



India and the Multilateral Organizations of the Region

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Introduction –

Owing to the importance the countries of the region attached to ASEAN, India began engaging with the region fore mostly through ASEAN. An important reason behind India doing so was that regional organizations were being formed world over and its own regional organization SAARC was not proving successful. India had, therefore, wanted to be a member of the ASEAN.

Another important noteworthy development is that through SAARC, India has gained access to the other important multilateral initiatives like the East Asia Forum which is much bigger venture than ASEAN. India was also led into the sub-regional organizations like BIMSTEC and Mekong-Ganga Co-operation Initiative.

As far as India's relations with ASEAN are concerned, as the organisation was assigned more responsibilities by the member states, India's relationship also became more diverse. India's bilateral relations with member countries complementing and gaining in the process. Through BIMSTEC, India gets a good opportunity to connect with some of the SAARC countries too.

The target of the Look-East Policy is not just to develop relations with Southeast Asia but the entire Asia-Pacific. In the pursuance of this goal, India is working on building relations with countries like Japan and Australia too.

A very important aspect of the Look-East Policy in today's phase is the development of the North-Eastern states of India which have been declared integral to the Look-East Policy. It is a very healthy sign of development being accepted as part of our security discourse. This could be a very interesting subject of research too.

This relationship will certainly prove a means to bring the Third World solidarity as most of the countries are in similar stages of development. This might also prove to be a move in the direction of bringing about the old Nehruvian vision of Asian solidarity.

Hindrances to the Look East Policy

In spite of all rhetoric of very close relations between the countries of Southeast Asia, the relationship certainly lacks on certain very important fronts. A perpetual fear of Indian omnipresence lurks in the mindset of countries like Indonesia.

The relations of India with these countries are also influence to a great extent by India's relations with other countries of the world. For e.g. India-Pakistan relations loom large in Muslim majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia.

A neglected aspect of the Look-East Policy is the people of Indian origin in these countries. If one looks at the Chinese diaspora one realizes that China has been very protective about their diaspora and this has helped in the enhancement of their sphere of influence in these countries.

India and Southeast Asia are set on the path of integrating their economies but a protectionism rooted in nationalistic fervor creates quite a lot of delay in the negotiating processes.

Suggestions for A More Effective and Fruitful Policy

The most important and primary measure that needs to be adopted is the promotion of knowledge and information about the countries of South-East Asia. It is very surprising that although historically India has had such strong ties with these countries, contemporary knowledge about the area is so very limited. It is very important to promote research and scholarship related to these countries. This would not only make people more informed about Southeast Asia but would also help identify further areas of collaboration. Cultural Exchange programmes and educational exchange programs should be pursued with more vigor. The human resource development programs that have been adopted for CMLV countries should be mad more extensive. This soft diplomacy is much more powerful than use of any hard power.



India's relations with each of the countries of the region are based on very differing premises. Our policy makers have to realize this and accordingly devise specific policies relating to each of them within the broad framework.

India shares a very important economic relationship with the Southeast Asia. This relationship is being further consolidated through the various Free Trade Agreements that are being signed with the countries of the region. But the inordinate delay in the negotiations of the FTAs sends wrong signals about the country's willingness to pursue them. It cannot be denied that there is great pressure from domestic producers who fear competition in terms of cost of production as well as quality. While there is no substitute for the strengthening of our own industries, it is also necessary that the general public need to be more informed about the provisions of the Free Trade Agreements which are at times in accordance with the domestic economic policy of the government and do not undermine the interests of the local producers.

The Indian Diaspora is a neglected aspect of the 'Look-East Policy.' This has been so in spite of the fact that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in his famous Singapore Lecture had said that they form an important part of the policy. While in countries like Singapore where the people of Indian origin are in good socio-economic condition, they can play a significant role in the improvement of ties. But in countries like Malaysia and Myanmar where their conditions are not so good, the Government can make special plans and aids for their betterment. India needs to help improve the socio-economic conditions of the Indian diaspora in these countries which are in poor condition. Here again a careful balance is needed as this might send a wrong signal of interference in the internal matters of other countries. For e.g. In the case of Malaysia while there is a need of betterment of the condition of the Indians there but at the same time as far as their political assertion is concerned, it becomes an internal matter of that country.

With countries like Myanmar, India needs to adopt a very guarded approach when it comes to its commitment to democratic principles and the pursuance of its national interests. It is certain that the policy of non-engagement with the military junta which the Government of India followed till recently did nothing but only brought the country under the influence of China. Therefore, there has been a swing in the policy. But this should nowhere send the message that India is not concerned with the suppression of democracy in the country.

Along with the passage of time, the Look-East Policy has extended beyond Southeast Asia to include other countries of Asia-Pacific like Japan and Australia. It is certainly necessary given the present geo-political scenario. But what the framers and practitioners of foreign policy should not forget is that Southeast Asia forms the core of our 'Look-East Policy, and we should never lose focus.

In the present world, multilateralism is the order of the day. India has been working hard to engage with the multilateral organizations in the region. But India should also make efforts to collaborate with the countries of Southeast Asia in world organization like the United Nations and those formed under its aegis like World Trade Organisation or the Environment related Conferences. India along with them can become an effective voice of the countries of the South. The onus of doing so lies more on India as it is the bigger country. While India wants a more important position for itself in these organizations, it never works for the betterment of others. For e.g. India wants a permanent position for itself on the Security Council, it never presses hard for UN Reforms which would place all the countries of the world on an equal footing.

Related to this is the effort India needs to make on working on its image amongst these countries. Our diplomacy has to take up that responsibility. India has to work on its relationship with its immediate neighbors because that is very important in creating an image of the country.

India also needs to make efforts to make its own regional organization SAARC more effective and successful. Until the region develops as a whole, India cannot improve its own security. This will certainly help improve ties with countries like Pakistan which would in turn improve conditions in the sub-continent.

North-East has been declared as integral to the 'Look-East Policy'. But not much headway has been made on the front. Related to this is the realization the development is integral part of the security discourse. The government has to work more vigorously on development of the peripheral areas of the country for these are important constituents of external relations.

The Government of India has to realize the importance of the Non-Governmental Organizations as they are important means of Track-II Diplomacy. There is need for better collaboration with them.

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