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**STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE AND  
COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC**

**“India’s Engagement with East Asia”**

*by*

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## **India's Engagement with East Asia.**

### **Introduction**

India is now in the second decade of its intensified engagement with East-Asia or in 'Look East Policy' as is euphemistically described. Ever since the end of the Cold War and following the initiative taken by some of the members of ASEAN as well as India, a new development of regular dialogue and closer interaction has been witnessed between East Asia, especially South East Asia and India. This approach has been seen in India as a practical and dynamic response to South East Asia's invitation to engage India. This enabled India to effect a suitable course correction in its foreign policy and constitutes a very important and integral element of India's external relations. Much has been talked and written about India's 'Look East Policy' in recent years. No doubt, this approach is still evolving and needs to get more substantial in content as even after 15-20 years, India's presence in East Asia remains marginal. An objective assessment as to where India stands today in its engagement in East Asia therefore becomes a primary requirement. A number of questions arise, such as – is the engagement policy being centred on East Asia as a whole, and has it been focused only on a limited number of countries in Southeast Asia ? Has the Look East Policy served India's strategic interests adequately? Another question can also come up ,namely, does India with its rapidly growing bilateral relations with major countries of East Asia, for example ,China need a

regional approach when substantive contacts especially in the economic field have developed bilaterally? On the other hand, there can be a counter-question whether in the Asia-Pacific region which is fast developing a spaghetti bowl of regional groupings, can India afford to lower its interest in participation in regional arrangements? Clearly, India is a stake-holder and a major one at that in ensuring peace, security and stability of the Asia-Pacific and has to position itself accordingly in the region which is described as the upcoming centre of gravity of geopolitics and geo-economics.

Why “the engagement with East Asia? – what are the main considerations for India?

India’s recognition of the changing reality of the Asia-Pacific following the end of the Cold War and the initiation of a dialogue with ASEAN at political, security or economic levels was one of its diplomacy’s high point. When Singapore Prime Minister spoke of an ‘India fever’ in the early 90s and after a few years referred to India as “the western wing of the ASEAN aircraft’, the vision outlined by India’s former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao at the ISEAS Singapore Lecture in 1994 found itself well enmeshed with the new logic proposed by ASEAN. Since then, there has been rapid progress of India’s entry and participation in a number of key arrangements crafted by ASEAN in the region. They include dialogue partnership with ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum(ARF), Summit partnership with ASEAN and East Asia Summit(EAS). India and ASEAN in the last decade and a half have indeed come a long way. With the signing of the ASEAN-India free trade agreement in 2009 a milestone in their relationship was reached. With other countries of East Asia, namely China, Japan and South Korea, India’s contacts have substantially grown bilaterally as well as regionally through the interface at ARF, EAS or annual ASEAN conferences.

Curiously, India's renewed engagement in East Asia had to await nearly 30 years after having experienced a number of misunderstandings and misperceptions about each other in the region. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the continuing volatile situation in India's western neighbourhood, the on-set of globalization and gradual rapprochement in Indo-US relations provided the backdrop. India had interacted very closely with a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific following India's independence in 1947 ( and even before at the Asian Relations Conference organized by the Indian Council of World Affairs(ICWA) in March, 1947) and India's diplomatic actions with Korea, Indo-China, Indonesia and Burma formed a significant component in the formulation of India's own foreign policy leading to non-alignment, independence of action, and peace and development.

### India and regionalism in the Asia-Pacific

India's engagement with East Asia was perhaps its first attempt to recognize growing multi-polarity in the Asia-Pacific region and brought it face to face with the dynamic economies of the region. The reasons for India's quest to becoming a partner in this multi-polar region were both political and economic. Security and stability in the Asia-Pacific were a sine qua non for India's own development. The dividing line between the Pacific and Indian Oceans was beginning to get blurred with the Pacific powers such as China exerting increasing influence on the issues of energy or maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Economically, the export-led economies of Japan, the 'flying geese' plus the 'new tigers' from Southeast Asia and the rapidly modernizing and liberalizing China loomed very large on the eastern horizon of India. If the Indian economy were to remain competitive, it was imperative that India developed closer ties with these economies. Indeed, India had few options.

