has to be alive to the changing economic world order and the process of Asian economic integration. India's policy to look east is relevant to develop closer cooperation with Southeast Asia as well as the emerging Asia-Pacific economic hub. From security perspective too, the policy is quite important and relevant as it can take care of its strategic concerns about the security of sea lanes and the environment around its maritime borders. This will not be possible without the active support and involvement of the countries of Southeast Asia. India can counter China which as an economic and military power is fast building bridges in India's northeastern neighborhood.

According to the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, "Look East policy was a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy."⁴⁶ Addressing the North East Council on April 12, 2005 in New Delhi, he further added.

Now, when the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, stated that "A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, 'The Look East Policy' has become 'Act East' policy."⁴⁷ During the twelfth ASEAN Summit, has leaped the Indo-South East relations to a new era.

It is therefore to conclude that different measures India has taken to expand its relations with the countries of Southeast Asia have been significant and have borne fruits, despite certain constraints of both inherent and induced in nature.

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