

The Future of India's Relations with ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

India and ASEAN had robust relations together, after 2014 the relations exalted to new heights when Narendra Modi led government reoriented the Look East policy to Act East Policy. This article discusses how the future between India and Southeast Asia will shape by giving emphasis to the Economy and People to People interaction. It also points out the areas which need immense attention for increased connectivity.

1. Introduction

The emerging narrative on Indo-Pacific as an inclusive concept with ASEAN centrality opens up an extensive future for India-ASEAN relations. Indian policymakers reoriented its foreign policy in the purview of neighbourhood first policy which resulted in up-gradation from Look East to Act East in 2014 and the graph never showed negative growth. India's relations with ASEAN elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012¹ and celebrated their 25 years of dialogue partnership in 2017. In political, economic and socio-cultural realms relations have shown substantiate growth by an increase in trade and enhancement in people to people relations. But never adapted with the practical realities of power dynamics because China's trade with ASEAN is about \$1 trillion as compared with India is only \$80 billion. Southeast Asia, a region which had relations with India from the past should rejuvenate the roots for a prosperous future. The relations between both will foster the rearrangement of the regional power structure. The future relies on 3Cs Culture, Connectivity and Commerce² and also should focus on underexploited areas like Blue Economy, Maritime cooperation, Cybersecurity and disaster relief.

2. The way forward

In the 16th ASEAN-India summit held at Bangkok on November 2019, Indian PM Modi appreciated the collective vision for free and open Indo-Pacific³, there are issues like how ASEAN will balance China. The growing militarization in the South China Sea and breaking borders intentionally by China acts like a bully in the region.

The growing narrative implies that the history of powering Southeast Asia with security and strategy assistance from the west is changing. Here, the role of regional groupings and a comprehensive regional alliance mechanism only can confront hegemony politics. But the Indian silence over the South China Sea (SCS) is creating restraints in nullifying the asymmetry. For keeping up Chinese relations without any harm the intentional Indian silence will downsize the cooperation with ASEAN on Indo-Pacific.

Chinese aggression on several parts of Southeast Asia and SCS littorals such in Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam by

encroaching their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) creates provocation but even the affected states can't act effectively due to Chinese investments in the area.

India invited all the heads of states of 10 ASEAN countries for the republic parade in 2018, showing the shift in Indian foreign policy to give importance to neighbouring states. In the East Asia Summit 2019, Indian PM Narendra Modi announced Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative⁴ to address maritime security across the Indo-Pacific. The Indian proposal was appreciated by Australia and then chair of ASEAN Thailand. The proposal has strategic as well as economic advantages. For enhancing marine security will encourage collective surveillance measures and open Indo-Pacific oceans will have a Balance of Power. Apart from strategic importance, the initiative possesses traits to conserve and sustain marine resources which will enhance research on ecosystems as well as positive exploitation for common good. The proposal also outlines the need for marine transport between the states of Indo-Pacific, the greater role of Andaman and Nicobar Islands got impact here and can act as a hub for Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. But there are challenges too, convincing the East Asian states is the task before India and ASEAN to look upon in the future.

The narrative exalted to a height after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) under the leadership of Japan refurbished in 2017⁵. But India's concern in the future will revolve around the role of Russia in Southeast Asia. Russia provides arms to Vietnam and Malaysia have seen cynical in the purview of New Delhi owing to the fear that of increased militarization in India's neighbourhood.⁶ The future of India-ASEAN and India's act east policy should be formulated upon considering Russian interests in the region. Upgrading Act East to Act Far East which gives concerns for Russia should be in priority for Indian Policymakers on Indo-Pacific domain.

In international stage, India keeps on talking about the need of counter-terrorism measures, in the future, the cumulative arrangements on fighting a war with terrorism will be good for ASEAN for the greater fear of Islamic state which is growing in Southeast Asia.

Cybersecurity will be of paramount importance in the next decade, in the modern era the conventional methods of warfare are being outnumbered, Methods like Hybrid Warfare which is a fusion of conventional and non-conventional warfare strategies used by Russia in seizing Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 shows the changing nature of warfare and can be a threat to Sovereignty of States⁷. In this regard, a combined policy building will mitigate threats in different domains.