India's experience with regionalism had been marginal, if not practically nil. SAARC, though initiated in 1985 had not progressed much due to differences within South Asia. Till the end of the 90s, India had no free trade agreement except with Nepal and Bhutan entered into in the 50s. The last 10-12 years have seen a major shift in India's approach towards regionalism and also regional or sub-regional free trade agreements. A question often arises whether a large economy like India (which is also mainly dependent on domestic market) can do without taking the route of regionalism. In a sense, India's engagement in East Asia provided that answer. No country, howsoever large and powerful can do without regional cooperation and integration. Indeed, today no country is totally independent in that sense. The Look East policy provided India a suitable access and a route to regional cooperation arrangements and economic integration process. India's partnership with ASEAN, membership with ARF and EAS brought a trans-regional exposure and opportunity. India has so far not been invited to join Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). It is to my mind, a major gap in the overall process of economic integration that is underway in the Asia-Pacific region. The Indian economy is one of the fastest growing in the world (expectations are that the growth rate may exceed 8% in this fiscal). India which escaped the recent global financial crisis relatively unscathed was invited last year to the newly created G-20. It is important that India has the opportunity to participate in all the regional groupings in East Asia.

### Look East- a priority in India's foreign policy

Engagement with East Asia can be argued as one of the most important priorities of India's foreign policy. Several reasons can be cited in this regard.

- a) The Asia-Pacific region is home to nearly half the world's population.

b) It has four major regional powers namely China, Japan, India, ASEAN ; and the US as a preponderant influence and a resident power.

c) Japan is still the world's second largest economy. The economies of China, India and some of the ASEAN members have proved to be resilient. They are rapidly growing and have large foreign currency reserves.

d) Nearly 50% of global trade including energy originates and moves through this region.

e) On the flip side, there are still a number of bilateral or regional issues that remain un-resolved and can be potentially dangerous for peace and stability.

f) In the up-coming Asian century, the inter-play of powers in the region with traditional and non-traditional security concerns will expectedly dominate the global scene.

India's own strategic goals can be influenced here. The rising India is emerging as a key player not only in the economic exchanges but also in the management of peace and security in the region. This role puts the Look East policy at the fore-front of India's external relations.

### An Assessment of India's policy

In assessing India's approach to engagement with East Asia, a question that comes up is whether India's policy is a reactive response or has it been based on India's own initiative? Has India only reacted to ASEAN's vision of a new Asia-Pacific in which they sought a role for India? In analyzing this it can be argued that India had indeed moved fairly swiftly as soon as the clouds of the Cold War had blown over and a new alignment of forces was becoming discernible. India had participated actively in the consultations among regional players which led to the settlement of the Cambodian crisis in the early 90s. The emergence of a modernizing China was also not lost sight of in India. The historic visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988 and his talks with the Chinese leader Deng

Xiao Ping was of path-breaking nature. India's assessment of the imperative need to catch up with the dynamic 'tiger economies' of East and Southeast Asia was no less critical. On the other hand it can also be stated that it took the imagination and foresight of Singapore and a few ASEAN leaders to bring India into a dialogue with Southeast Asia and East Asia. Admittedly, therefore, India's engagement with East Asia is due to a combination of both – a reactive response to the geopolitical and geo-economic developments in its eastern neighbourhood and also its own initiative to craft a creative approach to meet the new challenges in the region. That this policy could have possibly served India's interests more effectively if it had been initiated a decade earlier is besides the point. After all a host of domestic as well as external factors go into the making of foreign policy . That India is today firmly embarked on the path of its engagement with East Asia is perhaps more important.

### India and the Inter-play of Major Powers in the Region

Two issues come to mind with regard to India's above approach. One is the level of the U.S interest and influence in the region; and the other is China's drive and growing profile. The Bush period with the U.S pre-occupation with Iraq and Afghanistan was looked upon as a long neglect of East Asia by the U.S Administration. The indications in the Obama Administration are, however ,more positive. President Obama attended the Singapore APEC Summit; Secretary of State Clinton has visited a number of countries, both in Southeast as well as Northeast Asia. She also paid a visit to India. The U.S and India held their strategic dialogue in Washington on June 1-4. The U.S has appointed a special envoy to ASEAN and also signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN. Its alliance with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines remains as strong as before. That said, the U.S does not seem to have come up with any new initiatives or proposals to address the issues of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific.

