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India-ASEAN Relations: The Voyage of Eco-Political Multilateralism

*–Rasmita Sahoo**

Abstract

The intensification of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and India's cooperation has already been shaped upshot with the implementation of the ASEAN-India free trade area. However, Eco-political relations have not been fully examined specially if there are possibilities of potential conflicting policy directions. This paper aims to describe in brief about ASEAN and India's political and meteoric economic relations through the look east policy paradigm. ASEAN was formed in 1967 by the ten countries of South East Asia. It began with Five South East Asian nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) and later on Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam joined. Coupled with a number of virtues like enormous size, huge population, convenient geo-strategic location progressive military might, meteoric economic growth inspired various states together with South-east Asian States to devise collaborative ties with India. India-ASEAN relations are reflection of the complementariness of interests between the two entities. As India chooses embark on a benign projection of its rising power, it has become vital to chart a foreign policy commensurate with its ambitions in Asia and the world per se.

Keywords: ASEAN, India, Eco-political, Paradigm, Free trade, Look east policy, Meteoric economic growth, Geo-strategic.

Introduction

With the new dispensation of Narendra Modi's government, India's involvement with the ASEAN is credible to grow further. The craze of power so as to play a dominant role in the eco-political management of the world has become so intense these days that countries are not leaving any stone unturned. How India could have underprivileged to hold an ally with ASEAN?

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is an alliance promoting economic and political cooperation by fostering dialogue among its ten members:

* *Ph D Senior Research Scholar (SRF), Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia (A Central University), New Delhi.*

Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEAN is becoming a major economic powerhouse in the region, having signed free-trade agreements (FTA) with China, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, and Korea. The end of the Cold war marked a turning point in India's association with ASEAN. The resolution of the Cambodian conflict brought about a change in Indo-ASEAN relations. With the launching of India's economic liberalization policy in 1991, ASEAN came to be identified as being pivotal to India's policy in the Asia-Pacific region. The changed global circumstances forced India to adapt itself to the new emerging world order. India began to renovate its foreign policy and it was felt that ASEAN could be much help to India in this exercise. India extended support to ASEAN's efforts in establishing peace in Cambodia and to bring the warring factions to the negotiating table at the Jakarta Informal Meet and later cooperated with the UN Transitional Authority in its effort to bring peace to Cambodia.

"Before embarking on the analysis of the rationale of India's multilateral adventure with ASEAN, it would be imperative to discuss briefly the basic doctrine of multilateralism. The concept multilateralism refers to the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of these or more states through ad hoc arrangement or by means of institutions."[1] India–ASEAN relations reached a new height on 20-21 December 2012 during the commemorative summit celebrating twenty years of dialogue partnership and ten years of summit partnership. The summit ended with the termination of an economic agreement, an impressive India-ASEAN car rally, an emphasis on achievement of multi-pronged connectivity between the two regions, and strength of mind to work together towards building a stable and peaceful regional order. Themed on its path-breaking announcement of 2004 India-ASEAN Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity – the commemorative summit marked a qualitative jump in the tone and tenor of India-ASEAN relations.

Look East Policy

India's major presence in the global arena can be evidently discerned from its dynamic foreign policy orientation as well as from a number of enterprising collaborative ventures with other nations. In the early nineties the then Indian PM P.V Narasimha Rao started a new phenomenon as the Look-East Policy in Indian foreign policy paradigm. The Look East Policy of India, framed by the Narashimha Rao government in the early nineties, is a substantial manifesto of India's focused foreign policy orientation towards South East Asia, an immensely resourceful and flourishing region. The economy of South East Asia is a virtually untapped market which is up for grabs by major regional economic entities such as India, China, Europe or the USA. India's compatibility with the South East Asian countries with regard to better regional cooperation lies in the fact of its abstinence from exhibiting he gemonistic ambitions, making it more benign towards South East Asia. The East Policy is expected to usher a new era of development for the north-east through network of pipelines, connectivity, communication and trade.

In promoting "Look East Policy" India feels that the greater involvement of India's north-east is needed. The immediate neighbours, South East Asia is one of the arenas where Indian and Chinese have taken interest in terms of strategy, trade and economy.

