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India's Diplomatic Triumph in ASEAN

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Abstract

In today's world, ASEAN has matured into a leading economic block with strong trade and political relations with almost all nations and regional organizations. India's economic liberalization and 'Look East Policy' introduced in the year of 1991, heralded a new beginning in India-ASEAN relations. Besides, India has also given its effort to maintain mutual bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries in particular from time to time. In fact, at the broader regional level, India has continued to make a strong case for its growing relevance in the Southeast Asian regional security and economic architecture. Both India and ASEAN hold mutual diplomatic approach to each other with regard to the fulfillment of their respective national interests. India's "Look East Policy" is now at the stage of "Act East Policy". At this time, India is in a position where it has to act, take part in the affairs of Southeast Asia region and cooperate with the ASEAN states more actively and effectively in all aspects with the goal of emerging as a major global power in the present world. Therefore, India should pursue and conduct its foreign policy more diplomatically in relation with ASEAN, to serve its own national interest and also at the same time to establish its influence in the Southeast Asia region, and in future India's diplomatic triumph in establishing foreign relations with the major global powers will depend to a large extent on preparing, widening and strengthening various fields of common interest with the nation-states of Southeast Asia and other regions.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Southeast Asian States, Bilateral relations, National interest, Act East Policy, Diplomatic triumph.

Introduction:

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967 in Bangkok with five member-states, has matured into a leading economic block in today's world with strong trade and political relations with almost all nations and regional organizations. **Currently, ASEAN has 10 member-states, but has developed a very elaborate partnership mechanism – like ASEAN-10, ASEAN-3, ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), EAS (East Asian Summit), etc.-to maintain closer links with the rest of the world.** The 10 members of ASEAN are: Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore (the five founding states in 1967), Brunei (joined in 1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos, Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999). It is to be observed here that China, Japan and South Korea, the stronger economies of the region, are not members of the ASEAN; but these nations comprise an integral part of the ASEAN-3 mechanism. The ASEAN Secretariat is located in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Relations between India and ASEAN:

Historically, India had closer relations with the nations of the South-East Asian region. After independence, India started reaching out to the South-East Asian countries during the 1950's by supporting the Indonesian struggle for independence and involving itself in the Indo-China crisis in the 1960's. It also signed bilateral friendship treaties with Indonesia, Philippines and Myanmar and consolidated its bilateral and diplomatic relations with these nations. However, during the 1970's and the 1980's, India and the ASEAN were not so eager to develop close ties, because relations between these two were adversely affected by Cold War political calculations.

India's economic liberalization in 1991 and India's 'Look East Policy', introduced in the same year, heralded a new beginning in India-ASEAN relations. India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992. The sectors of partnership were trade, investment, tourism and science and technology. Mutual interests in wider partnership led ASEAN to accord India a full dialogue partner status during the Fifth ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in December 1995 (effective since early 1996), and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1996.

In the new century, relations took an upward turn with the hosting of the First ASEAN-India bilateral summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in November 2002 and since 2002 regular bilateral summits between India and ASEAN have been taking place. These summits have been instrumental in strengthening relations between ASEAN and India.

From a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1992, to a Full Dialogue Partner in 1996, to the First ASEAN-India Summit in 2002, to the Commemorative Summit in 2012, to the latest Fourteenth Summit in 2016, ASEAN-India relations have come a long way and gradually got strengthened. **In this evolutionary path, the contribution of the economic factors behind a strong relationship could never be ignored.** In the Financial year (FY) 2001-2002, the total volume of ASEAN-India trade was US \$ 7.84 billion. In FY 2014-2015, it went up to US \$ 76.53 billion. It showed that there was more than ten-fold increase in ASEAN-India trade in 13 years. Besides, the ASEAN-India FTA has also added dynamism in ASEAN-India economic relations.

India's bilateral relations with some of the ASEAN states:

At the same time, India has also given its effort to maintain mutual bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries in particular from time to time.

In the last few years, the **relationship between India and Indonesia** have been developed widely with strong emphasis on economic and security issues. India, with its "Look East Policy", decided to substantially enhance its presence in the South East Asia region while Indonesia took the lead in bringing India closer to the ASEAN. At present, economic engagement between the two nations is growing rapidly. Indonesia is an important source of energy and raw materials for India while Jakarta now also views India as a major source of military hardware. It was in 2005 that the two states signed the strategic partnership agreement and in 2006 a defense cooperation agreement was announced. Negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement have already begun. Being the most terrible military power in Southeast Asia, Indonesia can effectively work with India in ensuring safety in the region and tackle non-traditional security challenges in the Indian Ocean. **Both have a**

vested interest in ensuring that China's hegemony in the region does not go uncontested. Besides, Indonesia's role has been and will remain critical in supporting India's engagement with its Southeast Asian neighbours.

