

India's Relations with Regional Organizations in South East Asia

Dr. Shraddha Soral

Lecturer in Political science S.M.C.C. Govt. College, Abu Road

There is a common tendency to talk of the Southeast Asian Region as the ASEAN Region. Here it is important to note that when we talk of India –ASEAN Relations, we are referring to India's interaction with ASEAN as an institution. The point is critical because in international political arena bilateralism and multilateralism are very distinct phenomenon. This does not mean that they are not overlapping or one does not influence the other at all. For e.g. if we look at India and ASEAN, we find that the country's good bilateral relations with Singapore helped build its ties with the institution.

In order to understand the way India interacts with these organisations, it becomes necessary to have a brief understanding of the way these organisations were formed and their style of functioning for this does have a bearing on India's interaction with them.

India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN.

So, the ASEAN that we know today has come into its present form only in 1999. The ASEAN Charter signed on the occasion of the 40th anniversary celebration has been hailed as "providing a new legal and institutional base for the organization." The original invention of ASEAN had been formed as a response to the Cold War conditions in the region. The 'contemporary reinvention of ASEAN' is a response to the uncertainties of post-cold war world where one sees the rise of United States and China along with a lot of other new conditions in the Asia-Pacific region.

ASEAN has had a very important role to play in the Southeast Asian Region. "Most people think of ASEAN as a vehicle for regional co-operation and confidence building. It is that too, but over the years, it has also acquired a geo-political dimension. It is perhaps the only regional organisation in the developing world that has sought to influence the geo-political dynamics of its surrounding environment."¹

¹ Singh, Daljit, 'The major powers and Southeast Asian Security' in Kesavan, K. V. and Daljit Singh (edited) *South and Southeast Asia, Responding to Changing Geo-Political and Security Challenges*, ISEAS, Observer Research Foundation and KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2010

The Southeast Asian countries attach a great importance to ASEAN. ASEAN operates with a vision of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". This vision is the basis of this organisation.² Comparing ASEAN with EU, the eminent Singaporean diplomat and thinker Kishore Mahbubani cites various examples to prove that ASEAN is much more successful as an organisation than EU. Mahbubani cites the example of the post-cold war civil wars in the erstwhile communist states which the EU could not stop let alone protect the minorities. Nothing as grave happened in Southeast Asia which had also undergone financial crisis in 1997. And if "this crisis, combined with existing political, ethnic and other divides, could have begun a downward spiral of Southeast Asia into war." The credit for this, he says goes to "some internal strengths of ASEAN". Apart from this, says Mahbubani, the success of ASEAN also lies in the fact that "the annual ASEAN meetings have provided the only comfortable venue for the three Northeast Asian powers-China, Japan and South Korea to meet. While ASEAN has been able to engage quite successfully with its neighbours, EU has failed in doing so. He adds further that "ASEAN will also continue to strengthen the relationship amongst its members through its normal inter-governmental processes, Track-II diplomacy and trade. Diplomatically, in addition to its role in bringing together the major powers, ASEAN has continued to strengthen political harmony in Southeast Asia." Regarding importance of ASEAN for India, Mahbubani is of the opinion that "ASEAN has also facilitated in India's entry into East Asia." (He adds that India's membership eventually happened as India in the coming years going to emerge as major power.)³

A number of factors have contributed to this strong position of ASEAN. "...the impression of a poor and backward Southeast Asia which was the target of sphere of influence for big powers, has been replaced by the impression of a new ASEAN with its concept of peaceful coexistence with the big countries in the region,economic interdependence has been deepened and regional economic cooperation guided by building free trade areas with the big powers,.....a commitment by the big powers on the solution of conflicts without resorting to armed force has been introduced by signing the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation with all the major countries in the Asia-Pacific region, with the exception of the US. France (from EU) signed the TAC in 2007, with the help of manoeuvring, and checks and balances among the big powers, ASEAN stimulates these big powers to attach greater importance to Southeast Asia and, hence, increase their respective strategic inputs."⁴

