

India's Look East Policy: Its Origin and Development

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What is known today as India's Look East Policy had its beginnings in the early 1990s. The decade of the 1990s can perhaps be considered as an important threshold in the annals of modern history. It marked the end of the cold war and the beginning of an altogether new framework of relations among the major powers of the world. It also marked the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century and from the second to the third millennium of the Christian era.

In the aftermath of the end of the cold war, the world appeared to be standing at the threshold of a new era, leaving behind a century that had witnessed two world wars and the nuclear brinkmanship of the cold war. With the aura of peace and expectations of a future secure from the ravages of war embracing the political horizon, nations were full of new hopes. It was but natural that in that new dawn, India, like much of the rest of the world, would seek new opportunities and look towards new frontiers to serve its national interests. It meant thinking out of the box and seeking fresh paradigms to build a matrix of external relations in tune with the brave new world that seemed to be shaping up all around. India's Look East Policy, launched in the early 1990s, was a significant step in that direction.

Briefly, that policy meant connecting India more firmly to South East Asia, East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region and building bridges to them, especially through India's eastern states – both in the north and the south. These states had played precisely that role from times immemorial but it had got atrophied during the colonial era and then by the intensity of the cold war. On the eve of India's independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had highlighted his dream of reviving that role for India when, at the first Asian Relations Conference convened by him in New Delhi, he talked of the resurgence of Asia and of its rising nations like India, China and Japan. He referred to their ancient glory and expressed the hope that they would contribute towards forging a new world order in which colonial exploitation would

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have no role and international relations would be based on the concept of the sovereignty and equality of all nations, large and small. From well before the Graeco-Roman times, the role of Asia as a hub of culture and civilization and as a centre of economic activity had been very prominent and it had remained so until the beginning of the colonial era. As the curtain closed on the cold war in 1990, suddenly new horizons seemed to open up for the nations of Asia once again to revive their ancient links and be an important part of the global economic wave by rediscovering themselves, intensifying regional solidarity, and facing the challenges in front with a united will and a united purpose. India's Look East Policy was part of the Indian dynamics of responding to those new challenges and opportunities.

In the post-cold war scenario India seized the opportunity "to look east" and forge new bonds with South East Asia, mend ties with China that had been traumatized by the border conflict in 1962, look at Japan differently than as an ally of one superpower in combat against the other, and help establish a world order more just than the one offered by the post-world war institutions in the second half of the last century. Since its very independence India had been in the forefront of the struggle for a new world order free from exploitation and based on the concepts of mutual respect among nations for each other's interests and mutual benefit.

However, India could neither further its national interests best nor promote such a new world order without reviving its close links with the countries of Asia. That realization lay at the very heart of its new "Look East Policy". Then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao gave that policy a further boost with the assistance of Foreign Minister Madhavrao Solanki and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. Ever since the assumption of charge in May 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly stressed the enormous benefits likely to accrue to India in general and its north-eastern region in particular through an intensification of ties with ASEAN and its member countries, especially in the field of trade and commerce. There is growing realization in India of the geo-economic potential of the north-eastern region as India's gateway to South East Asia and its value as a bridgehead. India's Look East Policy is aimed at gradual integration of this region with the thriving market across the borders. At the time when that policy was framed, India's economy was growing at 4-5 per cent annually, while the South East Asian nations were showing a remarkably steady growth of 7-8 per cent and had earned encomiums as economic tigers of the East. India is catching up with them at a good speed with an improved economic growth rate, as it moves forward with a policy of Open Skies and Free Trade with South East Asia.

India's trade with the ASEAN countries has multiplied several times since India launched its Look East Policy in the early 1990s. It now stands at (US)\$60 billion. This is a far cry from the 1960s, when India had declined the offer of

ASEAN to be closely associated with it. The partnership with ASEAN, based on free trade and certain common security interests, makes it possible for India to interact with the South East Asian community of 500 million people with a combined GDP of \$750 billion as a collectivity. Extending from Burma and Thailand to the Malaysian and Indonesian archipelagos on one side and covering the countries of Indo-China and the Philippines on the other, this association of ten states offers enormous prospects in terms of infrastructure development, economic linkages and people-to-people contacts. Thus what had started in 1992 as “sectoral dialogue partnership” with ASEAN has blossomed further as full dialogue partnership, formalized as ASEAN+1, so that India is regularly present at ASEAN summits, is also a part of ASEAN+4 (Japan, South Korea, China and India), and attends ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), which annually reviews the security situation and is attended by important countries of Asia and the Pacific region, including USA.