Therefore all the more it becomes more important for India to engage ASEAN countries in more positive way. While interacting with ASEAN, India has paid particular attention to one of the ASEAN member countries-Myanmar. There had been increasing realization on the part of India's policy makers to develop physical connect between North-eastern India and south-east Asia. Myanmar stands as a hub as well as kingpin linking northeast India and ASEAN. Myanmar's open–door policy after the political change in 2011 gave more opportunity to expend India-ASEAN strategic cooperation. For India, it is a pre-requisite to utilize the opportunities provided by its "Look East Policy". As a result, India has initiated certain bilateral projects and also became a part to some multilateral projects, aimed at enhancing connectivity between north-east India and South East Asia. In "Look East Policy" and Thailand's Look West Policy, India–Myanmar–Thailand trilateral highway project will promote border trade and people-to–people connectivity on tourism in the region. The project is accepted to go under Myanmar-India strategic partnership in order to implement ASEAN-India's cooperation by 2016.

Economic Dimensions

In today's world, economic relations cannot be strengthened without adequate focus being given to trade in services and investment. Over the past two years, ASEAN and India have tried to engage for an early resolution of the issues that would help move the negotiations on services and investment onto the fast track. An early conclusion of agreements in both these areas could provide the wherewithal for getting the trade in goods off the ground. In economic scenario since the early 1990's and India's own march towards economic liberalization has compelled India to focus on strengthened and comprehensive relationship with ASEAN countries. Moreover, ASEAN and Indian economies are complementary to each other. ASEAN is export-driven while India is a service sector driven economy. "Trade between India and ASEAN was worth about $76 billion in 2012-13, making ASEAN the 4th largest trading partner of India after EU, USA and China. Both sides have set a target of increasing this $100 billion by 2015."[2.]

In the post-Cold War period, and particularly since the latter part of the 1990s, India's relations with all the major powers, especially the US, have shown considerable improvement. There is now greater mutual understanding of inter-linkages between economic, security and strategic interests of India on the one hand and major powers on the other. There are also hopeful signs that economic imperatives are gradually becoming much more important in driving relations on the Indian sub-continent, together with between India and Pakistan (Solomon 2004). As India demonstrates its economic and technological capacities to compete in the 21st century, it is becoming an important player in shaping the future political and security environment in Asia. Resilience and stability of India's political and other institutions and harmony between its decentralized economic and political arrangements also have the potential to contribute to India's competitive strength. ASEAN's population is about half that of India's population of over one billion. The most populous country in ASEAN viz. Indonesia, has about a fifth of India's population. However, ASEAN's per capita income in current prices at US $1,230 is nearly two and a half times that of India. The gap may narrow somewhat overtime but is not likely to reverse in the foreseeable future.

Asia is assuming new responsibilities commensurate with its capacities. Political and economic structures are evolving globally, and in a more pronounced manner, in East Asia. Under these circumstances ASEAN and India will have to remain natural partners in defining their perspective and addressing their common requirements of economic growth and prosperity. On the other hand, "ASEAN countries were more comparative in agriculture, textiles and auto components, electronics, and this was the major concern for India. As a safeguard measure, India submitted a list of around 1400 products at HS-6 digit level as the negative list. Those products accounted for about 42% of the total exports of ASEAN to India. In view of assessing the trajectory of India's economic journey with ASEAN, both at the organizational and bilateral to multilateral levels, prospects and challenges strewn on the alleyway have been predominant. In the field of trade, India and ASEAN are dependent on each other because of the availability of various goods in their respective spheres."[3]

The ASEAN region has a great quantity of natural resources and significant technological skills. These provide a natural base for the amalgamation between ASEAN and India in both trade and investment. India is also improving its relations with the support of other policy decisions like offers of lines of credit, better connectivity through air (open skies policy), rail and road links. "If truth be told, the first ASEAN-India Summit (2002) established the rationale of India's enhanced multilateralism on the basis of the immediate advantages that accrued from such arrangements, particularly for geographically contiguous regions. Additionally, it provided the Indian domestic industry and agriculture a valuable learning period, before it was exposed to the far greater competition of global free trade."[4]

