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Sukhia, Jyoti

Kurukshetra University

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India's look east policy: Its evolution, challenges and prospects

Jyoti

Kurukshetra University

Email – jyoti.research@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Look East Policy, initially crafted during the early nineties by the Narsimha Rao government of India, stands as a significant embodiment of India's deliberate foreign policy approach aimed at Southeast Asia—a region known for its abundant resources and thriving prospects. Over time, this policy has evolved into a pivotal component of India's foreign relations, marking a distinct departure from its traditional foreign policy priorities. The Look East Policy has not only gained substantial momentum but has also acquired strategic depth. Both India and Southeast Asia share deep-rooted cultural and civilizational ties, and they share common interests spanning trade, tourism, investment, joint ventures, counterterrorism, climate change mitigation, and natural disaster relief. As major players in the global economy, their collaboration holds the potential to drive the development of the broader Asian region, benefiting the Asia-Pacific as well. Nonetheless, building a robust partnership in the 21st century will demand both ASEAN and India to surmount formidable challenges and capitalize on significant opportunities with a cooperative and forward-looking perspective. This paper aims to illustrate the burgeoning cooperation between India and ASEAN across various domains while addressing the obstacles impeding their collaboration. Subsequently, it will conclude by exploring areas of alignment between India and the countries of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: India, foreign policy, ASEAN, economic trade, security cooperation, political and strategic dimensions

1. Introduction

The origins of India's Look East policy can be traced back to a shifting global landscape in the early 1990s. Although formally launched in 1991, its roots extend deeper into India's history, reaching back to the early years of its independence. Prior to gaining independence, India had already begun laying the foundation for regional cooperation in the mid-1940s and 1950s, actively seeking partnerships with Asian and other developing nations worldwide. The significance of Southeast Asia was recognized as early as the 1940s by influential figures like K.M. Panikkar, one of India's first strategic analysts. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, also acknowledged the strategic importance of Southeast Asia, viewing it as an opportunity to establish strong political connections. India's initial ventures into foreign policy involved supporting anti-colonial movements in the Southeast Asian region (Naidu, 2010; Aggarwal 2016, 2017a; Aggarwal and Chakraborty, 2017, 2019).

Even prior to achieving formal independence, Indian leaders convened the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi from March 23 to April 2, 1947, bringing together representatives from 25 Asian nations, including Egypt. The conference witnessed a significant eagerness for regional cooperation, particularly from countries like Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma. India's commitment to supporting the Indonesian cause was evident when it hosted the Conference on Indonesia in New Delhi on January 20, 1949. This gathering aimed to express solidarity with the armed struggle led by Sukarno against the Dutch attempt to reestablish colonial rule in Indonesia, which had begun in December 1947. Beyond addressing the Indonesian issue, the conference also passed resolutions advocating for regional integration among the participating nations.

A pivotal milestone in fostering cooperation among Asian and African nations occurred during the Bandung Conference in April 1955. At this event, these nations collaborated to formulate a shared policy and approach to address their common challenges. In addition to these major initiatives, India actively engaged in numerous other conferences and gatherings, exploring various possibilities for regional cooperation.

Despite the repeated calls for Asian solidarity by various leaders during the post-World War II anti-colonial struggles, there was minimal cooperation among Asian countries. India's efforts to foster collaboration among Asian nations fell short of its leaders' expectations. The primary reasons for this failure lay in interstate disputes, tensions, mutual distrust, and competing claims for leadership, particularly between India and China. This contributed to the lack of progress in India's endeavors for regional cooperation, spanning Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia in particular (Gonsalves, 1991; Gupta, 1964; Werner, 1954; Aggarwal 2017b, 2020).

While India's initial foray into the international arena originated in Southeast Asia, Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of Pan-Asian solidarity failed to materialize, particularly in the aftermath of the Chinese aggression in India's Northeastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1962 and India's subsequent shift towards bolstering its military capabilities. As I.K. Gujral noted in a 1996 speech in Singapore, India's cultural and historical ties with Southeast Asia were undeniable, yet external factors, such as colonialism and the Cold War, intermittently disrupted this closeness, erecting artificial barriers between the nations (Gujral, 1996, Aggarwal 2023a, 2023b).

Moreover, in the early post-colonial years, the focus was predominantly political rather than economic. Leaders in Asia and Africa centered their efforts on issues like decolonization, neutrality, and security to unite under a common platform, although some elements of economic cooperation were occasionally present.

