

INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY : ROLE OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

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1. **ASEAN**, the Association for South East Asian Nations was established in Aug 1967 in Bangkok. The five founding nations were Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore. Subsequently, it expanded to present strength of ten members, after Brunei joined in 1984, Laos & Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. The objective of this association is to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region through collaborative approach.

2. Over the years, ASEAN has grown in to a very important regional grouping, established its multinational administrative institutions to achieve its objectives. It expanded its role by establishing ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), extended membership to other major countries. The ASEAN has further steered and evolved a much larger forum of East Asia Summit (EAS), which includes SE Asia, East Asia, SAARC countries, USA and Russia. ASEAN has deepened its relations and cooperation with other multilateral institutions, as well.

3. **India & ASEAN**. India joined a limited 'Sectoral Dialogue' with ASEAN in 1992. However, India's strategic engagement with ASEAN began with our membership in ARF in 1996. ASEAN overruled objections from some of its other partners, particularly China, on India's admission to the ARF. Our Look East Policy, thereafter, started merging trade and economic engagement with issues of geo-strategic significance. The geographical outreach extended further eastwards towards Australia and Oceania. The 20th Anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership and the 10th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Summit Level Partnership was celebrated by hosting the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in Dec 2012 under the theme 'ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity'. Our interaction with ASEAN was also elevated to the level of Strategic Partnership in 20 12. Apart from ARF, India is also a member of ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, where the focus is on security, defence and strategic issues. As a strategic partner of ASEAN, India is actively associated with various ASEAN led fora dealing with defence and strategic issues. These include East Asia Summit, ARF, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. Our defence ties have expanded significantly with the countries in the region.

4. Importance of Asia Pacific Region. The emergence of China as a regional cum global power, delineated by robust sustained economic growth coupled with growing military might has altered the geo-strategic equations in the region. China's expansionist ambitions displayed through claims on various island territories in East and South China Sea, its muscle flexing in the South China Sea, in particular, has brought in to focus the Asia Pacific Region. The belligerent hegemonic stance of China in the region has sent ripples in the security domain of all the nations in the Asia Pacific region. The global geo-strategic centre of gravity has shifted in to this region, drawing US led power play, giving rise to new strategic partnerships and alliances to counter Chinese nefarious designs in the region. India is a rapidly emerging vibrant economy, particularly in light of Make in India Initiative, ASEAN countries would offer huge markets for our industry as well as goods.

5. Role of India : Emerging World Order. The onset of 21st century witnessed financial turmoil across the globe with large number of economies, including developed nations slipping into recession, some still struggling to stabilize their economy. However, in contrast, India not only withered the financial storm successfully but emerged stronger, as one of the fastest growing economies of the world, thus announcing its arrival in the centre stage of world power play. With global geo-politico-eco centre of gravity shifting towards Asia, has further brought the spot light on India. Displaying robust, sustained and resilient economic growth in troubled times, the world has accepted and welcomed emergence of India as a regional cum global power. In the emerging new world order, amity of nations, particularly the ASEAN countries, look up to India as a true balancing power in the diverse power play in geo-politico-eco-security spectrum in the region.

6. India : Look East Policy. Post independence in 1947 till 1991, for almost five decades, Indian economy grew at a dismal rate following the mixed economy, when India landed at the verge of default on international financial obligations. It was then that economic liberalization was ushered in the country, leading to gradual rise in economic growth, GDP rising to 8 to 9% in the first decade of 21st century. Thus, 1991 is a turning point in the history of Indian economy. Concurrently, this period witnessed break up of Soviet Union, which tacitly supported the country through the Cold War Era. These two metamorphic events in the last decade of 20th century brought a paradigm shift in the foreign policy of the nation. It was in Sep 1994, when PM Narasimha Rao, in a lecture in Singapore, adumbrated a vision of building closer relations with the countries of ASEAN. This vision came to be called the Look East Policy (LEP). The renewed vision to foster closer relations with countries in the India's extended eastern neighborhood was quintessentially a response to domestic economic challenges and the emerging geo-political environment in the region, marked by unipolar world order due to collapse of Soviet Union.

