

India's Relations with South East Asia from 1947 to 1990

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The entire History of Southeast Asia from the late 1940s onward to 1989-90 is nothing but a proof of the fact that cold war politics engulfed the entire region very badly. All efforts of the newly independent countries of Asia to remain away from it went in vain. Instead of concentrating on strengthening of their newly established political systems and developing their economies which had till now been subjected to colonial exploitation, the countries of the region got caught in some very violent and bloody strife. The animosities so created within the countries of the region have found it hard to be erased.

Talking of India's relations with the region in this period, it becomes very difficult to categorise as pertaining to specific countries as well as to specific organisations. It is all quite overlapping and therefore we would talk about India and the region as a whole. Reference would certainly be made to issues relating to specific countries. A point to be noted, however, is that India had begun its efforts through multilateralism.

India although proclaimed itself to be non-aligned but its tilt towards the Soviet bloc were quite obvious. The then ASEAN Countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Philippines were part of the American alliance. And any move on the part of India was viewed as extension of Communist USSR. India's relations with China also had a great bearing on India's relations with these countries. All these factors apart, a feeling that has continuously lurked in the mind of the countries of the region has been that India also wants to establish itself as regional leader.¹

The Asian Relations Conference organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs in New Delhi from March 23 to April 2, 1947 was the first effort by India in developing relations not only with Southeast Asia but also the rest of Asia (there were delegates from Egypt as well as Japan and Australia, in all twenty six countries had been represented). While the objective of the Conference, to put in the words of Sarojini Naidu, President of the Organizing Committee was

“to provide a cultural and intellectual revival, and social progress in Asia, independent of all questions of internal as well as international politics.”² But as critics say, the conference had also been called “to emphasize the strength of Indian nationalism, and to invite from other countries in Asia the offer of Indian leadership.”³ One thing that can be certainly said about the Indian Foreign Policy at this time that it was very pro-active and not only reactive.

India made its next efforts toward uniting the newly liberated countries of the world by organising the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. It was joined by Indonesia, Myanmar, Ceylon and Pakistan. “In all, 29 countries representing more than half the world's population sent delegates.” The discussions in the conference expressed dissatisfaction about Western countries not consulting the countries of the region in decisions regarding Asia. Other issues around which the discussions moved were tensions between the People's Republic of China and the United States, firmer foundations for China's peaceful relations with themselves and the West, opposition to colonialism, especially French influence in North Africa, and Indonesia's desire to promote its case in the dispute with the Netherlands over western New Guinea (Irian Java). Major deliberations were held about whether Soviet policies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia should be censured along with Western colonialism. It was decided by consensus that “colonialism in all of its manifestations” was condemned, implicitly censuring the Soviet Union, as well as the West. The Chinese Prime Minister Zhou En Lai by his address helped allay fears regarding China. For India, the biggest achievement was the inclusion of Nehru's ‘Panchsheel’ principles alongside the principles of the United Nations Charter in the final Declaration adopted unanimously.⁴

In all one can certainly agree that “India's policy towards Southeast Asia in the early years of independence – from 1947 to mid-1958- was not only dynamic and forward looking, it was also in complete empathy and solidarity-with the hopes and aspirations of Southeast Asian Peoples. Given

¹ Indonesia thinks so of India and its views can be well understood by for e.g. its objections to India's expansion of its naval power. Similar views were echoed in an interview the researcher had with the Indonesian Consulate General Dicky Fabrian in an interview to the researcher on 14 June, 2010 at the Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Mumbai

² Mccallum, J. A., ‘The Asian Relations Conference’, *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol.19, No.2, June, 1947

³ Ibid.

⁴ For Details Please See Encyclopaedia Britannica, eb.com, Bandung Conference, Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/51624/Bandung-Conference>

the world view of Indian nationalist leadership, who viewed the anti-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia as integral and indivisible to India's own struggle for freedom, it was but natural, that even before formal independence, the Interim government convened the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947."⁵

The two Conferences of 1947 and 1955 reflected the strong feeling on the part of the newly liberated countries to keep away from all power politics but unfortunately, all their efforts went in vain.

