# MULTI DICIPILANERY PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN STUDIES

LOLUME.





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# 1. INDIA'S SUBREGIONAL POLITICAL RELATIONS: THROUGH LOOK-EAST POLICY

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### Introduction

In the early 1990s, global and regional politics underwent qualitative changes. The collapse of the former Soviet Union led to the resolution of the decade long Cambodian Crisis and the 1991 economic liberalization policy inaugurated by Narasimha Rao's government in India led to significant alterations in India-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) relations. India, under Rao's government, embarked on substantive and wide-ranging programmes of economic reforms, restructuring and liberalization and thereby bringing the Indian economy in line with the economies of the ASEAN countries. India's decision to give a special policy thrust to its relations with the ASEAN and its desire to improve relations with individual countries in the ASEAN region and with ASEAN as a collective entity, "virtually obliterated its hitherto indifferent attitude to this regional organization". As a logical follow up, Rao's government designed a new policy initiative towards Southeast Asia which come under the umbrella of "Look-East Policy"

To ASEAN, India's size, population, educated middle class, industrial base, military strength, technical capability, ancient cultural ties and huge presence Indian Diaspora were seen as compelling factors to engage India and to strengthen the ASEAN-India relationship. Also, ASEAN's perception of New Delhi as an emerging regional power and China as a source of security threat, the volatile situation in the South China Sea due to conflicting claims over the Spratly islands, the grisly atmosphere in the Taiwan Straits and the Korean peninsula and the no-win ties among US, Japan and China, had convinced ASEAN of the need for a paradigm shift in India- ASEAN linkages. Thus, the mutual needs, to a larger extent, contributed to this convergence. New Delhi's 'Look-East' policy, therefore, coincided with ASEAN'S 'Look West' line and this new found regionalization drive ultimately led to an overall normalization of relations between India and ASEAN.

# The "Look-East" Policy - Phase I & II:

The Phase I of India's Look-East policy began with the end of the Cold War. The uncertainties arising out of the collapse of India's trusted friend and supporter, the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a uni-polar world gave a jolt to the hitherto prevailing structure of India's foreign policy. India was forced to explore other options, both regionally and globally in search of preserving and promoting its economic and strategic interests, and there, the eastern neighbours offered to be a promising area of engagement. The ASEAN, with Japan, Korea and China put together constituted, economically, the most dynamic region, not only in Asia but the whole world. Indian policy could not ignore this region particularly under the new situation when it was in dire need and search for new openings for the liberalizing economy. India was also looking elsewhere in Asia by the beginning of the 1990s, like the newly emerged Central Asian Republics not only as continuing markets for its produces and products, but also to meet the growing energy needs, as the hitherto prevailing arrangements have been disturbed due to

the break-down of the Soviet Union in 1991. The search of new options also got India involved in the initiative to build cooperative structures in the Indian Ocean Rim Region, Southeast and East Asian countries naturally got a priority in this search for Asian partnership, more so as new economic groupings like Asia Pacific Economic Community

(APEC) were taking shape in this region.

There were other factors as well that weighed in India's considerations to evolve a Look-East Policy in the post-Cold War era. Two of them may be of particular interest here. One was the fast developing situation in Myanmar (Burma), where both China and Pakistan had established a firm equation with the post-General Newin military regime. Keeping in view the Myanmar military junta's resistance to transfer of power to the Aung San Suu Kyi-led democratic forces even after their massive electoral victory in 1989; the Chinese and Pakistanis were more pragmatic. One wonders at times whether India's adherence to democratic ideology in the strategically sensitive situations would always be desirable. Burma being India's close and next-door neighbour, must have been dealt with greater resilience and ingenuity, if not opportunism. In 1996, at the ASEAN Ministerial meeting in Indonesia, India was quite impressed by the down to earth practical approach of the ASEAN countries in their discussion of Burma's admission into ASEAN, even in the face of strong opposition from the Western powers. India's policy of indifference towards Burma, from the early sixties to the end of the eighties did not seem to have any pragmatic relevance to the emerging trends in Myanmar. The Chinese had set up listening posts in Burma's Indian Ocean islands to monitor developments in India's missile programme and spread its economic and military presence in that country widely and deeply Pakistan, with the help and support of China, started supplying military equipments to Burma's military regime. India could not afford to ignore Burma any more and let its turbulent north-east become vulnerable and volatile. Of course, India did try to get Burma induced into SAARC membership, but could not succeed. It is time that efforts are made again, not only to consolidate India-Burma understanding, but also to strengthen SAARC.