3. Trade Matters

The future of India-ASEAN economic relations is promising, from \$75.86 Billion in 2012-13 to \$96.79 in 2018-19 the annual trade growing steadily. Currently, India is the sixth-largest in terms of trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). In future, the major investments expected by ASEAN are Pharmaceuticals, Oil and Gas, Information technology etc. In the 16th ASEAN-India summit, the ASEAN chair stressed for reaching \$ 200 billion trade between both the parties by 2022.⁸ the decision to review the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) in a more adaptive way to facilitate trade much easily is welcoming as it reduces several restrictions.

The main goal to strengthen people-to-people interaction between the states can be done by effective utilization of Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia. In this regard, ASEAN-India think tanks network, Training for ASEAN diplomats in India, exchange programs for parliamentarians are being done by ASEAN and India. Main Indian banks like Andhra Bank, Bank of Baroda are operating with their branches in Thailand and Malaysia.⁹

In the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, the India-CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) business enclave conducted under Indian leadership in May 2018. This shows the Indian interest to invest more in the low-income economies of ASEAN. The FDI inflow from India to ASEAN is growing, 2018 it accounted for \$1.7 Billion¹⁰ and the more open-ended approach of NDA government schemes like Make in India, Invest in India should be promoted more to ASEAN countries by means of diplomacy and soft power, and India should revamp its institutional bureaucratic hurdles and red-tapism. This measures will enhance India's position in Ease of Doing Business Index and can attract more ASEAN companies towards India.¹¹

India also needs to appreciate migration to Southeast Asian countries, as the majority of skilled and non-skilled workers are migrating towards the Middle Eastern region¹². India's has three million Indian citizens over the region¹³ and enhancing migration to these countries will be an added advantage for India to improve more on economic integration and trade.

As digital connectivity is increased, India should invest in Artificial Intelligence (AI) that will help to more on digital connectivity and inclusive growth caters development. A collaborative approach with India's Act East Policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) can yield better connectivity at the same time benefit ASEAN for trade affairs with India.

4. Connectivity

India and ASEAN should focus on the Blue economy in the next decade, for creating more opportunities in business, the abundant natural resources these all can be retrievable if both the parties should act together on issues such as Piracy, Chinese domination, Terrorism, Territorial disputes. If only peace and effective growth the Indian Ocean Region will be sustained.¹⁴

The structuring of ASEAN-India relations relies on how they work on connectivity projects such as trilateral highway which connecting India's North East to Myanmar and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project which is to be completed by 2020 connecting Kolkata to Myanmar. In 2017, the Indian government proposed \$1 Million USD to promote sea, land, air connectivity with ASEAN.¹⁵

The air connectivity between ASEAN and India is increasing by mainly segregating to certain countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Thai Airways top the list¹⁶ due to Indian interests of Thailand tourism. The data shows that about 140 million tourist arrivals reported in India and ASEAN in 2018 which shows a 7 per cent growth.¹⁷ But still, the direct flight connectivity between India and countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia is low. When Indian PM Modi visited Indonesia both the countries in the joint statement cited for more flights between the two. Still, now India has direct flight connectivity only with Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand. In future in need to have direct air connectivity with the rest of the ASEAN countries in order to develop the trade relations more viable.

5. Soft Power

While considering the socio-cultural relations for future the promotion of Yoga and religious tourism should be in main concern. The MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) between India and Cambodia in the restoration of Preah vihar temple in 2018¹⁸ is the latest example of how cultural diplomacy works for building constructive relations. After 2014, Indian PM Narendra Modi was in the journey to internationalize yoga got success even international organizations gave recognition and celebrated International Yoga Day.

All most all ASEAN countries have their own versions of Indian epic Ramayana like Ramakien in Thailand and Phra Lak Phra Ram in Laos¹⁹, so as proposed by scholar's religious tourism can be initiated to connect the societies culturally.

6. Conclusion

India's concept of Diversity and positive pluralism can be used to converge the societies together. In 2019 the joint initiative to promote tourism increased the interaction between peoples. In view of people-to-people relations several measures taken like ASEAN-India University network, youth summits, scholarship to ASEAN students to study in Nalanda University, 1000 PhD scholarships for ASEAN nationals to pursue doctoral studies in the premier institutions like the Indian Institute of technology²⁰ can be seen as the Indian-ASEAN collaborative vision to invest on human capital. Even though both parties needs improvement in connectivity and

commerce, the virtue for a community with mutual benefits will work for a composite inclusive Indo-pacific with Conflict less,

peace driven regional order.

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