



## INDIA - ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: POST LOOK EAST POLICY

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## ABSTRACT

In consonance with its growing power, India is expanding its footprint well beyond its borders to serve its national interest. In geopolitical terms, the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the emergence of globalization paved the way for India to re-establish the close ties with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). India's emerging ties with the ASEAN nations has become an important element of India's foreign relations. India perceives the growing strategic partnership with ASEAN nations as crucial to fulfilling the promise of 21st century being an Asian century. This article reviews the developments in India-ASEAN strategic partnership post implementation of Look East Policy and its eventual upgradation as Act East Policy(AEP).

**KEYWORDS** : Look East Policy, Act East Policy, North East Region, ASEAN

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign India's pro-active approach towards Southeast Asia is best suited when the global geo-politics has shifted from Europe to Asia-Pacific region due to its geo-strategic and geo-economic implications in the emerging post Cold War global environment. There witnessed a paradigm shift in Indian approach towards Southeast Asia from benign neglect to that of constructive engagement, in India's Look East Policy(LEP), which eventually evolved as Act East Policy(AEP). Such a shift in its approach is an attempt to assert India's role and power in collaboration with the developed countries of the world to establish its place commensurate with its size, population and civilization in the changing global world order.

In consonance with its growing power, India is expanding its footprint well beyond its borders to serve its national interest. In geopolitical terms, the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the emergence of globalization paved the way for India to re-establish the close ties with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Strategic partnership between India and ASEAN (comprising of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) have witnessed a sea change after the formulation of the LEP by India. The post Cold War developments at the regional and global level such as liberalization of the Indian economy, and the launch of the much needed 'Look East policy' by India, have compelled India and ASEAN to strengthen the partnership and play a more proactive role in regional and world affairs. By working closely together, the economic, security and strategic needs of India and ASEAN nations can be fulfilled.

India considers ASEAN nations at the core of its well articulated LEP because of its potential as a major strategic partner and as a source of FDI flows. The geo-strategic importance of Southeast Asia can be gauged from the location of the latter in close proximity to the former. India is just 45 kilometres away from the Coco Island of Myanmar, 450 kilometres away from Thailand and 700 kilometres from Malaysia. If measured from the Andaman and Nicobar islands, India is only 145 kilometres from Indonesia and 175 kilometres from Malaysia. It also shares a land border with Myanmar. Furthermore, India too has a vast diaspora with the total size of 4.6 million migrants spread all over the region. This makes India-ASEAN collaboration a natural process.

India's emerging ties with the ASEAN nations has become an important element of India's foreign relations. India perceives the growing strategic partnership with ASEAN nations as crucial to fulfilling the promise of 21<sup>st</sup> century being an Asian century.

The ASEAN nations have in the recent past been trying to position India as an important strategic partner. India became an important partner for South East Asian Nations from being a sectoral dialogue

partner in 1992 to a full dialogue partner in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, and a summit level partner in 2002. The same has been upgraded to Strategic partnership since 2012. India observed its 25 years of their Dialogue Partnership, 15 years of Summit Level interaction and 5 years of Strategic Partnership with ASEAN by undertaking a wide range of activities, both in India and in ASEAN Member States.

## Conceptualizing Strategic Partnership

On the basis of the common understanding developed during the last two decades, India and ASEAN have entered into the following agreements:

- Sectoral dialogue partner with the ASEAN in 1992 and a full dialogue partner in 1995.
- A member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996.
- A summit level partner (on par with China, Japan and Korea) in 2002.
- Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation was concluded in Bali in 2003.
- India has acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2003, on which ASEAN was formed initially in 1967.
- An ASEAN-India Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism on 8 October 2003 in Bali, Indonesia.
- Agreement on "India-ASEAN Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity" was signed at the 3rd ASEAN-India Summit in November 2004.
- Finalised FTA negotiations in August 2008.
- Agreement on Trade in Goods under the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in August 2009
- Indo – ASEAN Disputes Settlement Agreement in 2009.
- Indo – ASEAN Trade in Service Agreement in 2014.
- Indo – ASEAN Investments Agreement in 2014.