The second factor that prompted India to look towards the east more seriously and determinedly was to answer growing, but wholly untenable and baseless, allegations and suspicions on India's naval expansion and assertive intention in the Indian Ocean. Such allegations had been triggered during the late eighties by sponsored and ill informed western and regional media reports. These reports were, perhaps, aimed at camouflaging the intense military modernization programmes of a number of ASEAN countries. These developments were also related to the reports of suspected reduction of the US military presence in the Asia – Pacific region in the context of the end of the Cold War. India had to monitor these developments on its eastern front in its own long-term strategic interests.

Accordingly, India's Look-East Policy has both economic objectives and strategic considerations. What is often not realized is that in a very significant way, Southeast Asia was also inducing India to have greater involvement in this region. With the possibility of reduction in the US military presence, there were also clear a sign of China's growing economic and military presence in the Asia - Pacific region. The ASEAN and other countries have always preferred a smooth balance of forces in the region in the interest of greater stability and peace. Many of these countries found India

a deserving candidate to be involved in this balance, because India has never had aggressive or expansionist approach towards this region.

# India's 'Look-East' Policy towards Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Brunei (CLMB):

Since the fall of the former Soviet Union, the traditional friendship and multifaceted cooperation between India and the countries of Southeast Asia have been increasingly strengthened in the context of a new global order. India, through its 'Look East' policy clearly generated a confidence for better ties with some countries of Southeast Asia. The inclusion of Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999 into ASEAN generated a new momentum of India's 'Look East' policy towards the economically less developed countries. The admission of new members brought ASEAN to India's doors. From a maritime neighbour, ASEAN thus became a close neighbour with a land border of nearly, 1,600 kilometers. This has no doubt added a new path of India-ASEAN relations.India's relationship with ASEAN has been upgraded to summit level since 2002. The first INDIA-ASEAN summit took place in November 2002 at Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and the second took place, in Bali, Indonesia in 2003. Both were attended by the then Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee. In the pursuit of 'Look-East Policy', Vajpayee has not only "out traveled" Mr. Narasimha Rao but also the policy under his leadership, has turned into an "intense gaze." India has not only established economic linkages with ASEAN, but also broadened its agenda to involve security cooperation. The military contacts and joint exercises that India launched in the early 1990s are now expanding into full-fledged defence cooperation. India's defence contacts have been widened to include Japan, South Korea and China. Never before was India engaged in such multi-directional defence diplomacy in Asia.

# Common Agendas: Acceleration of Mekong – Ganga Project:

The entry of Myanmar into ASEAN has provided India a land boundary to go along its long maritime boundary with the Southeast Asian region. Myanmar, located between South and Southeast Asia, is a natural bridge linking the two regions. By carving new communication links, India can also be connected to locations in the Southeast Asian heartland and beyond. India's plan to draw on its historic links and develop its common land border with Myanmar to reduce the poverty and underdevelopment in the region is a strategic initiative to enhance its ties with Yangon. Development of better ties with Myanmar may largely reduce cross-border drug trafficking and separatist insurgencies in the Northeast region of India. So, in early 2000, India - Myanmar relations received a new momentum.

The inclusion of Myanmar within the orbit of ASEAN and the signing of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2000, in Vientiane, among six neighbouring countries namely Cambodia, Laos, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, further accelerated the development of bilateral relations between India and Myanmar. The basic theme of this sub-regional initiative outlines cooperation and charts the further course for rapid economic development of the Mekong region countries in the areas of tourism, culture, education, transport and communication. The six members also undertook to develop transportation networks including the East-West Corridor project and the Trans-Asian highway. Thus, the Vientiane Declaration has institutionalized the

Mekong —Ganga Cooperation initiative and New Delhi's integration into the Eurasian land bridge system. This venture of India was the first major one with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Following the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Economic cooperation (BIMST-EC) a sub-regional grouping established in June 1997, the selection. The MGC —Six raised a few questions in the region. Myanmar was obviously selected as it remains New Delhi's land neighbour and a bridge to the rest of Southeast Asia. Regarding Thailand, it has always visualised itself as being the "Gateway of Indochina".

might come to enjoy its dividends given the latter's close physical proximity to the project area.