Bilateral ties between India and Vietnam have been strengthened in recent years with a focus on enhancing cooperation in regional security issues and trade. With the rise of China in recent years, their relations have become strategic in orientation. The signing of the India-ASEAN FTA and India's recognition of Vietnam's market economy status have boosted economic ties between them. **Vietnam has played a very significant role for India in the ASEAN as well as India's bid for the Permanent membership in the UN Security Council.** The two states proclaimed a **Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation in 2003** in which they considered a program of creating an **"Arc of Advantage and Prosperity" in Southeast Asia** and have initiated a strategic dialogue since 2009. To give strong economic foundation to the bilateral ties between India and Vietnam, bilateral trade has been given a boost and it is expected to touch the US \$15 billion mark by 2020.

There is a significant convergence between the two nations in the defense sector also. Vietnam has sought Indian help in the modernization of its military hardware while India's exploration interests near the Vietnamese coasts have been threatened by China's diplomatic offensive. Therefore, **both New Delhi and Hanoi have significant determined attitude in ensuring the region's sea-lane security and preventing sea piracy while they also share concerns about Chinese access to the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.**

Indian strategic interests demand that Vietnam emerge as a major regional power in Southeast Asia and India is well placed to help Hanoi achieve that objective. It has been argued in Indian strategic circles that **just as China has used states in India's periphery to contain India, New Delhi should build states like Vietnam as strategic pressure points against China to counter it.** A common approach on the emerging balance of power is now developing with India and Vietnam both keen on reorienting their ties with the United States as their concerns about China rise increasingly.

Relations between Malaysia and India have been traditionally strong. **Malaysia has supported Indian presence in the ASEAN and in 2001 also accepted the Indian position on Kashmir that the issue should be resolved only through bilateral negotiations.** A close defense relationship between the two states has been emerged over the years with joint military exercises, training of defense personnel and trade in military equipment.

The two nations are focused on giving impetus to bilateral economic cooperation and liberalizing their respective investment regimes to facilitate greater mutual FDI as well as on strengthening their security partnership, by exploring collaborative defense projects and enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism through information sharing and the establishment of a joint working group.

Myanmar has also developed its relationship with India in its own way. During his visit to India in 2011, the President of Myanmar Thein Sein sought greater Indian investment in Myanmar's energy sector even as the two nations agreed to expand cooperation in oil and gas exploration, open border trade, and speed up construction of natural gas pipelines. **While India is under pressure from the West to demonstrate democratic credentials, Myanmar's first real democratic election in November 2015 is likely to give India a larger strategic space to maneuver and, compared to Beijing, New Delhi will be a more useful and effective partner for Naypyidaw as it tries to further improve its relations with the West.**

Therefore, **at the broader regional level, India has continued to make a strong case for its growing relevance in the Southeast Asian regional security and economic architecture.** India's FTA with ASEAN, signed in 2009, commits New Delhi to cut import tariffs on 80 percent of the commodities it trades with ASEAN, with the goal of placing itself in an important position in the world's most economically dynamic region. **Having signed a FTA for goods in 2010, India and ASEAN finalized the FTA in services and investments in 2014. Moreover, India's trade with ASEAN is expected to double by 2022.**

Mutual diplomatic approach between India and ASEAN:

Both India and ASEAN (the Southeast Asian states) hold mutual diplomatic approach to each other with regard to the fulfillment of their respective national interests. India is emerging as a serious player in the Asian strategic landscape as the smaller states in East Asia reach out to it for trade, diplomacy and potentially, as a key regional balancer. States in South and Southeast Asia too remain keen on a more proactive Indian role in the region. Because, the states in China's vicinity are now seeking to expand their strategic space by reaching out to other regional and global powers. **Smaller states in the region are now looking to India to act as a balancer in view of China's growing influence while larger states see India as an effective and powerful engine for regional growth. On the other hand, India also wants to curtail the growing influence and hegemony of China in this region by taking strategically the ASEAN (Southeast Asian) states into its own confidence.**

Therefore, in order to realize its full potential and meet the region's expectations, India must perform a more convincing job of emerging as a credible strategic partner of the region. Neither India nor the regional states in Southeast Asia have incentive to define their relationship in opposition to China, but they are certainly interested in energizing their ties with other states to gain benefits from China and bring a semblance of equality in their relationships.

Today, the rapid rise of China in Asia and beyond is the main central point even as New Delhi is seeking to expand economic integration and interdependence with the region. India is also developing strong security linkages with the region and trying to actively promote and participate in regional and multilateral initiatives. At present, New Delhi's ambitious policy in the Southeast Asia is aimed at significantly increasing its regional profile.

Factors behind India's recent growing engagement with ASEAN – present scenario:

November, 2017 marks the historic durability of India's more than 24 years engagement with ASEAN. The question at this time is not just maintaining relational network and supportive role playing in Southeast Asia but taking decisive stance in favour of reducing the gaps that we have so far in our outreach so that more strong and effective planning of ever closer engagement could be pursued, driving away hitherto hesitations sustained by Chinese perception that they can be offended by India's taking lead in the region.

Now, India is more confident and courageous than ever before in establishing further expanded and strengthened relationship with ASEAN and this confidence is derived partly from her military capability

show off at Doklam, from her continued economic reforms to make the home front more investment and business friendly and central government's economic measures of demonetization which have strengthened the fiscal system and further demonstrates the strong political will to curb the parallel black market.