India was very close to the Indonesian independence movement. Stories of the young Biju Patnaik (later Chief Minister of Orissa) having flown Sukarno and one of his colleagues from Dutch captivity to New Delhi in 1948 is quite well known. Prior to that, the Dutch Government in order to restore colonial rule through armed forces. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru raised the issue of Indonesian independence movement even in the United Nations Security Council. Commenting over Dutch aggression he said, "What has become of the United Nation's charter? "No European country has any business to set its Army in Asia against our people. When it does so, the spirit of New Asia will not tolerate such things."⁶ On Burmese prime minister U Nu's proposal of holding a conference of Asian states in defence of Indonesia, it was decided to organise an International Conference. India became the venue of the International Conference of Indonesia, which was held in New Delhi from January, 20 to 23, 1949. "The Conference condemned the Dutch aggression and demanded the immediate release of the arrested members of the Indonesian government, withdrawal of Dutch troops from Jogjakarta and transfer of power to the United States of Indonesia by January 1, 1950."

President Sukarno and Mrs. Fatmawati were guests of honour at the swearing –in-ceremony of the first President of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1950. President Sukarno on the occasion called upon the people of Indonesia and India to "intensify the cordial relations" that had existed between the two countries "for more than 1000 years". Prime Minister Nehru visited Indonesia in the same year. The two countries signed a 'Treaty of Friendship' in 1951.

India shares a colonial history with Myanmar. Burma had been a part of the British Empire in India till it was separated in 1935. Out of all the South-East Asian countries, geographically Myanmar is the closest. Strategically, it is the

most important of all the S.E. Asian countries because of its proximity to China. Emphasising the importance of Burma for India, V. S. Suryanarayan quotes Sardar K.M. Pannikar, "The defence of Burma is in fact a defence of India. At the time of Burma's independence in 1949, India was quick to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the country. Burma was not ready to accept the mediation offered by the Commonwealth countries when it was faced with the Karen Revolt. But the Burmese Premier U Nu came to New Delhi on Prime Minister Nehru's invitation to hold discussions. India along with Pakistan played an important role to get a loan sanctioned by the Commonwealth Prime Minister's conference in London. India had a major share in this loan. Apart from this, the Government of India gave an additional loan against the rice supplied by Burma. It is a well known fact that a big part of the debt amount that Burma owed to India as a result of separation was waived.

India and Burma signed a treaty of friendship in 1951. The Treaty was for five years and was to remain in force "forever thereafter" if neither side gave notice of its desire to terminate it six months before its expiry.

"The Cold War powers suspected any move towards Asian solidarity as contrary to their strategic moves and interests, and ensured that such moves did not succeed. In fact the whole of Asia got divided along the Cold War lines. The Asian leaders failed to forge a common front to emerge as a powerful balancing force in the global divide due to their economic dependence on the former colonial powers and their inherent political and military vulnerabilities. There were also internal conflicts and insurgencies that became proxy wars in the Cold War ideological divide. The unfolding Asian conflicts, some of which were the continuation of the colonial control in different forms such as in the Indo-China region and others that proved to be persistent (also involving India with Pakistan and China) facilitated the machinations of all those who worked to keep Asia divided."⁷

Even before the Bandung Conference was held, the American-Soviet rivalry had entered Southeast Asia in the form of formation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

The next big initiative was the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement, which held its first meeting in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961. It has been proclaimed time and again that two of the founders Jawaharlal Nehru from India and Sukarno of Indonesia offered a distinct foreign policy worldview that drew on their shared colonial experiences.

⁵ Suryanarayan, V., 'Looking Ahead: India and Southeast Asia in the 1990s', in 'New Perspectives, New Challenges', in Ghoshal, Baladas, (Edited) *India and Southeast Asia, Challenges and Opportunities*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd. (In association with India International Centre), 1996, p.19

⁶ Snapshots from Indonesian History depicting the first period of Indonesian independence at the Sukarno years 1945-1967, Source: <http://www.sukarnoyears.com/317india.htm>

⁷ Muni, S. D., *India's Look-East Policy, The Strategic Dimension*, ISAS Working Paper No.121, Feb.1.2011, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Source: www.isas.nus.edu.sg

They visualised an Asian region that could challenge the Cold War threat perceptions of the two superpowers."⁸

But India and Indonesia fell apart during Sukarno's last years due to their divergent perspectives of the role of the Non-Alligned Movement in an essentially bipolar world, their widely different views regarding the convening of a 'second Bandung Conference' of Afro-Asian states and its prospective membership, the Indonesian leader's perception about his country's role in the Indian Ocean, Jakarta's alignment with Beijing as part of its grand strategy to combat 'imperialism', India's support for the idea of a Malaysian federation and its subsequent tilt in favour of Kuala Lumpur during the period of the konfrontasi and, in retaliation, the Indonesian political and military support to Pakistan in its confrontation over Kashmir, all added up to a relatively tense atmosphere in the bilateral relations between the two countries."⁹ One of the reasons cited for the differences between the two countries was also a personality clash between Nehru and Sukarno. These differences became very apparent when at the Belgrade Summit of the Non-Alligned Movement in 1961. "During the conference Sukarno and Nehru differed over the primary objective of the non-aligned gathering. The former insisted on the anti-colonial line while the latter felt that world peace was the more pressing issue facing the countries. Even during the Fourth Asian games due to non-participation of Israel and Taiwan, an Indian vice president of the Asian games Federation, sought to have the status of the games nullified. This initiative was construed as a personal insult to Sukarno and a national insult to Indonesia. As a consequence Indian embassy was attacked by a rented mob and its participants as well as national flag were booed."¹⁰