# **Kunming Initiative:**

Kunming Initiative was the China-initiated sub-regional plan which proposes to involve India and China in the development of backward regions of south and Southeast Asia. Kunming, the capital of the Yunan province in China's southwest, organised a Track-II conference attended by the representatives of four adjoining countries China. India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in 1999. The conference was attended by 134 delegates representing the four countries at the Yunan Academy of Social Sciences (Kunming) which hosted the event. It was decided to establish a Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation among the four countries. The basic objective of the Kunming Initiative, as explained by the first conference was "to strengthen regional economic cooperation and cultural exchange among the contiguous regions of Eastern/North-eastern India. Bangladesh, Myanmar and Southwestern China within the overall framework of India-China-Myanmar-Bangladesh economic cooperation." It was agreed by the delegates that discussions should be conducted at Track-II level to build the needed public support for The declaration by the Kunming Conference explains its the subregional quadrant. economic case as follows:

The region is very rich in terms of bio-diversity, energy potential and human resources. There is tremendous scope for trade and services, particularly in the areas of tourism, banking, insurance and software. The quadrant offers a growing market. Business-to-business cooperation must be fostered in goods and services, investment, technology transfer and human resources. There is need to encourage collaboration in research and forge strategic alliances between business and institutions. A second conference was organized by the Centre for Policy Research, a Delhi based think-tank in December 2000.

The economic rationale for this subregional plan is that it interlocks northeastern region of India and the equally underdeveloped economies of Bangladesh and Myanmar with China's southwest. Yunnan, the southwestern province which is rich in resources is fast emerging as an industrial hub. Yunnan's GDP growth rate (in the last ten years), industrial growth rate, increase in foreign trade and investment (as suggested by the proportion of exports to GDP), border trade, its booming cities and towns, rising urban incomes and consumer expenditure, per capita ownership of consumer durables," indicate the province's higher degree of industrialization, which is certainly more than that of the neighbouring northeastern India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. By connecting this developing Chinese province with the resource rich but industrially backward

neighbouring countries, it is argued, that there is great scope for strengthening regional growth of the quadrant. These underdeveloped regions are resource rich, but as Kunming emphasized, developing transport and communication infrastructure should be the basic prerequisite for the regional development.

Kunming provides a common forum for India and China to engage themselves in the Greater Mekong sub-region and the ASEAN in general, a prospect underscored by the secretary general of ASEAN: "The Southeast Asian countries bordering China and India, as well as other ASEAN members, can deal more confidently and effectively with these large neighbours in the context of ASEAN-China and ASEAN-India relations than on their own." Kunming's realization, however, depends on the official support of the four governments concerned. While the representatives from three participating countries, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar, were obviously backed by the respective governments, only India has not yet welcomed the idea officially. Indian officials in private circles did not display keen interest in this sub regional idea. Perhaps India was already worried about the strategic implications of China's excessive involvement in Myanmar and about the Sino-Bangladesh relations which had deepened recently leading to a bilateral defence pact. Moreover, India shares membership with Bangladesh and Myanmar in BIMST-EC, and with the Indochina countries in the Mekong Ganga Cooperation. Lending support to a third grouping, the Kunming, would have amounted to overlapping regional arrangements and hence superfluous. On balance, it appears that support from India to Kunming Initiative has been essentially due to political and diplomatic reasons rather than on the viability factors of the project area.

### Shangrila Dialogue:

Another multilateral dialogue on the issues of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region has been periodic the Shangrila Dialogue organized in Singapore by the U.K –based International Institute for Strategic Studies since 2002. This forum comprises of defence ministers, experts and professionals from more than twenty countries from the Asia-Pacific, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Singapore's leaders have addressed it from its inception. The U.S interest in this dialogue could be seen from the participation of it's Secretary of Defence in the meetings. The major issues that have been discussed at the Shangrila Dialogue include North Korea's nuclear programme, international terrorism, maritime security, weapons of mass destruction, peacekeeping and China's rise in global politics. India has looked upon this dialogue in Singapore as a useful opportunity to participate in a multilateral setting to address the issues of stability and security in the Asia-Pacific region and has actively participated in the dialogue, including the (Defence) Ministerial-Level meetings.

# Further Developments in India's 'Look-East' Policy:

Since late 2000, India has been having better ties with the CLMB countries after the signing of the Vientiane Declaration in November 2000. This re-activisation of India's 'Look-East' policy is based on several important reasons and they are as follows.