The importance the countries of the region attach to the organisation is also proved by the following survey results: "For example, according to the public opinion survey of six ASEAN countries released in December (*Straits Times*, December 5, 2005), in response to the question "Do the people of the ASEAN member countries think of themselves as being part of a single group?" 60.3 percent answered "yes" and 35.5 percent answered "no." In response to the question "Should ASEAN have a single currency?" 45.0 percent answered

² Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Chairman's Statement of the 11th ASEAN Summit "One Vision, One Identity, One Community"*, Kuala Lumpur, 12 December 2005, Source: <http://www.asean.org/18039.htm>

³ Mahbubani, Kishore and Denni Jayme, 'ASEAN: A Diplomatic Superpower' in Sisodia, N. S., Sreeradha Dutta (Edited) *Changing Security Dynamics in Southeast Asia*, Magnum Books Pvt. Ltd., Institute of Defence Studies And Analysis, 2008

⁴ Kun, Zhai, 'The ASEAN Power in Changing Security Dynamics in Southeast Asia' in Sisodia N. S. and Sreeradha Datta, *Ibid.*

“yes.” Moreover, 45.4 percent responded that the speed of ASEAN integration is “too slow,” thus revealing the strength of the opinion in favour of ASEAN integration.”⁵

The realist explanation to the importance of ASEAN is that as Southeast Asia has been an arena of great power politics, be it during the cold war days or thereafter, “for the Southeast Asian states, the goal has been to create a platform for greater manoeuvrability among the great powers. To augment—but certainly not replace—traditional bilateral diplomacy, the Southeast Asian states built a multilateral institutional structure to engage the external powers in a regional format as well as the bilateral. In the quasi-ideological language of ASEAN’s proponents, the pooling of the member states’ national resilience (for resilience, read capabilities) creates regional resilience, which through a feedback loop should enhance national resilience in a bilateral context. This is now explicit in the ASEAN Charter, which states as one of its purposes: “To maintain the *centrality* and *proactive* role of ASEAN as the *primary driving force* in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive.”⁶ As far as external powers giving importance to ASEAN, the explanation goes as follows: “Two hypotheses can be advanced. First, ASEAN is emerging as a hub of its own global network with spokes of different sizes running to all of the great and not-so-great power actors and is becoming the fulcrum of a regional balance of power. A second hypothesis suggests that because of their own competitive rivalries, the great powers have implicitly granted to ASEAN by default the right to define the terms of an amorphous regionalism in which real commitment is limited and poses no threat to great power interests.”⁷

Whatever be the explanations, it is certainly true that the countries of Southeast Asia attach great importance to ASEAN. That is why it was quite logical for India to begin its Southeast Asian foray by seeking ties with ASEAN. ASEAN lies at the heart of India’s ‘Look-East Policy’. Although officially stated in 1994, the policy is said to begin with India becoming a sectoral dialogue partner of the association in 1992. This was the time when the concept of regional organisations was catching up on the international scenario. “From a regional perspective, the ‘Look East Policy’ also demonstrated that India had little faith in the development of its own South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation.”⁸

The cold war had come to an end. India was entering into the phase of economic reforms. The need for making the economy of the country open was being felt desperately. India was seeking newer political as well as economic alliances. The big question that comes forth is why only Southeast Asia. India, which had till now largely followed the Soviet Union inspired closed economic system. The debacle of the Soviet economy and India’s own economic problems had brought home the realisation for economic reforms. No doubt the East Asian economic systems and their performance had impressed the government of India. In 1991, the government of Narsimha Rao claimed that Japan was one of the partners likely to help India in its new economic policy. In his auto biography, J. N. Dixit, then Foreign

⁵ Sudo, Suelo, *ASEAN: Significance of and Issues at the First East Asia Summit*, Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organisation, 2006, Source: http://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Books/Yearbook/pdf/2006_04.pdf

⁶ Weatherbee, Donald E., *International Relations of Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009, pp.3

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yahya, Faizal, ‘India and Southeast Asia Revisited’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Volume 25, Number 1, April 2003