Thus, from the sixties onwards as the regional conflicts around India as well as Southeast Asia surface, with the two Superpowers making them all the more grim by supporting opposite sides, all notions of Asian solidarity suffered major blows.

Sukarno sided with China in the 1962 War¹¹ and even demanded on renaming the Indian Ocean as the Indonesian Ocean. Only Malaysia came out in open support of India at the time of Chinese invasion. Even Singapore's support was very formal. It stated merely that it was hopeful that the dispute

would be solved amicably. Even Philippines, South Vietnam and Thailand sympathised but it was just because of their dislike for Chinese communists rather than as friends of India. Laos sympathised with India but did not condemn China. North Vietnam and Cambodia were in support of China due to the Communist connection.¹²

India played a major role in the peace processes in the Indo-China Region. V.K.Krishna Menon was deployed as a special envoy by Nehru in the Geneva Conference held between USA, USSR, France and UK in 1954. The Geneva Agreements brought about the division of Vietnam into North and South. Vietnam vacated Cambodia and Laos and Cambodia emerged as an independent nation. The division of Vietnam was only provisional and elections for unification were to be held within two years. Later on, India was made member of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) "to supervise ceasefire and arrange for elections for the reunification of the two Vietnams."¹³ India played an important role as a member of the ICSC in reducing tensions. Towards the sixties, India moved closer to North Vietnam. In 1970, Lon Nol overthrew the Sihanouk government. South Vietnam with the backing of USA attacked Cambodia and the Vietnam War got extended to the region. India expressed grave concern at the happenings.

The major change also occurred in India-Myanmar relations in the year 1962 when the country was taken over by a military dictator. India and Myanmar gradually drifted apart in the coming years. A major irritant was also the treatment the Indian community received at the hands of the military regime. Burma maintained a neutral position in the Sino-Indian war. The coming years saw Myanmar come under Chinese influence. Moreover, India was committed to the principles of democracy and free governance. It's maintaining closeness with a dictatorial regime did not go down well with its international image. The initial closeness of ties was no longer existent although relations were not totally severed.

Another setback for India was also when the Southeast Asian countries hailed the Chinese nuclear explosions of 1964 over which India was very perturbed.¹⁴

Again at the time of 1965 War the Southeast Asian Countries remained neutral In Indonesia, demonstrations were held outside the Indian Embassy. Some of the political parties in Indonesia even asked President Sukarno to give aid to Pakistan. The differences between India and Indonesia over

⁸ Pant, Harsh V., *Looking Eastward*, Outlook, January 25, 2011, Source: <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?270191>

⁹ Ayoob, Mohammed, 'India, Indonesia, Vietnam: Coincidence of interests' in Ayoob, Mohammed, *India and Southeast Asia, Indian Perceptions and Policies*, Published under the auspices of ISEAS, Singapore, Routledge, 1990.

¹⁰ Jha, Pankaj K., *India-Indonesia Partnership: Perspectives on Security and Stability*, Source: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19229647/IndiaIndonesia-Strategic-Partnership>

¹¹ There is also a view that Indonesia adopted a neutral position. Pankaj Jha in his article quoted earlier says that Indonesia sided with China while Asis Kumar Majumdar says that it took a neutral stand.

¹² Majumdar, Asis Kumar, *A Study of India's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries from 1962-82*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1982, Pp.56-57.