Thus, it may be stated that while the U.S presence including its naval posture in the Asia-Pacific is dominant, the general perception in the region that the U.S influence is on the decline is not without basis. With India's improving ties with the U.S following the defence cooperation agreement and the Indo-U.S Nuclear deal, a strategic partnership between the two is evolving. There is growing cooperation on maritime security issues . The backdrop of a friendly relationship with the United States can become a positive factor for India in promoting its bilateral relationship with a number of countries in East and Southeast Asia ,many of which are closely linked with the U.S.

Frequent leadership changes and long financial stagnation seemed to have led to a relative absence of interest of Japan to play a meaningful role in the Asia-Pacific region. Over a decade or more, this contributed to creating a strategic vacuum which China has moved to fill. Even though of late Japan's economy is showing recovery and the country had taken steps to deploy its non-combative forces in the Indian Ocean or Cambodia , Japan still does not appear fully ready to play an effective role in the region. Evidently Japan's priorities appear centred on strengthening its alliance with the U.S and managing its fast expanding economic relationship with China.

In considering India's engagement with East Asia, the inter-play among major powers in the region would be a critical and also determining factor. The U.S-China relationship described by the U.S leaders as the most important one has clearly survived the strains – Tibet, Xinjiang, global financial crisis, climate change and so on. The scale of interdependence is such that the two powers will somehow find a modus vivendi in handling their multi-dimensional and voluminous relationship. The U.S-Japan



relationship is traditional though after the historic win by the Democratic Party for the first time since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War there was a sense of uncertainty. China-Japan ties too are focused on their huge trade and investments and the rapidly growing economic stakes do not seem to permit outstanding political issues or traditional prejudices between the two to come in the way. ASEAN is going through a turbulent period with the situation in Thailand still remaining highly uncertain . In Indonesia and the Philippines, on the other hand, there have been impressive gains for democracy . ASEAN's pursuit of creating a Security, Economic and Social Community by 2015 is on course though there appear several forces, both external and from within , which may pose hurdles. The Korean Peninsula is perhaps one region where stability and peace still seem elusive ,especially after the recent incident of the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel.

### India's equations with the region

I have outlined this brief overview of the Asia-Pacific scene to highlight the present context in which India will be developing its bilateral as well as regional equations. In recent years it has been India's consistent efforts to build on the positives in its relations with the countries of the region. Political as well as economic ties have been steadily promoted. India's nuclear tests in 1998 had created a sharp reaction amongst many countries ; but that receded several years back. In fact, a number of these countries extended their support at the IAEA and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group in the Indo-U.S nuclear deal. While India's relations with the countries of the region can be broadly described as good and forward – looking it needs to be seen if they are keeping pace with the process of integration that is underway in the region and whether India is able to contribute substantially to the regional architecture that is being conceived

and attempted in the Asia-Pacific. As stated earlier, engagement with East Asia has now become an integral and indispensable component of India's foreign policy calculus. The challenge lies in structuring India's ties with the region in such a way that the level of interdependence and as a result mutual stakes become so high that they cannot be ignored or dismissed.

Politically, India's search for closer relations with Southeast Asia and East Asia was prompted by the relative stability and peace that this region offered in comparison to India's neighborhood within South Asia, the Gulf and West Asia. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia and the newly formed states presented an unstable and unsettled situation. India's engagement with East Asia was facilitated by Southeast Asia, which by the early 90s had emerged as a cohesive and dynamic region. In ASEAN's efforts towards developing regional or trans-regional mechanisms for peace, security or economic cooperation a number of factors could be discerned. Principally the 'China factor'- China's growing influence, both military and economic; the preponderant presence of the United States and Japan's economic interest and investment in the region. A number of security issues, both traditional and non-traditional bound the countries of ASEAN with these powers and so also with India when the latter was invited to the ASEAN Regional Forum and Dialogue Partnership. Today, questions are often raised whether ASEAN could continue to remain in the 'driver's seat' as regards the Asia-Pacific regionalism. ASEAN's inability to effectively address its internal issues such as the continuing political deadlock in Myanmar or the Thai-Cambodian or Indonesian-Malaysian border disputes seem to prompt such fears. The widening asymmetry in military strength between major powers such as the U.S, China, India on the one hand and several ASEAN countries on the other is another factor. Yet it can be