The end of Cold War brought about a fundamental change in the international system, which focuses on the economic content of relations and led to the burgeoning of the formation of regional economic

organizations. This change in the international system, the success stories of the East Asian Tiger economies and the radical shift in India's economic and strategic circumstances caused New Delhi to pay more attention to the rapidly growing economies of East and Southeast Asia (Gordon, 1995a). From a strategic standpoint, a number of realist political commentators pointed out that the end of Cold War and the beginning of the Gulf War (1990–1991) had created 'unprecedented opportunities' for India (Malik, 1991), although Ross H. Munro argued in the early 1990s that India was the greatest loser from the end of the Cold War: 'India's reach for great power status is in shambles. India has gained significant advantages by opening up its economy—advantages that will eventually allow the synergisms inherent in India's circumstances to realize their potential (Gordon, 1995b; Aggarwal 2023c, 2023d, 2023e).

2. India's Domestic and Regional Environment in 1990-1991

Nations do not operate in isolation, and both their domestic conditions and external surroundings inevitably influence their foreign policy decisions. The connection between external factors and foreign policy is an undeniable reality. Foreign policy essentially comprises a series of reactions to external challenges and opportunities (Mann, 2000). Consequently, any alteration in the international environment necessitates corresponding adjustments in a nation's conduct. Thus, the political changes that unfolded from 1989 to 1991 had wide-reaching effects on all countries, and India was certainly not exempt from these external developments. These shifts left a significant imprint on both India's domestic and foreign policies.

The early 1990s marked a tumultuous period in India's history. The nation grappled with a precarious domestic landscape characterized by escalating terrorism, insurgencies, political instability, economic downturns, and financial crises. This volatile domestic situation was further exacerbated by an unfavorable regional context.

While the insurgency in Punjab had subsided by the close of 1992, there was a surge in violent incidents carried out by insurgents in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and Northeast India. Militant groups in J&K had grown increasingly radical, adopting religious ideologies to justify their actions. Many of these militants received logistical support from Pakistan, including training, advanced weaponry, and financial backing, which bolstered their ability to project power (Sreedhar, 1994).

Since the early 1990s, Pakistan had adopted a more aggressive anti-India stance, evident in its encouragement and support for militants in J&K, as well as its attempts to internationalize developments in the region (MoD 1990). Simultaneously, South Asia witnessed the resurgence of various sub-nationalist or ethno-centric movements, including Sindhi and Baluchi movements in Pakistan, Nepalis in Bhutan, tensions between the Terai and hill communities in Nepal, Chakmas in Bangladesh, Tamils in Sri Lanka, and various tribal communities in Northeast India (Nanda, 2003; Aggarwal and Chakraborty, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

The situation was further complicated by the emergence of the Sagiang Division in Myanmar as a safe haven for insurgent groups from Northeast India, the underground arms market in Cambodia, and the drug smuggling trade in the Golden Triangle, encompassing Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. These developments underscored the threats to India's national security emanating from the East, necessitating cooperation with neighboring governments to address these challenges effectively.

3. India's compulsion to look East

The early 1990s witnessed a series of transformative political and economic events worldwide, leading to a significant shift in global relations and ushering in the era of globalization. Globalization brought about an ever-deepening integration of economies and societies, presenting both developed and developing

nations with a spectrum of opportunities and challenges. This global economic integration also intensified international competition and prompted the emergence of a new wave of regionalism (Harshe, 1999).

In general, regionalism proved to be an effective mechanism for pursuing economic and commercial objectives. As a result, existing organizations underwent restructuring, and new ones were established to adapt to the evolving global political and economic landscape. The formation of such regional groupings often hinges on factors like geographical proximity, economic complementarity, political commitment, policy coordination, and infrastructure development. Consequently, numerous neighboring states across the globe coalesced into regional entities, fostering a range of cooperative endeavors rooted in regionalism.

In light of these evolving political and economic dynamics, India found it imperative to closely assess the changing international environment and proactively adjust its policies to maximize benefits. On a macro level, India's foreign policy objectives were threefold: preserving the territorial integrity of the nation, ensuring its geopolitical security through the establishment of a lasting atmosphere of peace and stability in the region, and constructing a framework that would promote the well-being of its citizens by nurturing a favorable external economic environment (MEA, 1992).