Secretary recalls that “Japan was identified as one of the most important sources of both investment and technology by the Government of India.” Japan, indeed, was the first country to send a substantial business delegation to India in December, 1991. However, this delegation expressed reservations and even submitted a 21 point memorandum proposing reforms that would make India a really attractive investment destination. Narsimha Rao then went to Japan for a week-long visit, one that proved to be largely fruitless. This is probably one of the main reasons for India’s increased interest in Southeast Asia.”⁹

It is common sense that no relationship can develop without an equal reciprocation from the other side. As far as ASEAN’s interest in India is concerned it is well known that with the solving of the Cambodia problem, there was no confusion among the ASEAN countries regarding India’s role in the region. “India’s renewed interest in closer economic and political relations with her south-east Asian neighbours was reciprocated by many of them who seemed to be pursuing an unstated “Look West” policy of increasing their interaction with India.”¹⁰ The economic reforms process which had been initiated by India was very lucrative for ASEAN. “India’s articulation of its Look-East Policy and the ASEAN states, eagerness to diversify their economic interests fitted together like a ‘sword and sheath’. Unencumbered by other considerations the two sides weighed the benefits of closer interactions where economies would be the driving force.”¹¹ Strategic reasons were also quite important in ASEAN reciprocating to India’s gestures of goodwill and friendship. “India’s gradual inclusion in the ASEAN proves that along with economic reasons it has also been due to considerations of geo-strategy. The Southeast Asian countries were also worried about Chinese power owing to Chinese nuclear tests, its claims over Spratly Island in the South China Sea and its aggressive attitude at the time of Taiwanese elections in 1996. They were afraid that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States of America would withdraw from the area. The most important for them was to protect their vital sea-lanes of communication which India with its strong naval power was capable enough to do.”¹²

The official website of ASEAN describes the organisation’s relationship with India as follows:

“ASEAN-India dialogue relations have grown rapidly from a sectoral dialogue partnership in 1992 to a full dialogue partnership in December 1995. The relationship was further elevated with the convening of the ASEAN-India Summit in 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Since then the ASEAN-India Summit has been held annually. All these took place in a decade, which clearly signifies the importance of the dialogue partnership to ASEAN and India and the progress made in the cooperation.”

There is no doubt that the immediate target of India-ASEAN relationship was economic and the relationship has certainly been very successful in this sphere. But as

⁹ Jaffrelot, Christopher, ‘India’s Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy, Perspective’, *India Review*, Vol.2, No.2, April, 2003, pp.35-68

¹⁰ Baru, Sanjay, *India And ASEAN: The Emerging Economic Relationship, Towards A Bay Of Bengal Community*, Working Paper No. 61, Indian Council For Research on International Economic Relations, 2001

¹¹ Sridharan, Kripa, ‘The ASEAN Region in India’s Look-East Policy’ in Reddy, K. Raja (Edited), *India and ASEAN, Foreign Policy Dimensions for the 21st century*, New Century Publications, New Dehi, 2005

¹² Naidu, G.V.C. *Indian Navy and Southeast Asia*, Delhi: Knowledge World, 2000 as quoted in Jaffrelot, Christophe, April, 2003, Op. Cit

ASEAN's own role in the region develops and increases so do India's relations with it and become more and more multidimensional.

India and ASEAN will celebrate twenty years of their relationship in 2012. Although the relationship remains essentially economic but it has certainly enhanced to cover very diverse aspects.

In 1992, India had been given sectoral dialogue partner just for tourism, commerce, investments and science and technology. In this regard, the 1st Summit Meet in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2002 can be a watershed as “the Leaders of ASEAN and India committed to enhance cooperation in the fields of political and security, trade and investment, human resources development, science and technology, information and communication technology, health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture, transport and infrastructure, tourism, biotechnology, small and medium enterprises and people-to-people contacts.”¹³



¹³ Address by Lt. Gen. (Retired.) Ghalib, Andi M, Ambassador of Republic Indonesia, *ASEAN and India: A Perspective from Indonesia*, Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP), Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.