

12. LOOK EAST POLICY OF INDIA

Background

The signing of the agreement on ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity on November 11, 2004, at the ASEAN-India Summit Meeting in Vientiane, Laos, is a major milestone in the evolving relationship between India and Southeast Asia. This, along with a clutch of other agreements that have been entered into in the last few years on to combat terrorism, on accession to the Treaty of Anand Cooperation (TAC), on a variety of other activities has resulted in further consolidation of what is known as **India's Look East Policy** which was initiated in the early 1990s. It has since remained a major priority of India's foreign policy. On the defence and strategic front too the progress has been impressive through a number of agreements and embarking on a variety of other activities with member-states of ASEAN. While continuing the emphasis on Southeast Asia, the Look East policy is poised to enlarge the scope to encompass the rest of the Asia Pacific region.

India has indeed come a long way since the Cold War days when most of the then ASEAN countries perceived India to be in the camp of the former Soviet Union. Aside from Vietnam to an extent, there was very little political interaction of consequence except normal relations, defence links were virtually non-existent, and economic bonds were of little consequence. When seen against this background, the progress that India has made in cultivating multi-faceted relationships with ASEAN and its members is remarkable. If visits by the top political leadership are any indication, Southeast Asia saw the largest number of visits by the Indian prime ministers in recent times. The then P.M. has been to Southeast Asia twice in less than six months to attend the newly created Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMTEC) in July 2004 and to the annual summit meeting with ASEAN in Laos in November 2004.

In order to underscore the economic aspects, India has signed a framework agreement during the Bali summit in 2003 to create a Free Trade and Investments Area with ASEAN by 2016, and the apex body of private

sector, the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has begun to hold annual India-ASEAN Business Summit meetings since 2002 to encourage greater private sector participation. An ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity was signed during the 2004 Vientiane meeting to enlarge the scope of interaction across various sectors.

Objectives of India's relation with south east

1. to institutionalize linkages with ASEAN and its affiliates (Dialogue Partnership, ASEAN Plus One Summit Meetings and membership on the ARE);
2. to strengthen bilateral relationships with member-states of ASEAN; and
3. to carve a niche for itself in Southeast Asia both politically and economically.

India Look east Policy

1. Though the Look East policy was started as an attempt to assuage negative reaction to the navy, the post-Cold War political atmosphere offered an opportunity to convert that into a policy initiative by expanding the scope considerably to include aspects political as well as economic. It soon became a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach to establish strategic links with as many individual countries as possible, evolve closer political links with ASEAN, and develop strong economic bonds with the region.
2. Second, it was an attempt to carve a place for India in the larger Asia Pacific.
3. Third, the Look East policy was also meant to showcase India's economic potential for investments and trade.
4. Fourth, this policy also resulted in a total volte-face with regard to its attitude toward Myanmar.
5. Last but not least, the feeling of getting left out of the action in the Asia Pacific, whether it was the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (ASEAN-PMC) with the Dialogue Partners of ASEAN, which had emerged as the only forum to

discuss regional issues, also weighed heavily in New Delhi's thinking.

Relations with Myanmar too have taken off in a big way overcoming the earlier problems. There is a broad consensus within the ASEAN leadership that India as an economic and strategic partner would contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity. Apart from a mutually beneficial economic relationship, a number of other developments in the region are contributing to greater India-Southeast Asia cooperation.

Refurbishing of India's image as a responsible major power and convincing ASEAN that it had greater stakes in peace and stability rather than extending its influence into Southeast Asia became an utmost priority. The emergence of ASEAN as an autonomous regional influential and the phenomenal economic success the member states achieved further added to the urgency. By then, ASEAN too was responsive to the Indian initiatives as the regional organization itself faced the trauma of an uncertain future in the midst of an unprecedented post-Cold War atmosphere of political flux.

The earlier Cold War image of ASEAN and India belonging to different political camps in the superpower-dominated global bipolar system dissipated removing major obstacles. And with that the strategic divide that segregated India from the ASEAN bloc of nations also disappeared so that ASEAN could appreciate, understand and positively respond to Indian overtures. Many ASEAN countries were also attracted by the economic opportunities that a huge market like India offered after its opening. Equally significantly, the China factor too started weighing heavily in several ASEAN quarters particularly after the closure of the U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1992 and the emergence of South China Sea dispute as a major security concern even as Beijing started ascertaining its claims more vociferously. Although New Delhi was overtly loathed the idea of becoming a counterbalancing power vis-a-vis China, it did not seem to beaverse to the idea of using Southeast Asian worries to advance its political and strategic interests. India was parti cuki%, Worried about growing nexus between China and strategically located Myanmar.