Thus, the economic reforms of 1991 and opening up of India's economy provided impetus to paradigm shift in the foreign policy. To emerge from the deep rooted economic crisis, India adopted two parallel paths ; domestic economic liberalization and external policy of LEP to help expand trade and investment with the dynamic ASEAN region. These two choices have undoubtedly transformed India's economy and foreign policy in the last 20 years.

7. Act East Policy. The LEP's changing profile and its increased geo-strategic significance has compelled us to adopt a more proactive approach which is now referred to 'Act East Policy'. In essence, India has to ennergise its LEP and act with more dynamism to remain relevant and play its rightful role in the region. The three important pillars of the Act East Policy are trade, investment and regional security. ASEAN is India's 4th largest trading partner. Bilateral trade was US \$100 billion in 201-15, with both sides committing to enhance it to US \$200 billion by 2022. Investment from ASEAN in India was around US \$25 billion in 2007-14, while from India to ASEAN, it was over US \$30 billion. We have Free Trade Agreement on Goods with ASEAN. In 2015, agreement was concluded on Trade in Services and investment and Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and India. Negotiations are on to forge a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which would involve ASEAN and six dialogue partners viz China, India, Japan, ROK, Australia and New Zealand. This would amount to creating ASEAN Economic Community and bolster further economic cooperation amongst these nations.

8. Re-calibration of LEP. To give impetus to Act East Policy, an Indian Ambassador to deal exclusively with ASEAN has been appointed. Keeping in view the importance of integration of NE states with neighbouring countries for the prosperity of the region, Bangladesh, though not part of LEP has been included and given primacy in the Act East Policy. Likewise, Myanmar, India's gateway to SE Asia is the key to the success of implementation of this policy. Thus, need to engage the nation post haste at all levels, particularly in light of new dispensation recently installed in the country. The implementation of the policy is also being pragmatically viewed in the context of US policy on Rebalance of Asia, which offers opportunities to India, US and other Asia-Pacific countries. To foster close cooperation and ties amongst India and US, a Joint Strategic Vision to guide their engagement in the region, was announced in 2015.

9. Infrastructure Bottlenecks. Notwithstanding, rapid policy initiatives being rolled out at multilateral fora as well as domestic levels, the infrastructure deficit by and large remains the biggest bottleneck in realizing the stated goals. The projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand highway, the Trans Asian Railway Project and the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project, once

completed would be game changers in the overall development of the region. There is a need for huge investment to obtain trans-national road-rail as well as maritime connectivity amongst the ASEAN countries to bolster trade and commerce.

Defence Diplomacy

10. Regional security in the Asia-Pacific Region is one of the three pillars of engagement with the ASEAN grouping. The geo-strategic landscape of Asia-Pacific Region is changing rapidly. The region with three largest world economies and several other rapidly growing economies is the most dynamic region in the world. China as a booming economy, a manufacturing superpower is scouting for energy resources and markets for its goods across the globe. Her hegemonic and expansionist outlook with rapidly growing military might seems unstoppable, which is demonstrated in its claims on disputed island territories in East and South China Sea. The power shift that is taking place from the trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific is creating turbulence in the international system. The US has adopted a policy of 'Rebalance Asia' to counter Chinese influence in the region by inviting and facilitating a stronger engagement with India and other regional players.

11. China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea, where it is embroiled in disputes with almost all the littoral nations, has peaked recently, with the stand-off between China and Vietnam, over oil exploration attempts by China at a site, claimed by Vietnam, as falling in its Exclusive Economic Zone. India has been allotted some off-shore oil blocks in the South China Sea by Vietnam, claimed by China. Chinese moves have raised the ante and disputes brewing in the South China Sea are cause of concern for all countries. India is encouraging all claimants to the disputed islands to maintain peace and find a solution within the UN's Law of Seas and ASEAN code of conduct. Whilst, US is playing a very vital role in countering Chinese juggernaut, the ASEAN countries as well as US, look up to India to play a true balancing role in the region to counter Chinese expansionist designs. Apropos, the ASEAN countries are reaching out to India at various levels for India to play an enhanced role in the power play unfolding in the Asia-Pacific Region. India too has huge economic and strategic stakes in this region safeguard the interest of the country. Since the security considerations against China are the major binding factor for the ASEAN countries, defence diplomacy can play a very vital role in forging strong bilateral relations with these countries. As a rapidly emerging global cum regional power, India needs to play the assigned role of balancing power in the region.