First, the drastic improvement in Indo-US ties substantially altered India's relations with the countries of Southeast Asia. In March 2000, the US President Bill Clinton visited India and this visit resulted in a marked realignment of New Delhi's geostrategic and foreign economic ties. After decades of neglect, the improvement in

Indo-US relations created a major spillover effect on New Delhi's relations with ASEAN. The advent of the Bush administration, its decision to lift the nuclear sanctions imposed on India after the Pokhran II nuclear blasts in 1998 and the unfortunate events of 9/11 provided the opportunity to realize the promise of a "natural alliance" between New Delhi and Washington. This new equation with the U.S. also paved the way for building better and more extensive security and political links with the American allies in the ASEAN as well as with Japan, South Korea and Australia.

Secondly, the improvement in relations between India and China is another important reason. Since late 1990's, New Delhi's decision to move closer to Washington has decisively created the basis for addressing issues that divided India and China for long. It is in the context of a rapidly expanding Indo-US cooperation which President Clinton described as "re-discovering India", the re-affirmation of India-Russia ' strategic partnership', greater uncertainty in Sino-US ties and the profound impact of the American war against terrorism in the region gave New Delhi and Beijing an opportunity to refashion their wary relationship. Both the countries agreed on the need for a framework of broad-based dialogue on all issues of mutual concern, and accelerated the clarification of the Line of Control, and initiated the process settlement of dispute over Sikkim and sought to liberate their relationship from Pakistan. Further, China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), its capacity to influence foreign direct investment (FDI) and its strategic and political influence in the region are the major reasons for New Delhi to engage the ASEAN countries. This resulted in a new dimension of Sino-India ties, when Atal Behari Vajpayee visited China in June, 2003 and signalled a 'New step forward in strengthening the all -round cooperation between India and China in the new century'.

Thirdly, India's gains in relations with China, gave her the scope to re-think it's hitherto followed Myanmar Policy. The inclusion of Myanmar in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1996, followed by the status of full membership of ASEAN in July 1997, gave New Delhi the opportunity to share a common land border with an ASEAN member state. India's emphasis on developing its eastward trade access to Myanmar clearly illustrates the Indian government's resolve to mend and enhance its historic ties with Myanmar. In spite of knowing fully well the economic weakness of Myanmar, New Delhi's strategy to reshape its historical links and develop its common land border with Myanmar in order to alleviate the poverty and under –development in the region has been determined mainly to overcome the reduction of chronic tensions in the northeast region.

By taking advantage of Myanmar as a gateway to Southeast Asia, New Delhi believes to convert the Northeast region from a security burden to a region of economic prosperity. Moreover, by improving the land route between India and Myanmar via the Northeast, New Delhi might eventually connect a section of the Asian highway from Singapore to Istanbul. When completed, this entire Asian highway project, this route will link Singapore with New Delhi in South Asia via Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Bangkok, Yangon, Chiang Mai, Mandalay, Tamu, Kalemyo, Dhaka and Kolkata. India's initiative to re-activate its ties with Myanmar is greatly influenced by the gains that China has made following the latter's close ties in the last four decades which made Beijing a reliable strategic partner of Myanmar. India's

approach has been not to challenge China's strategic position in Myanmar, but through its 'Look-East' policy, to tacitly win over the minds of the Myanmarese by supporting the pro-democracy movement and to detach the military junta from Chinese influence strategically.

Fourthly, the drastic changes, in the global order in the later 1990's and the appreciable number of foreign dignitaries' visits to India from all around the world, made it clear that India's economic and political potential in the global stage has come to be recognized. The opening up of Indian economy in the context of globalization and a stable government in New Delhi convinced the leading members of ASEAN to act more positively towards India. In the process of India-ASEAN dialogue, the leaders of ASEAN were firmly convinced that India could play a major role in the region and might emerge as the "stabilizing factor or influence' to contain China's growing influence in the Southeast Asian region.

### **ASEAN Vision 2020:**

Despite financial turbulence in the region, the member states are high in spirit to achieve the goals of ASEAN Economic Region by year 2020. The 'Vision 2020' underlines a creation of stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN Economic Region in which there will be free flow of goods, services and investments, a freer flow of capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities. The 'Vision 2020' visualizes an outward-looking ASEAN playing a pivotal role in the international fora. It also implies ASEANs' intensified relationship with its 'dialogue partners' and other regional organizations based on equal partnership and mutual respect.