In the South Asian region, India and its neighboring countries have made multiple attempts at fostering regional cooperation. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on December 8, 1985, with the aim of expediting economic and social development among its seven member states. Various endeavors were made to enhance trade within the region, including initiatives such as the South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) and the Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, intra-regional trade remains disappointingly low (Taneja, 2001; Aggarwal and Chakraborty, 2021, 2022). Notably, Pakistan is yet to ratify the free trade agreement, and the India-Pakistan dispute, coupled with India's considerable economic influence, has hindered economic exchanges and cooperative ties within SAARC.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union had profound consequences for India. The former Soviet Union had long been a reliable partner, supplying arms, petroleum, and providing some economic assistance. It also served as a significant market for Indian consumer goods. The collapse of the Soviet system deprived India of this valuable trading partner, with the Rupee Trade Area accounting for approximately one-fourth of India's exports. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had consistently supported India diplomatically in United Nations votes and had served as a model of centralized planning (Jaffrelot, 2003; Aggarwal et al., 2021, 2022). A major concern for New Delhi was the loss of Soviet diplomatic backing at the United Nations Security Council, exposing India to international pressures on vital issues such as disarmament, non-proliferation, and the Kashmir dispute (Saint-Mezard, 2003; Nag et al., 2021). Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet Union represented a substantial setback for India in political, strategic, and economic terms.

The disruption in the oil economy of the Gulf region during the Kuwait crisis highlighted to India the critical need to diversify its sources of energy procurement. This imperative stemmed from a desire to decrease reliance on its conventional suppliers in the Gulf and the former Soviet Union. In pursuit of this goal, India explored potential alternative energy sources in countries such as Myanmar, Brunei, Indonesia, and Australia within the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, it was only logical for Indian policymakers to seek a fresh international role and shift their focus towards the economically vibrant Southeast Asia, recognizing its significance in the global landscape (Grare, 2001; Aggarwal et al., 2023a, 2023b).

The rise of the Asian Tigers and the increasing economic prominence of ASEAN as key players in Asia served as additional motivation for Indian policymakers to explore the potential for economic engagement in the East. Simultaneously, the momentum behind the processes of liberalization, privatization, and globalization was unstoppable, and India was compelled to embrace these changes. It also became evident

that India's aspiration to attain permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council might not materialize without robust support from the nations in the East and Southeast Asian regions. Consequently, there was a growing recognition of the need to intensify efforts in strengthening India's connections with these countries (Nanda, 2003).

While maintaining its core foreign policy concerns, the Indian government also recognized the imperative of integrating the Indian economy into the global landscape. Swift policy reforms were initiated, with a particular focus on establishing formal ties with the ASEAN region. This marked a significant shift as, for the first time since independence, the Indian government directed its attention towards ASEAN with an economic agenda in mind (MEA, 1993). The absence of significant conflicts on vital issues and the presence of shared challenges facilitated the expansion of constructive relations between the two regions.

The evolving international and regional political and strategic dynamics in the late 1980s and early 1990s created a favorable environment for positive developments in India–ASEAN relations. The end of the Cold War and the breakdown of ideological barriers prompted India to adopt a more pragmatic approach. Post-Cold War, India's strategic outlook notably shifted from emphasizing moral principles to a realpolitik approach grounded in the acquisition and exercise of economic and military power (Mattoo, 2001). New Delhi's economic reform agenda transformed its relationships with numerous countries, as India actively demonstrated its desire for full integration into the global market and for engaging in global business (Ghoshal, 1999).

India realized that it was in its best interest to initiate cooperative ventures and seize the opportunities at hand, rather than passively waiting for initiatives from Southeast Asian countries. As noted by Prem Shankar Jha, there was a recognition that amidst the success story of East Asia, there could inevitably be losers, and India aimed to avoid being one of them (Jha, 1992). When Finance Minister Manmohan Singh introduced a fresh wave of economic liberalization in the 1993 budget, one of his stated objectives was to catch up with China (Macdonald and Sarkar, 1993).

4. Bilateral relations

Over the past two decades, India has significantly bolstered its bilateral relations with all the countries in Southeast Asia following the launch of the Look East Policy. Among the longstanding members of ASEAN, Singapore has emerged as India's most prominent bilateral partner, closely followed by Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. High-level visits by heads of state from most of these nations have taken place, signaling the deepening of diplomatic ties.

In addition to this dual-track diplomacy, there has been a deliberate effort to foster people-to-people connections to solidify the bonds between India and Southeast Asia. Initiatives to promote trade, tourism, cultural activities, academic exchanges, and more have been actively encouraged to cultivate friendly relations between the citizens of both regions.

Special attention has been directed towards the CMLVs (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam), where India sees ample opportunities to extend its influence. India has also entered into bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Thailand and Malaysia and economic cooperation agreements with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Notably, Myanmar holds a special place in India's strategic and security considerations due to its role as the land bridge connecting India and ASEAN.

5. Economic Cooperation

The economic dimension has assumed a prominent role in India's interactions with ASEAN. India recognized the importance of expanding domestic and regional economic cooperation with ASEAN, given the robust economic growth in East Asian nations, particularly the economically dynamic Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Following India's elevation to a Sectoral Dialogue Partner, the ASEAN–India Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (AIJSCC) was established in March 1993. This committee identified four key areas for cooperation: trade, investment, tourism, and science and technology.