Political Dimensions

In the political sphere, "India has been dynamically participating in various conclusive meetings under dialogue and cooperation frameworks initiated by ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN post Ministerial conferences (PMC)+1 sessions, ASEAN Economic Ministers+1Consultations, the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting plus (ADMM PLUS) and expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. ASEAN member states and India are also involved in Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which facilitate contribute to enhancing regional dialogue and accelerating regional integration. India initially was seen as a champion of decolonization in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s as head of the Non aligned Movement (NAM). However, with the signing of an indo-Soviet Peace and friendship Cooperation Treaty, relations between India and ASEAN took slump. Ideologically differences precluded close political knot from developing, throughout most of the Cold War."[5]

The India-ASEAN relationship has entered its third decade. India became an oral partner of ASEAN in 1992, a dialogue partner in 1996 and a summit level partner at Phnom Penh in 2002. At the Bali Summit in 2003, India and the ASEAN signed the Instrument of Accession to the treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South East Asia, a framework agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and a joint declaration for cooperation to combat international terrorism. "During the Vietnam conflict, India

supported North Vietnam due to its strong opposition to the United States. Consequently, the Cold War rivalry between the two super powers also influenced India's relations with Southeast Asia. At the time, India had reasonable relations with Malaysia and was amongst the first countries to grant diplomatic status to Singapore in 1965."[6]

In December 2012, New Delhi hosted the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit to mark 20 years of its association with the grouping and 10 years of its summit level partnership. It also marked the two decades of India's "Look East Policy" and that of its economic liberalization process. The India-ASEAN relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership at the 2012 meeting. The leaders also adopted a vision statement or a blueprint for the future India ASEAN-cooperation. ASEAN and India have now intensified their political dialogue to add a new dimension to mutually beneficial economic and commercial relationship. Reflective of India's interest in intensifying its engagement with ASEAN, both sides are in the process of jointly developing an India-ASEAN 2020. "The institutionalization of ASEAN India relation came with the first ASEAN-India Summit in Phnom Penh on 5th 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."[7]

Southeast Asia and India are by no means strangers. Their civilizational and cultural links date back thousands of years and are still visible today in Southeast Asian architecture, food, pop culture and religion. But ideological differences precluded the development of close political ties for most of the Cold War. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to engage Southeast Asia via the "Look East Policy", as part of a broader effort to liberalize the country's economy in an increasingly globalized world. "At the 2003 ASEAN summit in Bali, ASEAN leaders declared Bali concord second calling for establishment of an ASEAN community comprising ASEAN security community, ASEAN economic community and ASEAN socio-cultural community."[8] In the post-Cold war period ASEAN institutionalized the cooperation in the security field through ASEAN regional forum (ARF) which is modelled ASEAN post-Ministerial Conferences with its dialogue partners.

India's effort to align with ASEAN was not an easy task. "India close relationship and friendship agreement signed with Soviet Union and the establishment of Communist rules in some of the countries of the ASEAN were worrying these nations. Opposed to the SU and the communist nations in general and close to the US branded the ASEAN as pro West and this was the reason that India turned down to have dialogue with it twice in 1975 and 1980."[9]

Conclusion

ASEAN-India relations as what they are in the present day have come a long way. The 1990s have seen a higher interaction along with firm measures to amalgamate and cooperate in the economic as well as political spheres. It wouldn't be wrong to say that India-ASEAN relationship is one of the most defining partnerships of the century and is pivotal to both, in achieving their goals and objectives. No wonder,

India –ASEAN connection is one of the fastest growing relationships for partnership with a vision for peace, shared progress and prosperity.

Though ASEAN is known to endorse pan-southeast Asianism, it is an outward-looking organization; hence Pan- Asianism comes natural to it. It wouldn't be wrong to see its expansion in the future. Its success would be a template for the entire east. The idea that the problems of Asia 'have their solution in Asia' is again finding a strong ground in the region. ASEAN is a fine example of an Asianized regional organization. It has to emerge victorious, for the rise of a truly Asian Century. Having accomplished a fair degree of political consensus on the need for economic reforms, India is now vigorously pursuing its vision to become a developed nation by the year 2020 (Kalam 2004). This requires the country to preserve an annual average growth rate of 8% per–annum as envisaged in India's 10th Five Year Plan (2002-07) 26. As India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2020 continues to be translated into domestic reform initiatives and leads to its further integration with the world economy, the opportunities for ASEAN and other economic partners for mutually beneficial economic cooperation are expected to multiply. Hence, ASEAN per se is aware of the need to further diversify its engines of growth from the traditional growth engines of the US, Japan and more recently, China, to India as well.

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