India's "Look East Policy", now at the stage of "Act East Policy" has been strengthened by our political efforts to strike successful deal with some important insurgent groups in India's northeast like the NSCN IM. **At this time, India is in a position where it has to act, take part in the affairs of Southeast Asia region and cooperate with the ASEAN states more actively and effectively in all aspects with the goal of emerging as a major global power in the present world.**

Besides, India's growing close defense collaboration with the United States particularly since 2003 – '04 may be another major boosting factor that strategize our close nexus with this regional grouping because here also US has wanted to play greater role to counteract growing Chinese influence. According to the experts, China can outpace US economy by 2025 and by 2030 it is expected to outspend US militarily. The lightning speed China is advancing it is likely to take the most of the East Asia under its sphere of military influence. So, increasingly Southeast Asia could turn into a real battlefield between US and its allies like Japan, North Korea on one hand and China and its allies like Malaysia, Thailand and others on the other hand.

Therefore, it depends on India's matured tact and insightful approach as how to throw itself and move cautiously avoiding unnecessary conflicts but to secure its own national interest by maintaining strategically better diplomatic relationship with both USA and China and also at the same time by winning the hearts of Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries, thus assisting them with defense and economic aids and more importantly by ensuring and delivering the promise of continuous engagement as a benevolent partner and moderator in times of crisis and increasing polarization, in order to curb the growing Chinese influence in the region.

This fact may be arguably established by referring the recent example of Rohingya refugee (migration) crisis where more than 600,000 Rohingya Muslim minority people have crossed the border and fled to Bangladesh since August 25, 2017, driven out by a **military counter-insurgency clearance operation in Buddhist-majority Myanmar's Rakhine state, which the UN has called "ethnic cleansing"** (The Telegraph report dated 16th November, 2017).

At the pick of this crisis, the most welcome and noticeable event was Bangladesh's sensitive stance to accept the refugees aiming to encounter this crisis. Here, India can also and should play an effective role to overcome this crisis by providing economic or any other type of assistance.

During a two-day visit to Bangladesh, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi on 18th November, 2017, urged Bangladesh and Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya refugee crisis through bilateral negotiations instead of an international initiative. He also added, **"China supports resolving the crisis peacefully, bilaterally with mutual consultation between Bangladesh and Myanmar."** A statement from Bangladesh said that when the issue of displaced Myanmar nationals was raised, **Wang said China would help resolve the issue including economic help** (The Telegraph report dated 19th November, 2017). Moreover, China called for a ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine state so that Rohingya Muslim refugees can return from Bangladesh, proposing a three-stage approach to

the crisis in the **Asia-Europe Meeting held in Myanmar on 20th November, 2017**(The Telegraph report dated **21st November, 2017**).

The United States of America on 22nd November, 2017 labeled the Myanmar military operation against the Rohingya population “ethnic cleansing” and threatened targeted sanctions against those responsible for what it described as “*horrendous atrocities*”. The US shifted its stance in part to raise pressure on Myanmar’s military and civilian leaders, who have shared power for the past two years under an uneasy arrangement after decades of military rule, to address the crisis (The Telegraph report dated **23rd November, 2017**).

These newspaper reports reveal the fact that both China and USA are trying to expand their influences in the Southeast Asia region by manipulating the issue of *Rohingya refugee crisis*. So, in this context, it can be said that, **India should pursue and conduct its foreign policy more diplomatically in relation with ASEAN, to serve its own national interest and also at the same time to establish its influence in the Southeast Asia region.**

Future prospect of India-ASEAN relations:

There is little doubt that ASEAN-India relations have matured in the recent years. But a lot more needs to be done to strengthen this relation further. Both sides must engage continuously in widening the basis of their relationship. **Tourism, educational and cultural exchange programmes, information sharing to address traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including transnational crimes and to combat ‘International Terrorism’ etc. have a huge potential for development cooperation and these are some of the areas, which require further closer cooperation between India and ASEAN.**

However, they also need to show their commitment more for stronger relations and this would depend to a large extent on how both India and ASEAN perceive their shared interests in the region. India saw the need to engage ASEAN in order to increase trade and investment flows and to check the rising influence of China in ASEAN, particularly Myanmar which shares a land border with India. On the ASEAN side, **India’s growing economic strength, its status as a real nuclear weapon state, and its readiness to engage all players in the Asia-Pacific would offer not only new economic opportunities for ASEAN, but India’s active involvement in the region would provide additional driving space for ASEAN in dealing with the other major powers.**

Conclusion:

Therefore, in conclusion it may be said that, with its emerging economic status, India must learn to live in multi-lateral engagements. **In the recent ASEAN, we have seen how a plan has been discussed between US, Japan, Australia, India Quadrilateral as a safeguard or restriction to Chinese maritime advance in Indian Ocean.** While this is an emerging Equation, India needs cautious stepping because **ideally India’s interests would serve if the region remains stable and peaceful and in future India’s diplomatic triumph in establishing foreign relations with the major global powers will depend to a large extent on preparing, widening and strengthening such fields of common interest with the nation-states of Southeast Asia and other regions.**

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