¹³ Reddy C. Ravindranath, *India and Cambodia Perspective of Cooperation, 1954-1991*, Emerald Publishers, 2009

¹⁴ Majumdar, Asis Kumar, *A Study of India's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries from 1962-82*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1982, Pp.56-57.

the Non-Aligned Movement had already been worsened in the 1964 Cairo Conference over Malaysia's admission to the 1965 Afro-Asian Conference. There have also been evidences that Indonesia was about to supply naval assistance to Pakistan in the 1965 India-Pakistan War.¹⁵

After Sukarno, Suharto took up the leadership of Indonesia. Suharto had a clear tilt toward USA and Indonesia went on to join the American camp. It was during Suharto's time that ASEAN was created. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations came into existence by the Bangkok Declaration of 8 August, 1967. All the officially stated purpose of ASEAN was co-operation in the economic, cultural, technological, scientific, administrative field for a peaceful Southeast Asian Community; it was a response to the threat perceived from the Communist states. India had wanted to be a member of the grouping. But "Suharto was less than keen on India was obvious when he cold-shouldered the Indian interest to take part when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was being created in 1967 but found merit in extending the membership to Sri Lanka (which it refused)."¹⁶

The Indo-Pakistan War and the liberation of Bangladesh created further suspicion in the minds of the Southeast Asian Countries who saw it as interference in another country's internal affairs. That India belonged to the Soviet Camp became clear when India signed the treaty of Friendship with Soviet Union in 1971. "By the 1970s, the political gulf further intensified with India and Indonesia drifting towards the Soviet Union and the U.S. respectively as a result there was neither a political meeting point nor economic compatibility."¹⁷

The boundary agreement between India and Burma was signed in 1967. Trade between the two countries declined when China started importing rice from Burma. Although an agreement to promote trade was signed in 1962 but it was not of much help. Burma's withdrawal from the non-aligned summit in Cuba in the year 1969. From here onwards there was a lull in Indo-Burmese relations. During this period it grew close to China. The deposed Prime Minister U Nu being given political asylum by India was a reason of contention. General Ne Win visited India in 1970. In August 1974, a new payment Agreement was signed between the two countries.

Meanwhile the Second Indo-China War came to an end with the establishment of Communist governments in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975. The United States of

America had suffered a major setback in the war before that US-China relations also normalised, the Nixon-Chou-en-Lai 'Shanghai Communiqué' was issued in 1972. This also helped normalisation of relations between the United States of America and the ASEAN countries. Newer power equations were emerging in the region. USSR saw the 'Shanghai Communiqué' as a way to curb Russian influence in the region. But after this China stopped supporting communist insurgencies in the region. In spite of that, the creation of communist regimes created great uneasiness for the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia. Vietnam was the most feared of all. The revolutionary character of the way they had captured power created fear of expansionism. The countries created a sub-region of communism and their support for communist parties in other countries was althmore worrying.¹⁸

While all the other countries gave recognition to the Peoples' Republic of China, Indonesia and Singapore refrained.

The biggest challenge for Indian policy in Southeast Asia was the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea and the consequent Chinese aggression on Vietnam.

There had been grave charges of human rights violations and killing of millions of people against the Pol Pot Regime of Cambodia. Vietnam invaded the country under the pretext of helping the so-called Kampuchean United Front for salvation. Although the Cambodians put up a fight but they could not resist the Vietnamese aggression. The Vietnamese reached Phnom Penh and put up a puppet government under Hang Samarin. As a belated reaction, the Chinese attacked Vietnam. The Chinese attack on Vietnam occurred at a time when the Indian foreign Minister AB Vajpayee was on a visit to China. He cut short his visit and the government asked for immediate withdrawal of China. But the then Janata Government had still not given recognition to the Heng Samarin regime. But the government headed by Indira Gandhi which came to power in the mid-term elections of 1980 announced its recognition to the Heng Samarin regime. The rationale which the government gave was that the country's friendship with Vietnam was an important factor. But at the international level it was considered that India had done so under Soviet pressure. The ASEAN countries who had in their Bali Communiqué of 1979 reacted strongly against the Vietnamese invasion were upset by India's stand.¹⁹

Indonesia did not follow the ASEAN majority decision and expressed solidarity with Vietnam. "The Vietnam-China rift and the Cambodian crisis that arose consequent to the Vietnamese military action was the only occasion when it appeared that there was congruence of

¹⁵ Ayoob, Mohammed, 'India, Indonesia, Vietnam: Coincidence of interests' in Ayoob, Mohammed, *India and Southeast Asia, Indian Perceptions and Policies*, Published under the auspices of ISEAS, Singapore by Routledge, 1990

¹⁶ Naidu, G. V. C., *Deergayu India-Indonesia Relations*, Source: <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2011/january/31/Deergayu-India-Indonesia-Relations>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Weatherbee, Donald E., *International Relations in Southeast Asia, Struggle for Autonomy*, USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

¹⁹ Reddy C. Ravindranath, Op.Cit.

security interests between India and Indonesia.However, soon Indonesia had to fall in line with the dominant view of fellow ASEAN member states who took a hard line stance and India became the only non-communist country to extend diplomatic recognition to the Hanoi-installed Heng Samrin government in Cambodia much to the annoyance of ASEAN.”²⁰

“India-ASEAN relations, therefore, were not really autonomous. They were subject to the vagaries of the respective countries’ ties with the major powers and were therefore impossibly ‘derived’.”²¹

Indira Gandhi continued with her tilt towards USSR and ASEAN –India relations continued to go down. An International Conference was held in New York in 1981 over the Cambodian issue at the behest of ASEAN. India remained absent along with Vietnam and USSR.