Over the period spanning from 1995 to 2010, economic cooperation between India and ASEAN saw significant growth. This growth underscores the positive impact of India's policy of liberalization and openness on strengthening ties with ASEAN. Presently, India's trade with ASEAN has experienced impressive growth, surging from \$2.3 billion in 1991-92 to \$50 billion in 2010-11. Among ASEAN nations, Singapore stands out as India's largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 9% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), followed by Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

A detailed analysis of bilateral trade between India and ASEAN countries reveals growth across various sectors, including minerals, fuels, oils, organic chemicals, plastics, rubber and rubber products, gems and jewelry, iron and steel, and electronic equipment, among others. Joint Ventures have also played a significant role in investment between India and ASEAN countries.

A notable achievement of the Look East Policy was the signing of the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement on August 13, 2009, in Bangkok. This agreement is poised to create substantial growth opportunities, benefiting both India's trade with ASEAN and its relations with Japan, Australia, and the Republic of Korea. Due to its economic potential and reforms, this agreement is expected to further boost not only India's economic growth but also its relations with its East Asian neighbors.

6. Challenges

India's Look East Policy has undoubtedly gained significant momentum and strategic depth. There is now a far greater level of shared interests, interdependence, and evident mutual alignment. India's ongoing high-level dialogues with ASEAN countries, China, and Japan offer her the opportunity to safeguard and advance her national, regional, and global interests. It also positions India as an integral part of an Asia-Pacific community, collaborating with countries in the region.

Despite notable progress, India still lags behind other major powers in terms of geopolitical and economic significance. Concerns persist regarding the inadequacy of confidence-building measures, policy predictability, transparency, and mutual understanding in the realm of regional security cooperation, which remains a source of concern.

However, India faces several challenges on the path to making the Look East Policy a success. Southeast Asia and India's neighboring South Asian regions are increasingly becoming hubs for transnational crimes, including terrorism, narcotics trafficking, drug trade, and small arms smuggling. Maritime route security and piracy have also emerged as mutual concerns. China's growing economic and strategic influence in the region necessitates a diversified relationship between India and Southeast Asia. However, tensions could arise if China intensifies its grip on these countries, potentially putting pressure on India's presence in the region.

Another challenge lies in the intricate strategic triangle formed by India, the U.S., and China. These relationships are inherently marked by competition and tensions, as each seeks to exert greater influence in

the region. China is particularly concerned about the growing strategic alignment between India and the U.S., aimed at constraining China's emerging strategic presence and interests in the region.

At present, India-ASEAN relations lack the depth, content, and direction seen in China's, Japan's, and South Korea's relations with Southeast Asia. Despite sharing common land and maritime boundaries, India has not fully capitalized on the emerging alignment with Southeast Asia. Issues such as natural disasters, epidemics, local conflicts, environmental degradation, shared maritime spaces, and the exploitation of natural resources have compounded the problem. The absence of regional trans-border infrastructure allows separatist groups and criminal elements to exploit neighboring territories for illicit purposes.

India's diplomatic efforts, including the trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project and the establishment of land and air links to facilitate trade, may inadvertently create new challenges related to cross-border migration and refugee issues.

7. Prospects

India must maintain a close and collaborative relationship with the region, particularly by focusing on areas of mutual interest, such as fostering economic cooperation through its dialogue partnership with ASEAN. Establishing institutional linkages is a vital step for both regions. In the fiercely competitive landscape of the knowledge-based global economy, ASEAN and India should expand and deepen their economic ties. They should work closely within the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation to unlock their economic potential in trade of goods and services and investment. By doing so, both ASEAN and India can enhance their appeal as destinations for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and boost their competitiveness as global producers, exporters, and service providers.

Additionally, ASEAN and India, through forums like the ARF and other multilateral platforms, should address non-traditional security threats and transnational crimes, including issues related to maritime security, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking. Collaboration should also extend to efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear technology and materials.

India's Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s to engage with the Asia-Pacific region, has now gained significant momentum and strategic depth. The presence of shared interests, interdependence, and evident mutual alignment underscores the potential for a strong partnership between ASEAN and India, given their robust cultural and civilizational connections in the past. Nurturing this potential requires careful cultivation by policymakers and strategists, as Southeast Asia is likely to remain a viable foreign and security policy option for India as it seeks to establish its geopolitical and economic influence in the years ahead. Achieving this will necessitate bold decisions, innovative policies, and astute political leadership on the part of both ASEAN and Indian leaders. Strengthening their relations will not only benefit both parties but also contribute to the peace, progress, and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

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