Approach

Political

As far as political engagement is two-dimensional: to establish institutional links and to target certain countries to elevate bilateral ties to a high place. After the initial Sector Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN in 1992. India became a full Dialogue Partner in 1995. Realising its potential to contribute to regional security and economic development, India was ntain 1996. and a summit partner of ASEAN called ASEAN Plus One since 2002. India has also hci .vc'edlr. **ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)** to underscore its commitment to ASEAN's principles with ASEAN have been further buttressed by the recent ASEAN-India partnership. Simultaneously, one can see a remarkable turn around in India's bilateral relations in particular with Singapore, the Indochina countries. Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia.

Phases of Look East Policy

1. The first phase marked enormous enthusiasm and a flurry of activity and exchanges.
2. By mid-1990s, there was considerable cooling down of earlier zeal by both sides, which got further dampened by the 1997-78 financial crisis.
3. The third and a more recent phase is the revival of interest once again.

Defence / Strategic

It is however on the defence and strategic front that India has made impressive progress. A sea change in the political atmosphere that Southeast Asia witnessed in the aftermath of the cold war. especially after the Cambodian issue was settled and looking at Vietnam as a potential ally of ASEAN, contributed to this in a big way. Moreover, India's military might in the emergent Asian balance of power could not be ignored any longer. The Southeast Asian nations began to look upon India as a power that could play a kind of 'balancing role' vis-a-vis China in particular. On the other hand, it was in India's interest to ensure that Southeast Asia would not be dominated by a regional great power once it became obvious that the superpowers were going to build-down their presence, which coincided with a similar thinking within Southeast Asia. The upshot of convergence of interests was the genesis of a new strategic interaction with several of the ASEAN nations.

A unique advantage India enjoyed was that its military, despite being dominated by the Moscow supplied equipment, had continued to maintain links with West Europe.

Critical remarks with regard to the ambitions of the Indian Navy were replaced by many instances of greater defence cooperation. A number of confidence building measures (CBMs) that India undertook and greater appreciation by the Southeast Asian countries of Indian maritime concerns ushered in a new era of cooperation which began to transcend beyond the naval contours. Aside from periodic naval exercises and the biannual get-together of regional navies, called the Milan. India has entered into bilateral defence cooperation agreements with Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Laos, and Indonesia. India has also been actively involved in assisting the armed forces of Myanmar and Thailand. For instance, Singapore has not only made use of India's missile testing range to test its own guns and missiles, but also uses Indian facilities to train its naval personnel- the first time ever that India has done for a foreign country. Similarly, the Thai pilots are being trained in India to gain experience to operate their aircraft carrier, and the Myanmar are getting anti-insurgency training. India and Indonesia have also frequently conducted joint patrolling in the critical straits of Southeast Asia ensuring security of sea lanes of communication. It is notable that India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia is the strongest compared to any other Asian power. One reason why India has been relatively more successful is that, apart from the absence of any border/territorial disputes and any historical baggage, India is seen to be not having any 'ambitions' in and posing no security threat to the region.

Economic

The Look East policy also gave a tremendous boost to economic ties between India and Southeast Asia. A number of institutional mechanisms have been put in place to promote economic exchanges both at the governmental as well as private sector level. The ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee and an ASEAN-India Working Group on Trade and Investment were set up along with the creation of an ASEAN-India Fund to promote trade, tourism, science and technology, and other economic activity. From virtually

little or no investment from Southeast Asia in the early 1990s, Malaysia and Singapore have emerged as the tenth and eleventh largest in terms of approved investments respectively by 2002. Thailand is in the 18th and Indonesia and the Philippines are in 33rd and 35th position respectively. Cumulatively these five countries constitute nearly 5 percent of the total approved investments in India. In the last few years there has been a spurt in Singaporean and Malaysian investments in India's large investments projects. The progress with regard to bilateral trade is also equally impressive. The growth in India's trade was the fastest with Southeast Asia compared to any other region between 1991 and 1997. While ASEAN exports kept the momentum, there was considerable slow down in imports as a result of the financial crisis in 1997-98. The exports grew from about US \$1.4 billion in 1993 to over 6.2 billion in 2000. Imports by ASEAN on the other hand increased from 1.4 bn to 4.4 bn in 1997 but nosedived to 1.71 bn in 1998 but have since picked up to reach about 3 bn in 2000. The US \$ 13 billion bilateral trade between India and Southeast Asia is expected to reach 30 billion in the next few years.

Despite repeated assertions of emphasis on economic aspects, India lags far behind other powers, for its share in trade and investments in Southeast Asia is relatively less significant. Hence, India has put across concrete plans to increase the economic interaction and integration through a number of new initiatives. Apart from creating an ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC), in the first-ever meeting of India and ASEAN economic ministers in Brunei in September 2002, the Indian trade and industry minister offered to enter into a formal agreement with ASEAN on the Regional Trade and Investment Agreement (RTIA) or a free trade area (FTA) which has since been agreed upon to be realised by 2016. New Delhi is also in an advanced stage of finalising agreement with Singapore and Thailand to create bilateral FTAs. As the Indian economy expands, it is also providing enormous investment and trade opportunities, which countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are quickly grabbing. Both the premiers of Singapore and Thailand have often expressed concern over excessive dependence on the Chinese market and the need to look at another big country like India more

closely. This is the thinking that is getting reflected in the Vesfof SoUtlieastA'sia.

The China Factor

Insofar as the China factor is concerned, questions have often been raised as to what extent India's policy toward Southeast Asia is influenced by this. It is rather difficult to give a definite answer. China certainly was high on New Delhi's strategic calculations when it attacked Vietnam in 1979, which led India to openly empathize with Hanoi (the only non-communist country to recognise the Vietnam-installed Cambodian regime). There is no evidence to suggest that the Look East policy itself was aimed at China. The about-turn in policy toward Myanmar since 1992, however, is to an extent because of the close nexus between China and Myanmar. If China is strong in terms of economic interaction with Southeast Asia, India has a clear edge in the defence/strategic arena. It is obvious that one of the reasons why ASEAN was keen to bring India into the regional affairs was the concern with China. It nevertheless needs to be underscored that there are at present no signs of rivalry or competition for influence between India and China in Southeast Asia. It is hoped that Southeast Asia is a large enough region and the multilateral institutions are strong enough to accommodate the interests of great powers so that the region will not become a battleground for influence. Neither India nor ASEAN wants to create the impression that India's involvement in Southeast Asia is because of China.

Look East Policy and Support to Multilateralism

An interesting facet of India's Look East policy is the newfound interest in regional multilateralism. Although India has been a member of the Commonwealth and more recently the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Indian Ocean Region Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC), New Delhi had always been wary of political/security issues becoming part of the agenda of these fora. Quite often it appeared as though New Delhi did not have much faith in the role and significance of regional multilateralism other than global mechanisms. India not only has moved away from that position to actively supporting them but has become instrumental in creating several new ones. Surely, it was not a

founding member, but India lobbied hard to get into the ARE and became its member in 1996. As part of the ARF's CBM agenda, India has for the first time presented a fairly detailed Security Outlook paper to the Forum in 2001. The earlier reticence has given way to active participation in a variety of ARF's activities both at the official as well as unofficial CSCAP levels.

Second, India also has come up with a number of new multilateral initiatives involving Southeast Asian countries. Prominent among these are the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BBIMTEC) with India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand as members in 1997, and the Ganga-Mekong Swarnabhumi (India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) in 2000.⁵ Among these, the BBIMTEC, involving five South and two Southeast Asian countries, appears to be the most promising for a variety of reasons. Aside from underscoring its eastward thrust, India appears to look at BBIMTEC as an alternative to SAARC to kick start sagging South Asian economic cooperation efforts, to build yet another bridge between South and Southeast Asian regions, to address economic development issues of the volatile Northeastern region, to create a sub-sub-regional energy grid, and to tackle other security issues of region, especially smuggling in light weapons, narcotics, and terrorism. Thus, one can once again notice a multi-dimensional approach in India's strategy. India has also entered into bilateral agreements with Myanmar and collective with BBIMTEC to improve the road and rail links. A road has already been made operational connecting India's northeast with Myanmar, which will be further extended all the way up to Singapore. Similarly, a rail link will also be established along those lines.

Non-Traditional Security Threats

In the last few years, a number of non-traditional threats have become so grave that conventional aspects like power balance and jostle for India is also a member of the Kunming Initiative, which has since been renamed as BCIM Forum comprising Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar in 1999, politico-economic influence have become secondary. Terrorism, a range of maritime-related security issues, gun running, drug

pedaling, illegal migration of people, etc.. have acquired such a serious dimension that they can only be tackled collectively. Southeast Asia is touted as the second front of terrorism and this region is susceptible to a variety of above threats, and given its close proximity sharing land and maritime borders with several countries. India would be all the more concerned. India has been trying to work closely with the countries of Southeast Asia to add these problems. Undoubtedly, the Look East policy has once again emerged as a major thrust area of India's foreign policy after some hiccups in the mid-1990s. It is one of the most comprehensive and successful policies that India has formulated in the recent past. India has indeed come a long way since the Cold War days when most of the then ASEAN countries perceived India to be in the camp of the former Soviet Union. Against this background, the progress that India has made in cultivating multi-faceted relationships with ASEAN and its member-states is remarkable.

Which the emphasis so far has been on Southeast Asia, this policy is being extended to the rest of the Asia Pacific region, which means a greater India involvement in the region. While developing links with ASEAN and other ASEAN-led multilateral institutions, India is also pursuing to qualitatively improve bilateral links with member states. Despite enormous progress made since its enunciation in the early 1990s, economic dimension remains the weakest leg. Nonetheless, undoubtedly New Delhi has carved an important niche for itself. And the Look East policy is responsible in making India an inalienable part of Asia Pacific's strategic discourse. Just a decade back most discussions on the Asia Pacific would be conspicuous by the absence of any reference to India. The important thing is that a number of institutional mechanisms have been put in place so that India's relationship does not suffer the fate as in the past.

Now that India has become a summit partner of ASEAN, it provides an opportunity for the top leadership to visit Southeast Asia every year for exchange of views with counterparts. The three distinct features of the Look East policy are: one, India has managed to develop a multi-faceted relationship; two, successful defence diplomacy has been put in place; and three India is not averse to participate in regional multilateralism, security or economic. It is expected that India's involvement in

and interaction with Southeast Asia will increase further in the coming years, which will result in an enhanced Indian involvement in the Asia Pacific.

India's Look East Policy

The changing geopolitical environment in Asia and in particular in the Indian Ocean region brings attention to the role of oceans in shaping a country's strategic and security policy. The launch of India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, *Vikrant*, and later, a military satellite from French Guiana, in August, appears to form an integral part of India's Asia-Pacific strategy or India's Look East Policy (LEP) 3.0 Strategy. China views the Indian aircraft carrier and military satellite as a power projection by New Delhi in the region. The view that these developments have contributed to India's efforts "to quicken its pace to steer eastward to the Pacific."

Look East Policy 3.0

According to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "it was also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy." Consequently, increasing trade ties between India and SEA has contributed to the expansion of relations in the areas of defence and security. As a result, relations between India and the region have acquired strategic characteristics in recent years. India's Look East Policy 3.0 refers to India's strategy of strengthening its relations with states in Asia-Pacific that are beyond the South East Asia region, extending to East Asia. It is safe to assume that the new version of India's Look East Policy has been shaped partly by China's rise and the manner in which Beijing is strengthening its position in the South and Southeast Asian regions both in terms of strategic ties with countries in the region and technological advancements like anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM).

Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region aided by the modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N) and its aggressive posture towards its neighbors has rekindled the maritime interests of India and other regional powers. The second factor that has called for an updated version of LEP is India's quest for external energy sources and its engagement in the South China Sea. Notably, India seems to be reorienting the basis of its Look East Policy in order to position itself as a strategically pre-eminent power in the region.

Eastern Ocean

Today, the Asia-Pacific region has reemerged as a major center of geopolitical interest. Several factors have contributed to this development. Strategic rivalries among major powers like an aggressive China, the United States with its focus on the region and a revitalized Japan, are intensifying in the region. Competition is more powerful today because more is at stake including natural resources and access to maritime sea-lanes.

The continued and ever-growing importance of oil, energy and other vital resources is a factor that contributes to the reemergence of Asia-Pacific as a theatre of strategic significance. Apart from being a major sea route connecting Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, around 40 percent of seaborne crude oil and 50 percent of the world's merchant fleet passes through this region.

At present, about 25 percent of all oil used by the United States and 80 percent of crude oil imports used by China and Japan pass through the Indian Ocean. The world is witnessing a growing competition over access to vital economic assets, "an interruption in the supply of natural resources would portend severe economic consequences." Consequently, the major powers now consider protection of this flow of sea-lanes of considerable importance and a significant national priority.

The Chinese thrust for energy security and its naval build-up have highlighted the significance of the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, one-third of Chinese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is attributable to foreign trade and it is the Indian Ocean that makes this trade possible. Access to the Indian Ocean can also be understood from yet another angle. With mounting tensions between China and Japan in ECS and the US pivot to Asia (who has its own allies like Philippines, South Korea and Japan already with whom China has maritime disputes) Beijing considers that having a strong presence in the Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific Ocean only will secure its strategic interest.

America's attention to the region has amplified due to its stated policy of a "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific. It is quite apparent that the region is expected to witness a heightened amount of tension

as the power equations in the region change from time to time, precisely because the region is so vast and diverse with countries that are at different stages of development and those that have formed alliances with one another or outside actors like the United States.

India's Maritime Strategic Interest

India's increasing energy requirements and growing economic power have evinced New Delhi's augmented interest in the affairs of the Asia-Pacific Ocean. New Delhi perceives this region as a potential opportunity for maximizing its strategic and security interests. In fact, India has always considered itself the major player in South Asia and the Indian Ocean as part of its sphere of influence. With almost 55 per cent of India's trade with the Asia Pacific transits through the SCS and India's maritime activities related to trade and exploration for hydro-carbons in the region and in particular in SCS in accordance with principles of international law have prompted India to look seaward the Eastern Ocean as part of its new version of LEP. Furthermore the increased maritime disputes related to fisheries management, maritime border and threats like seaborne terrorism and piracy had called for India's attention on maritime domain.

More importantly, though China is concerned about the US' presence in the region, it is equally or more concerned about India's moves considering India has a geostrategic advantage in the Indian Ocean owing to its geographic location, which could help India to contest China's interests in the region. Also as the largest power in the region. India is likely to be a victim of the emerging power politics in the future, if not armored with the required strategic posture i.e. naval preparedness, technological self-sufficiency and "readiness to accept a leadership role in providing the public good of maritime security."

The improved version of India's LEP 3.0 strategy appears designed to help New Delhi maneuver into a favorable position in the Asia-Pacific, without being directly involved in any internal conflicts but at the same time meeting challenges that might arise in the region. Enhancing greater relations with other regional players like Japan, Australia and South Korea further would provide a solid basis for India's LEP 3.0.

Drift in India's Look East policy

World attention has focused on East Asia in the past week with its annual high-level summits. The Indian and Chinese prime ministers were in Brunei among other major leaders, even while presidents Obama and Putin did not show up. The meeting, however, remained an important step for the Asian region.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprising countries in the East Asian region, has increasingly become a major economic regional block. It extended its partnerships with Japan, China and Korea creating the ASEAN plus three formation. Politics and economics dictated that ASEAN+3 increase interaction with other nations and an East Asian Summit was developed to follow- every meeting of the ASEAN+3. The US and Russia became members of this East Asia Summit. Then, the inclusion of another three countries Australia, New Zealand and India was accepted. India became a dialogue partner in 1995 with the ASEAN Regional Forum also.

The formal logic was that these three countries were concerned with the Indian and Pacific Ocean continuities of ASEAN and are an important part of East Asian economic interaction. The geopolitics was that ASEAN wanted some nations to balance China's influence. Yet others wanted to balance the US, and some Russia. This laid the basis of the East Asian Summit (EAS).

India's membership of this regional summit has benefits, problems and challenges. As the global economy integrates, the major powers are developing complex interfaces with each other and clearly India cannot be left out. The East Asian Summit is taking steps to create a more integrated East Asian Economic Community that is looking to create a solid Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia that will deepen economic integration. This integration will be based on Free Trade Agreements (ETA), which means that each country that signs these will lower their tariff protection for their own goods and services, lower tariff rates that were imposed on imports and open their markets for inflow of goods and capital. So far India's FTA with select ASEAN nations (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore) agreed to the flow of goods. Prime minister Manmohan Singh announced in this

summit that India was ready to sign the ASEAN-India FTA with all the remaining countries. The FTA would now extend to services, enabling India's strong service industry's entry into East Asia. India has also announced that it would open a dedicated mission to deal exclusively with ASEAN affairs.

Clearly, India has benefitted as its overall trade with ASEAN countries has increased to some US\$ 71 billion in 2012 and is targeted to reach 100 billion USD by 2015. However, India has a huge trade deficit as the imports from ASEAN nations far exceed the exports from India. There have been other fears also. For example, the Kerala government expressed concern that cheaper exports of rubber, spices and palm oil products could ruin their domestic markets.

The belief that the FTA will compensate its losses in agriculture by allowing to make up its trade deficit through its services sector needs to be strong. It cannot allow local agriculture to dwindle since it sustains an elite industry that employs much fewer people, who will benefit. So the way forward is to give further subsidies to those agricultural products that are suffering the consequence of these FTAs so they can survive and reinvent themselves.

The other geopolitical anxiety for India is the aggressive push by China. China's trade with ASEAN is likely to reach a trillion dollars, with the trade balance in China's favour. China has asserted its claims over the South China Sea over those of Vietnam and objected to Vietnam offering deep sea drilling rights to India. China also claimed several islands that the Philippines regard as their own, in addition China has long-standing issues with Japan. Others in the Asian frameworks view China with some trepidation. Thus, each country and regional formation has its own agenda vis-a-vis China but also with others.

Several countries would thus like to use India to balance China, since they are all familiar with India-China antagonisms as a competition. India, however, has to remain focused on the agenda which serves the people of their country and protect their interest by ensuring that they do not fight other countries' battles. The only way they can hold their own against China is to make sure their internal vitals in terms of security,

economy, and cohesive democratic politics continue to strengthen.

Another issue in India's Look East Policy is that it should engage India's own east, which is connected with the ASEAN countries. India has been slow in this direction, since it has to build its economic and security structures in this region. It can, for example only revive the Manipur-Mandalay Road if there is peace in Manipur. Again, the project for the Nalanda University was announced at an East Asian Summit.

The ancient significance of Nalanda as the site for Buddhist enlightenment from the 13th to the 15th centuries and its impact on all of East and Southeast Asia remains a symbol of India's close and common heritage and linkage with the rest of Asia. But despite the assistance given for this university, it has barely moved despite a well-paid vice chancellor. This is because Bihar offers no adequate infrastructure for an international university.

So, besides summits, FTAs and agreements of trade and security architecture, India has simultaneously to make the right connections between its internal and external policies. Many of the ASEAN nations have done this. The removal of antagonisms between ASEAN countries, their close co-operation, their declaration as a nuclear-free zone have all been steps in the right direction.

India is expanding its footprint across the Southeast and East Asia along the periphery of China. India's relation with 10-member Asean, or Association for Southeast Asian Nations, is not merely about economics. The current India-Asean Summit showcased that Delhi is quietly but surely building strategic partnerships across the region, with China in mind.

While India's policy cannot be termed as "replication of Chinese strings of pearls strategy", there is no doubt that Delhi is expanding its footprint in various strategic sectors across the Southeast and East Asia along the periphery of China.

The very idea of an Asean mission, with a full-time resident Indian ambassador, reflects growing strategic ties between the two entities. It was in last December that the ties were elevated to the strategic level during the commemorative summit that India hosted in Delhi. India's growing defence ties with

Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are adding to the discomfiture of Beijing.

Similarly, China, with its diaspora across several Southeast Asian nations and economic might, has a strong presence in the region. However, the overwhelming presence and territorial ambitions of Beijing are worrying these small nations. On the contrary, India's image is benign. Also, Delhi is careful not to align with the US and is following a strategy based on its national interests.

Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines have refused to budge before the Chinese diktat and a wary Singapore is seeking greater Indian presence to balance Beijing.

India, on its part, refuted Beijing's pressure to withdraw from Vietnam's oil block in the South China Sea region. At the Asean Summit in Brunei, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh minced no words when he said that a stable maritime environment is essential to realise our collective regional aspirations. We should re-affirm the principles of maritime security, including the right of passage and unimpeded commerce, in accordance with international law, and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes.

The Southeast Asia's importance lies in the fact that it is India's bridge to the East Asia and Asia-Pacific region. While India has strong strategic and economic ties with Japan and South Korea and its relations with Australia are growing, it is yet to emerge as a player in the Asia-Pacific.

However, the potential of India and the Southeast Asian relations and cooperation is yet to be exploited fully but consistent initiatives have made most analysts and observers hopeful.