pointed out that the need for a cohesive and structured group facilitating dialogue among the powers in the region cannot be over-emphasized. Without such approach the whole region could start pulling in divergent directions thus endangering peace and stability. The pressure on ASEAN to be more direct and effective in dealing with issues of security and stability has been on the increase . ASEAN often finds itself unable to tackle internecine problems of governance or violence let alone take the lead in addressing such issues in the wider Asia-Pacific . Yet in the regional architecture by virtue of its geographical location, a benign and asymmetric military posture and equally importantly the norm of ‘ consultation and consensus’( musyawarah dan muafakat) the centrality of ASEAN’s role is crucial and irreplaceable and should remain so in the future. If there is no group like ASEAN to act as a catalyst to bring together on a common platform the major powers of the region there is unlikely to be any architecture and consequently prospects of integration may prove to be an illusion.

### ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

In creating the ARF, ASEAN showed a highly imaginative and visionary approach towards multilateralisation of security in the Asia-Pacific. Fifteen years later, the ARF is judged by the progress(or the lack of it) it has registered in confidence-building, preventive diplomacy or conflict resolution-the three pillars of the ARF process. And so also ASEAN’s record in steering the ARF vehicle. If considerations of sovereignty , national interest or balance of power have come in the way of progress in ARF, it should also be borne in mind that ARF is a unique multilateral mechanism where major powers have come together with weaker countries on a common platform to address issues of peace and security. It is

significant that the concept was accepted by all, big or small. It will be unrealistic to expect concrete results on issues of traditional security in a short span of time. Moreover, in the area of non-traditional security there have been useful gains. India regards the ARF process with its present format a very useful mechanism for furthering stability and security in the volatile region of the Asia-Pacific. There is, no doubt, room for improvisation which should come about through continued dialogue among the member states .

### Evolving Regional Groupings

In this context it would also be pertinent to look at the diplomatic discourse that has been in progress with regard to regional or trans-regional groupings in the Asia-Pacific for past several years. The institutions that have been set up here are diverse in their priorities . However, they all primarily relate to stability, political or economic, of the vast dynamic region. Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation ( APEC), Asia Europe Meeting(ASEM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN + 3, ASEAN Summit Partnership with ASEAN's dialogue partners , East Asia Summit (EAS) - these are some of the groupings that have been created in the Asia-Pacific region over the years. They vary in terms of their main focus or composition. They are still evolving while new ideas about an overarching holistic architecture are being proposed. The Australian proposal of an Asia-Pacific Community or the Japanese proposal of an East Asian Community emphasize the need to build a 'community' of like-minded nations . Any proposal of such nature should be inclusive as regards the composition; it should also be based on the principle of equality . Any suggestion that it is related to a 'concert of powers' will not be generally acceptable and practical. In India's policy of engagement with East Asia, it has held the view that its participation in the

regional arrangements will make a useful contribution to the objectives of the institutions . The East Asia Summit which brings together ASEAN plus six countries ( now proposed to include eight-namely, also the U.S and Russia) could be the appropriate all- inclusive forum taking into account multifarious regional needs such as traditional and non-traditional security , economic integration and dialogue and consultation for resolving bilateral or sub-regional disputes. India believes that with its stable political institutions including long-established democratic structure, robust and fast growing economy, knowledge-oriented society it can add useful value to the process of political stability and socio-economic progress that the EAS seeks to achieve on wide and diverse landscape of the Asia-Pacific .