The first ASEAN-India Summit was held in Phnom Penh in November 2002. A Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and India was signed in Bali in October 2003 with the objective of realizing the full potential of ASEAN-India Regional Trade and Investment Area (RTIA) and economic cooperation. At the Laos Summit in November 2004 the two sides committed themselves to promoting a long-term cooperative partnership, impart synergies to their complementarities and cooperate in a coordinated manner to accelerate and mutually reinforce sustainable growth and development, taking full advantage of their geographic contiguity.

ASEAN and India have agreed to give high priority to the development of regional infrastructure and road, rail, sea and air transportation links to increase physical connectivity and facilitate greater movement of goods and people. In this connection they have also agreed to facilitate travel and tourism between ASEAN countries and India by linking their tourist centres and to enhance synergies of tourist destinations. In addition, they promote cooperation in the fields of science and technology, and work through both conventional and innovative trade and economic arrangements to achieve freer movement of goods, services and investment. They have agreed to the full implementation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area by 2016. India and ASEAN cooperate now in human resource development through capacity-building, strengthening of institutions, and training and entrepreneurship development focusing on small and medium enterprises. Apart from fostering cooperation to preserve their common cultural heritage, they promote people-to-people exchanges involving parliamentarians, the youth, artists, sportspersons and representatives from business, industry, the media, and academic and think-tank institutions.

The document on Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity,

signed on 11 November 2004 at the third ASEAN-India Summit, also provided for strengthening cooperation at the United Nations and other multilateral forums, in particular WTO. It expressed support for early reforms of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions to make them more democratic constitutionally and responsive to the priorities of the developing countries. That need is felt even more strongly today on account of the exclusion of the emerging major powers of the world like India from permanent membership of the UN Security Council and in the face of the current global trends towards recession. The ASEAN-India Partnership document manifests a new urge on the part of ASEAN and India to jointly address the common challenges confronting the world, especially those relating to security such as the menace of international terrorism and other transnational crimes, through institutional linkages and programmes of cooperation. That agenda for cooperative action on the Asian and world stage must be followed assiduously. The Asian leaders must also huddle together for a common fight against the new hydra of global recession and minimize its impact on their countries. There are natural disasters, too, that call for concerted action.

At the sixth India-ASEAN Summit and the third East Asia Summit in November 2007 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh proposed that the nations of the region cooperate wholeheartedly not only in the realms of prevention and management of natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, cyclones and floods, and diseases like HIV and the avian flu which respect no frontiers, but also man-made disasters like terrorism, trafficking in drugs, human trafficking, cyber crimes, international economic and environmental crimes, sea piracy and money laundering. That agenda must be pursued vigorously in a cooperative spirit by improving coordination among relevant national agencies engaged in that task. India's Prime Minister has also called upon the countries of the region to work together to meet the challenges of global warming and climate change. As partners, ASEAN and India are already collaborating on the global plane in areas of general and complete disarmament and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction under strict and effective international control. India sees its growing interaction with ASEAN as "critical to fulfilling the promise of the twenty-first century being an Asian century", to use the words of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

At the ninth India-ASEAN Summit and the sixth EAS in Bali in November 2011, the progress registered by India with its South East Asian and East Asian partners was reviewed. It was stressed that from meagre beginnings in 1992, India's trade with ASEAN countries had reached about \$60 billion and confidence was expressed that by the end of 2012 it would reach the target of \$70 billion announced by the Prime Minister at Hua-Hin, Thailand, in 2009. The year 2011 saw ASEAN-India relations cross some new frontiers. Marking their growing relationship they

established an ASEAN-India Green Fund; its first meeting was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 19 October 2011, with India contributing \$5 million to it. The two entities also have an S&T Fund of \$1 million, under which a number of projects like a mutual S&T Digital Centre, a Technology Information Commercialization Portal and a Virtual Institute for Intellectual Property are being implemented. For the first time, in October 2011, an ASEAN-India Meeting on Agriculture was held in Jakarta and ministers in the field from both sides are slated to meet in 2012. In September 2011 India and ASEAN also had a meeting of Energy Ministers at Brunei to discuss further prospects of cooperation, as South East Asia is rich in petroleum and gas reserves. The two sides are also discussing a Regional Air Services agreement. Under the ASEAN-India Media Exchange Programme India has proposed that each year forty ASEAN journalists may visit India in two batches of twenty each and India send five batches of eight each to ASEAN states over the next three years.

The ninth ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' Consultations took place at Manado, Indonesia, in August 2011, where they agreed to a structured private sector engagement in the areas of pharmaceuticals, innovation and skills training, information technology, manufacturing and infrastructure. In his statement at the ninth ASEAN-India Summit in Bali on 19 November 2011, India's Prime Minister urged for an early conclusion of a commercially meaningful Services and Investment Agreement between India and ASEAN to create the right atmosphere for the implementation of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) provided for in the 2003 Framework Agreement between the two sides. Following the implementation of the 2004–2010 ASEAN-India Plan of Action, the two sides adopted a far-reaching 82-point Plan of Action on specific items of cooperation in a time-bound manner during 2010–2015 at the Hanoi Summit. India has drafted a number of proposals and forwarded them to ASEAN for further consultation and implementation under the new Plan of Action. As the Prime Minister informed the ninth summit, India has also constituted an ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group tasked to draft a Vision 2020 document for the strategic partnership between them, which met in August and October of 2011. In early 2012, India will be hosting a meeting of the Heads of Space Agencies of India and ASEAN as part of activities under their S&T Fund. Meanwhile, India's Department of Space has updated the proposal for a five-year project for establishing a tracking and reception station and data processing facility for the ASEAN countries and training of ASEAN personnel based on the feedback from ASEAN. These are important breakthroughs, symptomatic of their determination to chart a common course for wide-ranging cooperation in vital fields of development. In his statement at the Bali ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh welcomed the growing cooperation with ASEAN on security issues and India's association with ASEAN-led forums which have focused on maritime security, counterterrorism, training, exercises and

disaster management. He also invited the ASEAN leaders to the special ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit proposed to be held in New Delhi on 20 and 21 December. That will be preceded by the fourth round of the Delhi Dialogue in February 2012, by meetings of the Ministers of Agriculture as well as of New and Renewable Energy of India and ASEAN and by an India-ASEAN Business Fair. The Commemorative Summit will also coincide with an ASEAN-India Car Rally “to highlight the strong bonds between ASEAN and India, and spread the message of solidarity, enterprise and creativity which are the hallmarks of our region”, as the Prime Minister said at the ninth ASEAN-India Summit.

In addition to ASEAN, India’s participation in the East Asia Summits is a further extension of its Look East Policy. Comprising ASEAN and the Greater East Asia comity of nations, the EAS is an eighteen-member body and incorporates the ten ASEAN countries plus Japan, South Korea, China, India, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Russia. It is inspired by a new vision of Asia as being central to the world’s economic growth, political stability and strategic balance. For the time being it concentrates on five core areas of energy, education, finance, pandemics and disaster management.

The EAS is ASEAN-driven and emphasizes connectivity. Its agenda includes Comprehensive Economic Partnership of East Asia (CEPEA). At the sixth EAS held in Bali on 19 November 2011, a Declaration was adopted on the Principles of Mutually Beneficial Relations and another on ASEAN Connectivity. As the Prime Minister of India pointed out in his statement at the summit, it is a forum for building an “open, inclusive and transparent architecture of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region”. He impressed on the leaders of the region how India was part of the growth story of the world economy, with its 7.5 per cent growth rate at a time when economic growth is under stress in the developed world. He urged his audience to persist in the difficult task of the region’s economic integration and movement towards CEPEA. Rapid economic growth, he said, was the most enduring strategy to overcome the global economic slowdown. He stressed the need to focus on the development agenda while making sure that the growth was environmentally sustainable. He also emphasized the need for finding new and renewable technologies to fuel growth and investing in education and skill development. These are areas of common interest but supremely important for a country like India which is in the throes of economic growth and development and is seeking ways to foster that process nationally and internationally. The East Asia Summit’s interest in India is symbolized by its statement on the establishment of the Nalanda University in India, issued in Thailand in 2009. The Prime Minister took the opportunity at the sixth EAS to inform leaders of the progress in the matter achieved since then.

Opportunity was also taken at the sixth EAS to discuss “common challenges cutting across boundaries”, as the Prime Minister described them, of terrorism, prevention and response to natural disasters, piracy, protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and drug trafficking. He offered to share India’s expertise in the areas of disaster management and maritime security, and proposed to host next year an EAS Workshop on disaster management and relief related to an earthquake.