Rajiv Gandhi came to power in 1984. He had a very moderate image on the international relations front. Rajiv’s efforts to build relations with USA and China. He even visited Burma in 1987 which raised expectations of improvement of relations between the two countries. But the support India gave to the 8888 pro-democracy movement in the country brought an all time low to relations between the two countries.

But even during Rajiv Gandhi’s time, Indonesia did have scepticism about Indian intentions in Southeast Asia.

A major scepticism continues in the Indonesian mindset regarding the Indian navy. This is probably also due to Indonesia’s close proximity to the Andaman Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean. Tensions arose between the two countries over reports India planning to build a major base on Great Nicobar Island, separated from Northern Sumatra by only 160 kilometres. An article in the Far Eastern Economic Review said that behind India’s decision ‘underlines India’s drive for a multi-role blue water navy’ in the vicinity of the Straits of Malacca.

As far as Indo-China was concerned, Foreign Minister Natwar Singh conducted extensive tour of the ASEAN countries as well as Indo-China in 1987. “There was generally a favourable response for Indian diplomacy. During the visit, Vietnam Prime Minister, Pham Hung said that India should be one of the guarantors of an international agreement on Cambodia.” Natwar Singh met Prince Sihanouk too in New York. Heng Samarin too recognised the importance of India in the peace process. A series of visits between Indian,

²⁰ Naidu, G.V.C., Op. Cit.

²¹ Sidharan, Kripa, ‘India and ASEAN’, K. Raja Reddy (edited). *India and ASEAN: Foreign Policy Dimensions for the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Century Publications, 2005

Vietnamese and Cambodian officials ensued in the coming years to solve the Cambodian issue.²²

Meanwhile with the dissolution of the Soviet Union from the period of 1989-91 paved the way for the solution of the Cambodian problem.

Trade between India and Southeast Asia during the period

It is not surprising knowing the political conditions that existed in the region as well as India that the trade between them declined in absolute and relative terms from the early 1950s until the early 1970s.²³ This was the mixed result of majorly unorganized efforts, diversification of trading patterns from both the sides and green revolution of India. India’s Trade with ASEAN countries saw dramatic spurt after 1970. The main reason was “ India’s victory over Pakistan in 1971” which has boosted the confidence of ASEAN countries as well as world at large as this gave message that India is no more in fear of Pakistan and stable country to provide conducive environment for trade.²⁴ Although this trend could not be continued after 1979 and in the beginning of new era of globalization during the 1980’s. The open door policies and closer integration of China with the Asian countries were one of the main reasons for her meteoric economic growth. However China’s policies were in total contrast with India’s own socialist policies under Nehruvian Era. Her close association with Soviet Union and her inward looking policies marginalised her from the neighbouring East Asian countries. The effect of this drift of India from the Asian countries that have the vast potentials for trade and commerce became evident as India persistently lagged behind and failed to catch up with China’s impressive economic performance. The last blow to India’s isolation from her East Asian neighbours came with the collapse of Soviet Union, the power that India supported at the time of cold war. Thus India needed new strategic and economic relations in the absence of the Soviet market to give her economy the much needed boost and this could only come from new Asian markets for trade and commerce. This took the shape of Look East Policy of 1992.²⁵

²² Reddy C. Ravindranath, Op.Cit.

²³ Majumdar, Asis Kumar, *A Study of India’s Relations with Southeast Asian Countries from 1962-82*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash,, 1982 Pp.214-215. Cf. Ayoob, Mohammed, *India and Southeast Asia : Indian Perception and Policies*, (Published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore) London / New York : Routledge,1990, pp.15-16

²⁴ Ayoob, Mohammed, Ibid

²⁵ Das, Santosh Kumar & Tewari, Ritika, *India – ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and Development of North East: Prospects and Challenge*, Draft Paper for CDS – IIFT - RIS - UNCTAD National Seminar on India – ASEAN Free Trade Agreement & Way Forward 5 – 6th February, 2010 Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, Source: