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India-Asean Relations in the 21st Century: Exploration of the China Factor

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Abstract- The India-ASEAN relation which is set on a new path of revelry in the 21st century cannot be discussed without mentioning the China factor in it. India and China still continue to have their own share of mutual suspicions and misperceptions about each other will continue to provide a major leeway for these Southeast Asian countries to try and play one against the other all the time. This reality captures the essence of India's present foreign policy vision .It now needs to be seen how far the "dragon" of the Asian continent is ruffled by the Indian "elephant" in the future.

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I. Introduction

It is said that there is no singular conception or idea of Asia. Varied conceptions of Asia have shaped in meaningful ways the destinies of its states and peoples. The durability of Asia has its underpinnings in regionalism. The stress put on regionalism is mainly regarded as a transitory measure, to provide a learning process for countries to emerge from a protective domestic economy towards a more open multilateral system. At the same time, regionalism is regarded as an insurance policy in case the global trading system cannot be sustained. In the economic field regionalism is regarded as a building block towards a more worldwide multilateralism. In the security field, regional cooperation is also regarded as a stepping stone towards the development of a more regional peace. Though an Asia, free of western hegemony remains a pipedream as the world gets more and more interconnected in the 21st century, time has come for reassertion of Asian independence. Asian independence is emerging against the backdrop of a more pluralistic, non-European, non-Western world. Asian economies are gaining in confidence to stand up in this changed situation. This is because there is space available to recast Asian relations away from the usual balance of power concept. In the Post-Cold war world configuration, India is no longer hostage to Cold war compulsions. It need not walk the tightrope of assuaging the Big Powers (Soviet Union and U.S.A) as well as follow an independent foreign policy. This has happened as the global political architecture has undergone a transformation with power shifting from the West to the East. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and the onset of the era of globalization and economic liberalization, a new narrative of renaissance and renewal is being written. India is at the centre of this celebratory and optimistic atmosphere where the Great Asian Dream has become a reality.

This reality captures the essence of India's present foreign policy vision which reflects an enlargement of vision and a continuous effort towards cultivation of resources towards cultivation of resources to increase its zone of influence, albeit in a more diplomatic and friendly manner without evoking sentiments that could brand India as a meddling power. Undoubtedly, this is basically where India has charted out a space for itself in the Southeast Asian region despite the overwhelming presence of the Chinese power. The 'east' is important for many cultures and religions. Southeast Asia, which is part of the larger Asia Pacific region, occupies an important place as far as India is concerned. The emergence of India into a glowing position in the global arena, coupled with a number of virtues like enormous size, huge population, convenient geostrategic locations, progressive military might, and meteoric economic growth inspired Southeast Asian nations to devise collaborative ties with India. The principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of others must be the bedrock of our cooperative endeavours. India's strategic and diplomatic maneuvers in Southeast Asia are signs of its intent to play a more substantial role in Asia. This objective is reflected in the formation of regional organization like Association of Southeast Asian nations formed in 1967. Its founding fathers had envisioned an organization which would include all the ten countries of Southeast Asia. It began with five Southeast Asian states like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand; and others including the LCMV countries like Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam joined later. The relation between these countries is symptomatic of the inter-connectedness of these different member countries, specifically within the same geographical region.

India-ASEAN relations are a reflection of the complex inter-dependence among these two entities in the international politics in the 21st century. Looking for uncharted territories and moving beyond the conventional zone of interest India has built bridges and tried to amplify the convergences between it and

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ASEAN. India has embarked on a projection of its rising power and pitched itself into a higher trajectory in its relations with ASEAN The relations got cemented and diversified with the introduction of Look-East Policy in the 1990s. As Dr Man Mohan Singh, Indian Prime Minister said, "India's Look East Policy is not merely an external economic policy; it is also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. Most of all it is about reaching out to our civilizational neighbours in South East Asia and East Asia."[1]

Though in the annals of its history, India has had extensive cultural, economic and political ties with the Southeast Asian nations, there has been a period of tumultuous relationship fraught with tension and suspicion. In the years after independence, the Southeast Asian region was completely overlooked by India for various reasons which need to be explored. India's rich civilization heritage followed by two centuries of colonization and the unique nature of freedom struggle have all contributed to the nature of India's foreign policy and foreign policy priorities. The leaders of nascent independent India were primarily concerned with the preservation of the new found political sovereignty and autonomy in international affairs which was under constant threat in the emergent Cold War characterized international system. Added to this, the direct security threat created by the partition of India and an assertive China coming to India's doorstep through annexation of Tibet created a complex that compelled India focus more on these two neighbours

A major characteristic of India's foreign policy comes from India's need for a fruitful association with the developed world to ensure steady economic growth that was of prime concern to independent India. This entailed that India avoids meddling with murky international affairs particularly where there was a tussle between the two superpowers was evident. Coming out of the colonial yoke, India had developed an anti hegemonic foreign policy ethos.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) afforded a greater degree of interaction between India and many countries which it had neglected earlier. India also had close relations with Moscow. All these exemplified India's twin formulations of security pragmatism and foreign policy idealism. But the pro-Soviet tilt in India's foreign policy drove a wedge between India and the Southeast Asian nations. India's proposal for a security arrangement in the region also did not go down well with the ASEAN countries as it was seen to be part of the Soviet Union's attempts to bring the region under its influence. ASEAN also did not support India's cause during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

Although NAM's credibility had started withering from the early 1970s onwards, India did not find any contradiction between signing a 'peace and friendship treaty' with the former Soviet Union and nonalignment. India had no option but to pursue the above policy given the serious security challenges it was faced with after a series of wars it had to fight between 1962 and 1971, and continued tensions in its immediate vicinity, including the Indian Ocean region. Thus during much of the Cold War era, India's foreign and security policies were dictated by events not only in South Asia but also the world in general.

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in India's relation with ASEAN. It has had a considerable impact on India's thinking. The resolution of the Cambodian conflict brought about a change in Indo-ASEAN relations. India extended support to ASEAN's efforts in establishing peace in Cambodia and bring the warring factions to the negotiating table at the Jakarta Informal Meeting. It was perceived that China was using the Cambodian issue to increase its influence in the region.

For a variety of reasons, the end of the Cold War came at a very opportune time for India, enabling it to suitably adjust and reorient its foreign and security policies as it opened up new opportunities to reinvigorate its activist policy. The foreign exchange crisis and poor economic performance forced India to radically change its economic policy from the earlier self-radiant, socialist model to market orientation. In a way, they were also instrumental in effecting changes to external policies. A number of changes, as a result, were brought about in the foreign policy domain.

Look East Policy: The most significant change has been brought about through the initiation of the 'Look East Policy'. In the early nineties the then Indian Prime Minister, PV Narsimha Rao initiated a new chapter as the 'Look East Policy' in Indian foreign policy paradigm. It soon became a multifaceted 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 .It was also an attempt to carve a place for India in the larger Asia Pacific. Thirdly, the Look East Policy was also meant to showcase India's economic potential for investments and trade. One can discern three distinct phases of this policy so far. The first phase is marked by enormous enthusiasm and a flurry of activities and exchanges. For instance, Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, in his national address in August 1993 made a special mention creating a "mild Indian fever" in Singapore. By mid-1990s, there was considerable cooling down of earlier zeal by both sides, which got further dampened by the 1997-1998 financial

[1] Asif Ahmed, 'India-ASEAN Relations in the 21st Century-Strategic implications for India', Eurasian Review, 2012.
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crises. The third and a more recent phase is the revival of interest once again.

As far as political engagement is concerned, it is two-dimensional: to establish institutional links and to target certain countries to elevate bilateral ties to a higher plane. India and ASEAN became partners for the first time when India became a Dialogue Partner at ASEAN Meet in1992. This relationship went on developing and consequently, India was invited to become a full Dialogue Partner at the fifth ASEAN summit held at Bangkok in 1995 and subsequently a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. At the economic level, the growth in Indo-ASEAN trade and investments was expected to be boosted following the successive sectoral and full dialogue partnership .Though late to open to the east, once consciously initiated, India's Look East diplomacy gained a swift logic of its own. India became a summit partner of ASEAN called ASEAN Plus One since 2002. India has also acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) to underscore it's commitment to ASEAN's principles for inter-state relations. Simultaneously, one can see a remarkable turnaround in India's bilateral relations with Singapore, the Indochina countries, Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia. The ASEAN India Joint Cooperation Committee and an ASEAN 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. 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 realized by 2016. One of the biggest points in the India-ASEAN relationship is that on the defense and strategic front India has made impressive progress. The upshot of convergence of interests was the genesis of a new strategic interaction with several of the ASEAN nations. Aside from periodic naval exercises and the biannual get-together of regional navies, called the Milan, India has entered into bilateral defense cooperation agreements with Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Laos and Indonesia. Moreover, the 26-day India-ASEAN Car rally that was flagged down in New Delhi on 21st December after a trip of 8000 kilometers and the voyage of INS Sudarshini further highlighted the indispensability for any meaningful integration.

The China Factor: The India-ASEAN relation which is set on a new path of revelry in the 21st century cannot be discussed without mentioning the China factor in it. In fact, ASEAN's unease over China's rapid rise is a key factor bringing India and ASEAN closer to each other. China remains India's most important Asian contender in its policy initiatives. India and China are not only two fastest growing major economies in the world at present, but are among the few countries that have continues to expand at a time when the economies at present contracted. They are defined by contrasting models of development, regime form, and compete not only for capital, resources and markets, but also for legitimacy in the global arena. They both believe in a rigid defense of the Westphalian system of national sovereignty and a certain degree of nationalism although this may be changing.

It may be clearly said that the China factor is a recurring subtext in any discussion about Southeast Asia and the rise of both China and India has been keenly monitored. Two separate studies have highlighted the trajectories these two Asian neighbours are taking. Southeast has been concerned with China's rise but its expression has been restrained and veiled. The rise has been marked by striking economic growth and military modernization with claims on the South China Sea, its growing influence in Myanmar, economic dominance of the Chinese community in Southeast Asian countries, etc.

In the 21st century, India is concerned with the emergent competition and threat from China at all levels which has become a major player in Southeast Asia. Indeed, China's future role, interests, capabilities and influence have been a major concern to India as it has been to ASEAN. India specially resents China's standing in the international order not only in its UN Security Council seat but also its clout as a nuclear power in both these dimensions, India sees itself as coequal with China and is at a loss to comprehend why China's role aspiration is acceptable and India's not.

Though right from the very beginning, the Indian policy making elite had been alive to the strategic significance of the China factor, India's vision of Southeast Asia was determined more by a desire to emerge as the new Asian leader rather than with the narrow agenda of dealing with a any major power: especially not China. China was still fighting to survive against Western policy of containment and was still in the throngs of its own nation-building experiments like the 'Great Leap Forward' and Cultural Revolution.

The China factor of India's policy towards Southeast Asia had begun to germinate far earlier than when it was first noticed and analyzed. The first major event that was destined to make China the most critical factor in India's relations with Southeast Asia was to be the famous Ban dung Conference of Afro-Asian nations during April 1955.This conference which witnessed the pinnacle of India's involvement with Southeast Asia, was also to mark the beginning of a sudden decline in India's interest in this region and this neglect was to last for a very long time. It is in this conference that Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai stole the show and heralded China's aggressive charm offensive on to the

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developing countries of the region. Despite his well-known showdown with the Srilankan prime minister he was successful in cultivating most other representatives. Pandit Nehru's personal friend, Indonesian President Sukarno, decided to side with the Chinese and push their agenda expounding closer ties with Communist countries. However, it was India that had built this Afro-Asian movement and co-sponsored the Bandung Conference. This event caught Nehru's ire and he abruptly downgraded Southeast Asia in his scheme of things.

It is from here that India's initiatives were moulded in a direction seen often as a reflection of India's estrangement with the Chinese. This led to an altered diplomatic scenario. Chinese indulgence with Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian tilt towards Beijing had come as a complete surprise to India's leadership. Historically speaking, perhaps no other country had influenced the evolution of Southeast Asia culturally, religiously and linguistically as much as India did which had evolved maritime linkages with this region since the ancient times. As far India, its increasing discomfiture with China over the issue of Tibet and subsequently Dalai Lama's arrival in India in March 1959 followed by India-China border war during October-November 1962 had provided many opportunities to gauge the seriousness of commitments of these Southeast Asian countries. Indonesia had refused to condemn the Chinese aggression and virtually went to the extent of supporting the Pakistanis in their wars against India .Again; North Vietnam was virtually aligned to China and supported the Chinese side in their war against India. North Vietnam was virtually aligned to China and supported the Chinese side in their war against India. Therefore, the spectre of insecurity looming large over the destiny of India, New Delhi had to give up its grandiose plans for global peace and begin focusing on national security which later brought it closer to former Soviet Union which created its own difficulties between New Delhi and Beijing and its own misgivings amongst these Southeast countries.

Meanwhile, all this had resulted in making the China factor the most critical determinant in India's Southeast Asia policy which remained inactive and incoherent for many long years. As China factor gradually moved India towards former Soviet Union, India became more focused on building stronger ties with ASEAN countries. In fact, beginning from mid-1970s, New Delhi's increasing solidarity with Vietnam, following its estrangement with China witnessed India recognizing the Vietnamese installed Hang Samrin government in Cambodia. This later became a major irritant in India-ASEAN ties which persisted throughout 1980s and even later. Indeed, these entire attitudes were partly influenced by the larger policy of containing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. During 1979, to show India's solidarity with Indo-China countries, the then Foreign Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee had cut short his maiden visit to China, as China attacked Vietnam while he was still on Chinese soil.

From the ASEAN side as well, their vision of China threat has clearly vision of China threat has clearly has clearly has clearly been the most critical factor determining their policy postures in engaging India leadership from time to time. New Delhi had formally approached ASEAN for such partnership in 1976, but ASEAN. In fact ASEAN continued to suspect India's intentions as it believed that India along with others was trying to undermine Chinese role in Southeast Asia .In the process, the Chinese gained enough political mileage, especially from the Cambodian tangle, to gradually start opening up their dialogue with ASEAN which was to result in a major policy shift during the early 1990s.

With the Chinese liberalization in 1980s and the open door policy of India in the 1990s there has been the rise of two emerging economic giants in Asia. China competes with India in the political, economic and military sphere and most importantly, for economic influence in the region of Southeast Asia. The "peaceful rise" of China is being considered more of an opportunity despite the challenges. China is virtually dominating the Southeast Asian region. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area created by an accord in 2004 has come into effect from January 2010. China's trade with ASEAN in 2011 was a whopping $363 billion and it remains far better integrated in the region. A new talking point is the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). It is basically a currency pool of the ASEAN+3 countries (China, Japan and South Korea).

China's rapid ascendance in the global hierarchy and aim to expand its strategic space is viewed with expectation and suspicion by ASEAN nations. It is a strong supporter of ASEAN's central position in the region and has developed an extensive bilateral relationship with its member states. It has shown a definite readiness to use its growing soft power notably economic leverage and national image and the benefits that accrue from non-material, ideational and cultural influences as a persuasive means to translate its influence into concrete policy measures.

China knows that India is the only country that could possibly challenge its ascendancy and potential hegemony in Asia. Therefore, it makes sense to keep India under pressure. In particular, territorial and border issues remain intractable specifically the disputes over the South China Sea Islands. ASEAN has sought to restrain Chinese power. To do that, it has cultivated India as an alternative both in the economic sphere for trade and investments, and on the security plan to balance both sides. ASEAN had no defence related problem with India, but was conscious of China's ambitions and intentions.

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To live up to its full potential and meet the region's expectations, India, for its part will have to do a more convincing job of emerging as a credible strategic partner of the region. Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Man Mohan Singh has repeatedly mentioned that in a global competitive environment India is not afraid of competition. Moreover, Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh once said that India's strategic footprint as a "super regional power covers the region bounded by the Horn of Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.

At the sub-regional level, sponsored by India, the "Mekong Ganges River Cooperation Project" between India and ASEAN-5 (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand) was initiated in 2000. India is also a member of BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation). These projects underlie cooperation in tourism, culture and education; emphasize links between Indian traditional culture and ASEAN's culture, thus underscoring New Delhi's intention to elbow out China's influence from this area.

However, in spite of looming large like a spectre over Indian skies, the China factor has opened up the India-ASEAN relations further. Freewheeling engagement is the buzzword now. The Look East Policy is much stronger than before and India-ASEAN trade is now $80 billion. Connectivity and economic partnership has been the core of the December 2012 Commemorative Summit between India and ASEAN in Delhi. The ASEAN-India Car rally has shown the seamless road travel linking Southeast Asia to Northeast India is possible.

Thus, the China factor has been the most critical and persistent factor in Indo-ASEAN relations. Similarly, the fact that India and China still continue to have their own share of mutual suspicions and misperceptions about each other will continue to provide a major leeway for these Southeast Asian countries to try and play one against the other all the time. It now needs to be seen how far the "dragon" of the Asian continent is ruffled by the Indian "elephant" in the future.

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