Envisaging a prosperous ASEAN is based on certain landmark achievements of the region over the past three decades. The first and foremost is that there has been no war amongst any two ASEAN countries in the last thirty years. The very low probability of war between them helped the region to consolidate the economic interaction between member states and strengthen economic unity within the region. The member states on the basis of region's good performance could increase their economic transaction outside Secondly, the formation of the ASEAN forum has delivered the region's border. prosperity to the region. In 1967, ASEAN's overall trade was worth US \$10 billion. ASEAN trade over the last three decades has increased by about 62 times while its population has only doubled. ASEAN is the fourth largest trading community in the world. Over the years, the ASEAN forum could succeed in the creation of an incipient sense of community within the region. The regular, formal and informal meetings of government executives of the member states have enabled the region to build a strong community. For instance, ASEAN holds over three hundred meetings amongst senior government officials every year. Such official linkages are complemented by nongovernmental contacts.

# Prospects for India and ASEAN Relations:

In fact, it would be more appropriate to define it as an "intense gaze". Upon historical ties, India has built new bonds with significant substance. The fact that India's

relations with ASEAN countries do not have a belligerent history has also significantly contributed to India's active participation with the ASEAN+3 countries and has facilitated the improvement of ties in several fronts. India has projected itself as a major power in the region with a military that has the potential to act as a stabilizer and a large market economy that has an even greater potential. Above all, India has not established itself as a power that does not seek territory, nor does it seek to interfere in the inner working of the individual countries.

The positivism in their mutual perception about each other has brought forth definitive paradigm shifts in India ASEAN linkages. New Delhi's 'Look-East' policy, coincided with ASEAN's 'Look-West' line and this new found rationalization drive ultimately has led to an overall normalization of relations between India and ASEAN. Their mutual needs have thus effected a very favourable 'convergence' between them. This convergence of bilateral interests resulted in ASEAN governments responding to Indian prelude in 1992, and between 1992 and 1996, when New Delhi first became a 'sectoral dialogue' partner of the grouping and thereafter a 'full dialogue' partner. India also joined the security entity of the ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, thereby helping to raise the profile of the security forum. But New Delhi's priority of its 'Look-East' policy in its initial years concentrated more towards the developed economies within the ASEAN members and failed to coordinate a policy of promoting better partnership with the less developed countries of the region. However, the decision for a separate ASEAN-India Summit clearly demonstrated an opportunity for India to prove its economic influence and dynamics in the region.

India's 'Look-East' policy reached its zenith when the First ASEAN-India Summit took place in Phnom Penh on 5th November 2002. This preferment of India as a new actor in the orbit of ASEAN's economic, political and strategic process was a product of history of more than one decade. In this Summit, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had the distinction of being the first leader not only of India, but also from the entire South Asia to address the ASEAN Summit. Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia inaugurated this Summit and launched 'The Phnom Penh Agenda: Promoting Shared Prosperity and Peace across ASEAN'. In this Summit, the Indian Prime Minister proposed to create an ASEAN –India Free Trade Area (FTA) by the year 2012 which, covering about 1.5 billion consumers with a combined GNP of 1.7 trillion dollars, would gradually eliminate the trade barriers between the member countries of ASEAN and India.

Under the 'Look-East' policy, India tried to reach out to its East Asian neighbours in many ways. To begin with, through various official visits, including at the highest political levels, India tried to explain to its eastern neighbours that India was a modern, peace loving, practical and cooperative country. In bilateral discussions, India's attempt was to enhance political understanding, identify areas of mutual interests and initiate moves to harness these interests. There was a fund of goodwill for India in the whole region, particularly in the Indo-China countries and Singapore which deserved to be consolidated and expanded. India also adjusted its policy in relation to Myanmar, by accepting the harsh reality of the military junta being firmly in power there

The induction of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia into ASEAN, reactivated India's 'Look-East' policy towards these countries with fresh momentum. The entry of

Myanmar provided India a land boundary to go along with its long maritime boundary with the ASEAN region, and expanded New Delhi's economic, security and political opportunities with the countries of Southeast Asia. The signing of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) has helped to accelerate the development of bilateral relations between India and the less developed countries of Southeast Asia. Therefore, although belated, India's 'Look-East' policy towards these less developed countries of Southeast Asia have clearly signaled an upward trend of improvement of bilateral ties.

While India pursued its new 'Look-East' policy more energetically, the Southeast Asian nations also appeared to be more than willing to reciprocate with their own positive agenda. Today, both India and Southeast Asia are looking at each other more positively than ever before in their history as independent nations. Emerging consensus indicate that there exists a favorable trend for establishing mutually beneficial linkages in a wide range of fields, especially in the strategic, political, economic, cultural, and educational fields between India and Southeast Asia.

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