These summits provide an excellent opportunity to the leaders of the Asia-Pacific Region to discuss both bilateral and multilateral issues on the sidelines, too. At Bali, India’s Prime Minister separately met President Obama and Premier Wen. President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed their deep appreciation of the progress registered in Indo-US cooperation bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally since President Obama’s visit to India in 2010, which the Prime Minister described as “historic” and by the President as “an extraordinary trip”. Bilaterally these had included the areas of economy, trade, investment, higher education, clean energy, civil nuclear cooperation, infrastructure development and strategic and defence, all very vital to India’s growth and security. Multilaterally, the fields covered included terrorism, maritime security, disaster management and humanitarian relief. The statements made at the summit and to the Press by the two leaders had a lot of resonance on these matters, especially those related to the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

China regards the South China Sea as its sovereign territory and opposes any foreign operations there. It had objected to oil explorations by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) of India in collaboration with Vietnam, which like other states in the region such as the Philippines, disputes China’s claims. China had buzzed an Indian naval vessel last year asking it to retreat while it was passing through those waters, a call which the latter did not heed, for India favours free international navigation there. At the sixth EAS, in his meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh observed that “exploitation of oil and gas in the South China Sea by India was purely a commercial activity” and that “the issues of sovereignty should be resolved according to international law and practice”.

In the multilateral fields also, such as on climate change and other issues involving the interests of the developing world, India and China are increasingly finding common ground and supporting each other. The frequency of dialogues between the two countries at all levels has increased manifold since the Look East Policy was heralded. Doubts remain, however, about China really wishing to have a strategic relationship with India due to its huge military relationship with Pakistan that extends into the strategic nuclear field and its manifest use of that country as a bulwark against India in the subcontinent.

There have been Indian sensitivities, too, about China's military presence in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) and aggressive Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean Region, including building of docks and establishing naval facilities in strategic locations in Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius, creating a ring around India. The recent example of Chinese traders holding two Indian traders hostage and bestially torturing them in Yiwu, a commodity market centre near Shanghai, and maltreating S. Balachandran, the Indian Consular Officer who is a diabetic, denying him food and medication, thus putting his life in peril, simply cannot help the cause of building a tension-free relationship between the two countries.

In contrast to the bumpy relationship with China that often gasps for breath, India's relations with Japan have run a smooth course as an earnest of its Look East Policy. The regular exchanges between the two countries at the highest level in recent years have moved them into strategic avenues and they are acquiring a multi-dimensional character. It is a naturally growing relationship between Asia's two ancient nations and important democracies. With a common historical bond in terms of culture, both of them seek to retain the values of the past while advancing at a rapid pace into the future and constantly modernizing themselves. As a nation that is known for its spirit of social discipline, quiet demeanour, community solidarity and fathomless forbearance, Japan has rubbed shoulders with the West as one of the world's largest economies, until recently the second-largest and now the third after USA and China. It is endowed with the experience of modernization of a century or more. India hopes to benefit from Japan's innovative spirit manifest in the high-tech field, its capital reserves, and its interest in cooperating with India with technology and investment in the vital fields of industry, infrastructure, energy and transport. Maruti Udyog and the Delhi Metro are symptomatic of India's successful collaboration with Japan, as is also India's trade with it, which is of the order of \$25 billion. High-speed rail networks, expressways and projects such as the Delhi-Mumbai and Chennai-Bangalore industrial corridors will cement that relationship further, as also the Japanese-funded Western Dedicated Freight Corridor. The two nations are steadily growing a mutually beneficial relationship in the defence field as also rare earths and metals. India should quickly remove bottlenecks in fostering that interest and liberalize enough to attract international investment. The Vision Statement jointly signed by India and Japan at the end of the visit of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in December 2011 must be pursued to the very end.