12. India as a Maritime Power : Blue Water Navy. The security dimension in the Asia-Pacific Region is primarily restricted to the maritime domain, coupled with the importance of IOR to India, it is a prerequisite for India to develop a Blue Water Navy in a time bound manner in the decades ahead, to protect national interests and play its rightful role in the maritime domain as a regional cum global power.

13. India's Role in ASEAN Fora. Over the years, ASEAN has evolved four important fora to deal with inter alia security related issues, viz EAS, ARF, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. India is an important member, participates in all these fora with the ASEAN. The evolving complex geo-strategic environment in the region is characterized by the belligerent and expansionist design of China against the East and South East Asian nations in the region, creating regional insecurity amongst these nations. These nations look up to India as a balancing power, define the contours of geo-strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific Region. It is imperative for India to play a very pro-active role in all these fora, particularly on regional security issues, prompt these nations to pass resolutions to stymie hegemonic designs of China.

14. Defence Cooperation with ASEAN Countries. The prevailing nebulous geo-strategic environment in the region is best suited to catapult our defence cooperation to the next level with all the ASEAN countries. Whist, these nations are looking for answers to the security related issues, India could quickly move in to fill the void, forge selective partnerships/alliances with these countries. It is imperative that India addresses concerns of each country separately to meet the security challenges. Thus, we need to pragmatically work out the scale and scope of bilateral engagements as well as defence cooperation with each country separately.

15. Multi-lateral Partnerships / Alliances. The non-alignment policy adopted by the country for last seven decades has prevented India from joining bilateral or multi-lateral partnerships / alliances, primarily to pursue an independent foreign policy. The geo-strategic environment emerging in IOR and Asia-Pacific Region in the 21st century, demands forging strategic bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships / alliances to promote national interests as well as regional security. In fact, forging of such alliances is the order of the day in the 21st century for peace, prosperity and global security. Thus, it is imperative for India to realign its policy with the contours of current regional security paradigm and forge alliances with USA, Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries. However, such alliances do not restrict our foreign policy options, could be realigned to safeguard our national interests with the emerging dynamic security paradigm.

16. Multi-lateral Maritime Exercises. China has encircled India in the maritime domain through establishment of military bases under the policy of String of Pearls, in fact string of thorns for India, developed in the Indian Ocean, which would undermine our maritime security. In the past, India has been carrying out only bilateral maritime engagements, which are being gradually promoted to multi-lateral engagements. In the complex security environment obtaining in the region, it is imperative for India to participate and promote multi-lateral maritime engagements in IOR as well as Asia-Pacific Region, to display intent and military might of such alliances. India could organize and participate in multi-lateral maritime exercises in the IOR and Asia-Pacific Region on yearly basis to promote maritime engagement with major players in the region.

17. Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Andaman & Nicobar Islands are strategically located, extend our reach in the maritime domain in the Indian Ocean and would play a pivotal role in maritime diplomacy and securing our national interests. In the era of partnerships / alliances, the collaborative approach to regional security, it is imperative for India to augment the security apparatus in these islands to play a strategic role. In the foreseeable future, India may be required to provide logistic support to the alliance partners, thus need to develop requisite infrastructure in phased manner in these islands. It may not be absurd to debate about establishment of maritime bases by alliance partners in these islands, albeit in a long term perspective.

18. Development of Deep Sea Ports in ASEAN Countries. India could explore development of deep sea ports in the ASEAN & IOR countries, particularly, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia, which would afford access to India during hostilities.

19. The ASEAN countries are pivotal to economic development of the country as well as promoting regional security in Asia-Pacific and IOR Regions. The geo-strategic dynamics obtaining in the region offer India an optimal opportunity to forge strong bilateral cum multilateral relations with ASEAN countries, to bring peace, prosperity and stability in the region. The security considerations in the region, rising primarily due to Chinese hegemonic designs have brought these nations closer and afforded vitality to this grouping. In the prevailing geo-strategic environment defence diplomacy would serve as an effective tool in bilateral and multilateral engagement amongst these countries. It is an opportunity for India, endowed with robust economic growth and resilient military might to play the role of a regional power, ushering peace, prosperity and stability in the region.