Today, economic cooperation has emerged as the key impulse for any engagement , be it bilateral or regional. India's growing exchanges with East Asia are also driven by this consideration. Incidentally when India and ASEAN began their dialogue in the early-90s, politics rather than economics was the main driving reason. Trade, investment and technology cooperation were no doubt reinforcing factors. Following the Asian financial crisis , the economic rise of China and lately that of India and a world-wide trend towards free trade agreements, the emphasis on economic cooperation between India and Southeast Asia and now with the main economic locomotives of East Asia, namely, China, Japan and South Korea has substantially grown. India entered into a FTA (on goods )with ASEAN last year; signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement( CECA) with Singapore in 2005, with Thailand in 2003 and South Korea in 2009. Negotiations for an ASEAN-India agreement on services have already started. India is also discussing a CECA with Japan. Across the Asia-Pacific region the process of regional or sub-regional trade and economic

cooperation agreements appears in full swing. The ASEAN +3 process has seen substantial movement in just 10 years' time. The route that India is following with regard to economic integration with this region is aimed at maximizing the benefits of globalization. India –China trade stood at U.S \$60 billion by 2009-10 and China emerged as India's largest trading partner. India-ASEAN trade is expected to cross U.S \$ 50 billion by 2010. More than 50 % of India's trade is with East Asia. India has also seen the advantage of technology absorption and up- by widening its economic exchanges with the highly competitive and export-led economies of East Asia. There are a number of best business practices available ,particularly with regard to infrastructure, tourism , transport, hospitality etc sectors which India can usefully adopt even as it can offer its expertise in education, information technology, banking and stock exchanges etc. India has sought to increase interdependence with East Asia through greater economic and technological cooperation. A long-term goal of an Asian Economic Community has been under discussion with countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia. Closer economic integration within the region is already becoming discernible which can be a path-breaking development .

India's membership of G-20 ( there are also six other Asia-Pacific countries included in this group) can be a positive development for the process of economic integration in East Asia. Indeed, the East Asia Summit which is considering a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement can draw upon the common strengths and experience of the Asia-Pacific members of G-20 .

### **Bilateral relations- key to successful engagement**

As stated earlier, India's engagement with East Asia cannot be sustained without a strong bilateral basis. With countries of the vast region which

extends from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia to Australia and New Zealand India has excellent opportunities and possibilities to expand relations. With some of them there are long outstanding issues while in some cases there are temporary irritants. Just as the China factor was a principal consideration for ASEAN in developing mechanisms such as the ARF or the ASEAN +3, for India too China remains central in its engagement with East Asia. Be it the issues of traditional or non-traditional security, sea lanes of communications and maritime security, energy, resources, trade and investment in the region– India and China have their own priorities and policies . Relations with China is one of the most important foreign policy components for India. How do India and China manage their highly complex politico-strategic and rapidly growing economic relationship in the coming years may shape India’s policies with East Asia. This relationship can also impact on the political landscape of the Asia-Pacific. A number of major differences between China and India have come into sharp focus in recent times. However, the process of dialogue and mutual consultations on bilateral as well as global issues has been maintained. In fact highest level exchanges have recently taken place .

With countries of Southeast Asia, especially Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia , India looks forward to expansion in trade, investment, security cooperation in combating against terrorism and religious fundamentalism, maritime security, energy, education and culture .With Australia too, India’s exchanges in the fields such as trade, investment, energy, education etc have expanded. The strengthening of the democratic institution in Indonesia following last year’s Presidential and Parliamentary elections marks a new era in that country. India shares a great deal in common with Indonesia and

the two have a new opportunity to create a very substantive and mutually beneficial relationship.

The same holds good , in way or the other with respect to other countries of Southeast Asia ,in traditional security as well as non-traditional security areas. Institutional arrangements such as ASEAN-India FTA, BIMSTEC, Mekong Ganga Cooperation or ASEAN –India Convention on elimination of terrorism are already available. It is important that implementation of agreed projects or decisions is carried out on both sides expeditiously and effectively. The success of engagement lies in implementation.

Last year , India’s Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh proposed to establish an India-ASEAN Roundtable . This could provide the two sides with new ideas to promote their engagement further.

## Conclusion

What is the vision in India with regard to its engagement with East Asia? Clearly, it is seen that this policy has been both timely and useful. This enables regular and frequent high level exchanges between the two . East Asia and India are in many ways interdependent and have large stakes in mutual stability and security. This needs to be well understood on the two sides and the mechanisms of dialogue and cooperation constantly reviewed and improvised so that the opportunities available can be fully seized by both.

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