India's security concerns, enhanced by China's piercing thrust in 1962 through the entire length of India's Himalayan frontier including Arunachal, have made India ever conscious of the fragile nature of its connection with its north-eastern

region. That connection is limited to a perilous 40 km wide corridor at Siliguri, the famous chokepoint, while 98 per cent of the 4500 km long border of the north-eastern region is with foreign countries. The region is strategically vitally important. Its development and security are linked to that of India as a nation in a crucial way, as the events of 1962 proved. The emergence of East Pakistan in 1947 traumatically cut the gateways of the north-eastern region's traditional economy and communication and suddenly scuttled the lifelines of its people. Hopes of a revival of those links have not materialized enough after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

The Look East Policy seeks to recover that lost frontier by giving the north-eastern region of India scope to re-establish its historical links with the countries in the neighbourhood and bringing it together with the rest of India into the mainstream of Asian development. The Look East Policy was calculated to change the security paradigm into one in which India's security needs in the north-eastern region would move in tandem with its paramount need for development.

With that paradigm shift, of intertwining the development and security needs of its north-eastern region as an imperative of India's Look East Policy, development of relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar and further down with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore came to the fore as symbolized by BIMSTEC.

India's Look East Policy favours forging an excellent relationship with Bangladesh based on mutual trust and mutual benefit, with full regard to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, there have been snags in bringing a model relationship with Bangladesh into being, a healthy complementary relationship between the two nations, each trying to understand the other and cooperating with it in an environment of sympathy and trust. That prospect had come alive in 1971 when Bangladesh came into being. There is nostalgia all over India for the hoary relationship that had been emerging with Bangladesh until its prospects suddenly plunged with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, hope springs eternal since neither side can ignore for long the demands on it of both geography and history to pull together rather than pull apart. India has heartily welcomed Sheikh Hasina's return to power. The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in September 2011, the landmark agreement on the border with Bangladesh signed then and resolution of the problem of enclaves has given a new impetus to this relationship. The cooperation being extended by the Government of Bangladesh now on sensitive security issues also adds to the new climate of confidence and trust between the two governments.

In this new climate it might be easier to resolve other irritants in India-Bangladesh ties such as issues relating to the migration of Bangladeshis into India's north-eastern region, critical transit links between the two countries, and

management of river flows for the common good of both countries. In this context the sooner the agreement on the flow of waters from the Tista River into Bangladesh is signed the better. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's initiatives to put relations with India on an even keel deserve a prompt and an equal response.

As far as Myanmar is concerned, India has stepped up the process of mending fences with it under the Look East Policy rather than leaving the field wide open to the Chinese for strategic, political and economic penetration of this gateway to South and South East Asia. The shift in policy towards Myanmar is a function of India's supreme security concerns. It has paid dividends in terms of checkmating trans-border support for rebel groups in the north-eastern region, improvement of transport links between that region and Myanmar and through its territory to South East Asia, more settled conditions for the three million people of Indian origin in the country, and increased prospects for India to access Myanmar's fossil fuels and rich mineral reserves.

Meanwhile, the pro-democracy and pro-Aung San Suu Kyi sentiment in India has remained strong and India has successfully used its links with the Government of Myanmar in favour of democratic change. The visit of President Thein Sein to India in October 2011 after the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from custody has served to strengthen age-old ties between the two neighbours and has laid the foundation of a new relationship based on mutual trust and mutual benefit. Encouraged by the desire of the Myanmar President to bring about a sea-change in relations with India, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a credit line of \$500 million for development. As that country moves in the direction of greater respect for the democratic urges and aspirations of its people, revival of the political process and restoration of representative institutions, one notices a definite change in the way the democratic world looks at it now, as demonstrated by the visit of the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to Myanmar in December 2011.

There is need for a very balanced relationship to emerge between India, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar for India's north-eastern region to flourish, unhampered by apprehensions about neighbouring countries indulging in activities prejudicial to India's security. The Look East policy seeks to enhance all-round trust and build bridges of confidence in India's relations with them and it has given them a new direction.

India's emphasis on the resurgence of Asia and cooperation with Asian nations in the post-colonial era goes back to the days of the Asian Relations Conference organized by Prime Minister Nehru on the eve of India's independence. The countries of East and South East Asia have shared history with India for two thousand years or more, a priceless heritage of civilization and culture and of religious, social and economic interaction with each other. In this millennial

relationship, all the societies extending from Burma to Indonesia along the Indian Ocean and across China right up to Japan have had a close kinship and affinity with India. If there exists today between India and these nations a multifaceted partnership that encompasses political, cultural, social, economic, scientific, technological, and security dimensions, much of it may be credited to India's Look East Policy. Inspired by Nehru's Asian dream, that policy constitutes a solid foundation for India's external affairs in the region. And if and when an Asian Community becomes a reality, that policy would be its fountain spring.