India's 'Act East' Profile : The Strategic and Military Dimension

India's 'Act East' profile political and economic spheres only. Strategic and military turbulence in East Asia and South East Asia generated an unstable security environment. India was not a party to the regional disputes of Asia Pacific of which East Asia and South East Asia were parts of. Nevertheless, India could not remain a detached observer of conflictual regional events as they impacted on India's security and national interests. It needs to be noted that India and ASEAN

share overlapping security environments and share virtually the same strategic concerns. Furthermore, India as an emerging power was expected and increasingly being looked upon by ASEAN Region as a counterweight to China's perceptually threatening military profile. ASEAN was expecting India to play the role of a 'Regional Balancer'.

The United States going by the statements of its top dignitaries at international forums in the region expected India to be the "net provider of security in the Asia Pacific". That stands supported by other Western nations. India has always traditionally been reluctant to join military alliances or security networks but despite that reluctance what has become increasingly visible in India's 'Act East' profile is the adding of bi-lateral strategic and military dimensions.

In East Asia, India has a strategic dialogue with Japan and South Korea, exchange of visits by Defence Ministers and Armed Forces Chiefs. India conducts naval cruises in Western Pacific and conducts joint exercises in the region. On a higher plane the US-Japan-India Trilateral and US-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral indicate integration with security initiatives in the region.

In South East Asia, India has substantive strategic and military dialogues with ASEAN nations. Heading the list are Vietnam and Singapore. Added to this list are also Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. India also enjoys close military relations with Myanmar. In short the strategic and military tapestry that India has woven now extends from South Korea and Japan in the North to the South China Sea littoral ASEAN countries and extends all the way to Straits of Malacca. Myanmar and India's island territories of Andaman & Nicobar Islands sitting strategically on the approaches to Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.

India's Interests In the South China Sea

The South China Sea extends from the Straits of Taiwan and extends all the way to the Straits of Malacca. The South China Sea therefore is virtually located at the doorsteps of India. Overlapping security concerns between India and ASEAN countries are therefore a legitimate outcome. India has therefore a legitimate security interest in the security and stability of the South China Sea region as any turbulence in this

region could adversely impact India's national security interests. Apart from the strategic importance of South China Sea to India's security interests, this maritime expanse is vital for India's trade and commerce. The South China Sea is also vital for India in relation to its energy security in relation to its Sakhalin supplies from Russia.

Politically, the ASEAN littoral countries of the South China Sea count on India for support against any dominance of the South China Sea by a single power. China has demonstrated by its Nine Dash Declarations and the South China Sea as China's "Core National Interest" Declaration that it claims sovereignty over the entire South China Sea. This claim is not acceptable regionally or globally.

Globally and regionally it has been asserted that the South China Sea is "Global Commons" and these are international waters through which international maritime traffic including naval movements have the right of unimpeded access and navigation. The United States has declared that security in the South China Sea is a national security interest of America.

India strongly supports the stand of the international community on this score and it has been reiterated and asserted at India's apex political levels.

The ASEAN-India Vision Statement of 2012 states the same: "Committed to strengthening cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation and safety of sea-lanes communication and unfettered movement of trade and commerce in accordance with international law's (UNCLOS)".

The question that is often asked is as to whether India would come to the assistance of Vietnam or the Philippines or any other ASEAN country in the event of Chinese aggression and armed conflict in the South China Sea. The short answer would be that in the event of such an armed aggression or conflict escalation contingency, a 'stand-alone' response from India is not expected by the Region. In such a contingency it would be a strategic gauntlet thrown by China at the international community with deep regional and global implications.

The international community would have to unitedly face such a contingency and it is my personal belief that India would not be found wanting in not supporting

international community's actions. While India in relation to the South China Sea as a responsible stake-holder is committed to conflict prevention and peaceful conflict resolution of the South China Sea, it cannot remain oblivious to a threatening maritime environment. Which presently menaces the South China Sea and later may manifest in the Indian Ocean.

India's own maritime and naval postures have adopted an eastward orientation with greater emphasis on reinforcing the operational capabilities of its Eastern Naval Command, the Tri-Service Command in the

Andaman & Nicobar Islands now to be headed by an Indian Navy Vice Admiral. Maritime aerial surveillance backed up by Indian Air Force strike capabilities is also being reinforced in Eastern India.

India is presently engaged through various protocols in 'capacity-building' of self-reliant naval and maritime capabilities of a number of ASEAN nations along with other responsible stake-holders in the South China Sea. In fact, conflict-escalation in the South China Sea has been a 'wake-up call' for ASEAN as a whole where complacency is no longer advisable and an unquestioned unity is a strategic imperative.