## Factors Influencing India-ASEAN Engagement

The major factors that have influenced India and ASEAN to come closer towards active engagement are as under:

- Emergence of globalisation.
- Change in global strategic environment.
- New found ASEAN's political and strategic importance in the Asia-Pacific region.
- India and ASEAN's long-term GDP growth.
- India's changing role in the twenty-first century.
- Convergence of economic and strategic interests.
- Shared vision on a range of issues.

## Strategic Significance of India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

The multi-dimensional aspects of relations between India and ASEAN nations have gained strategic significance when they do not have any bilateral territorial disputes, security concerns or any sort of conflict. The mutual engagement holds immense significance for bringing peace, security and equitable economic development in a region that is undergoing rapid change and transitions. Together,

they could enhance Asia's ability to usher social and economic change, overcome several security related concerns thereby maintaining stable security in the region. India-ASEAN partnership in the twenty-first century are at the threshold of significant potential by virtue of the gravitation of a number of strategic, economic and political factors. It is essential that all-round ties be steadily deepened so that both emerge stronger not only to face the post-Cold War challenges in the areas of security, politics and economy, and also to shape the future of Asia and the world.

### Converging Strategic Interests between India and ASEAN

India and ASEAN can help each other in the fulfillment of common objective by enhancing mutual cooperation in the political, economic and strategic sphere. India and ASEAN have in recent past developed close convergence in their security perspectives. The common interests that both India and ASEAN share includes:-

- India – ASEAN Strategic Partnership
- Supporting Peace, Security and Stability in the Region
- Combating Terrorism and its Related Activities
- Security of the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs)

### India and ASEAN post AEP

Today ASEAN nations have become an inevitable partner for India and vice versa and will continue to be in the coming decades. Going by the current trend, the future of India and ASEAN cooperation in political, economic, technological and military ties holds great prospects. In fact, India's effort to improve its relations both at multilateral level with the ASEAN and, at bilateral level with each of the members of the association paid significant dividends at every aspect of engagements.

The economic complementariness and the socio-cultural affiliation with the region offer an opportunity for deeper engagement. With gaining political understanding India has not only proved itself to be a reliable partner but also as a co-investor of political and economic stability in the region. The imperative for stronger ties stems from the political and security environment, globalisation and its associated technological changes, and institutional foundations.

The absence of conflict on vital issues and the presence of common challenges make it possible to rapidly expand ties between the two sides. It is necessary that this window of opportunity to build strong relations be grasped and institutional mechanisms created to advance them on a long-term basis, and impediments removed. Over the past years, ASEAN-India cooperation has deepened and broadened to several new areas such as health, transport and infrastructure, small and medium enterprises, information and communication technology (ICT) and agriculture. The maturing strategic partnership should reflect to the shaping of the world. And any further strengthening of the relations would require strong political commitment. While holding a dialogue at the strategic, political and economic level, they must explore more areas of strategic cooperation where there is significant untapped potential. India and ASEAN need to focus on cooperation in enhancing connectivity through land, sea and air. This can be synergised through joint development of infrastructure such as transport networks, ports, shipping and air connectivity for greater regional economic integration.

The present state of interactions between India and ASEAN is not free from limitations. One of the key factors that loom large on India-ASEAN relations is the China factor. Secondly, India still does not have a clear cut interests, concerns and strategic stakes clearly, which often results in considerable confusion, especially in Southeast Asia. Besides, India's unwillingness to be seen as antagonizing other players is also playing a part that has not allowed India's deep penetration into the region. The high levels of interactions between India and ASEAN members have grown considerably in recent years which are a good sign for both. The partnership holds ample potential for a successful future.

### CONCLUSION

The nature of the relationship between India and ASEAN has undergone a significant transformation from being a benign neglect to constructive engagement in the recent past. With LEP, upgraded to AEP, the relationship has seen an upward trajectory after the successful formulation. The LEP has been the key to India's gaining strategic weights in the region of Southeast Asia and beyond. With gaining understanding between India and ASEAN, the partnership gained endurance and comprehensiveness. Both India and ASEAN have made remarkable progress in their engagement but still lot need to be done for the further growth and deepening of our mutually advantageous relations.

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