

Let Us “Act” to Catch the Dragon

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Abstract: The “Look East Policy” has been a major component of India’s international engagement since its economic opening in 1991. Since coming to power in 2014, the Narendra Modi Government has lent India’s “Look East Policy” even greater momentum through its unveiling of an upgraded “Act East Policy” during the India-ASEAN Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. The new policy is driven as much by India’s strategy of external balancing against a formidable rival – China – as the desire for a greater global role. This paper analyses what factors make the Look East Policy important to India, the response of Southeast Asia towards India’s new economic engagement and what advantages India can gain over China in competing for the attention of Southeast Asia in an age where south-south relations matter more than ever before.

Key words:

INTRODUCTION

Indian foreign policy, in the new millennium, is decidedly pragmatic in nature. Where once leadership in the non-Aligned Movement was considered to be the principal means of acquiring international spotlight and Russia the sole extra-regional friend, today India has expanded its options by intensifying its simultaneous engagement with all the major powers. The Indo-US nuclear deal, for instance, has removed a major irritant with the United States and more importantly, given it access to high technology needed for India’s growth. The EU, despite being on the throes of a protracted economic crisis, is rapidly emerging as India’s largest trading partner and source of foreign direct investment [1]. Closer home, our engagement with Southeast and East Asia is already considerable and likely to grow in ways that could not have been imagined two decades ago. For example, India’s trade with North and Southeast Asia now represent about a quarter of its total trade, outweighing that with the United States and the European Union [2]. China has become India’s top partner with bilateral trade growing from roughly \$US 7 billion in 2003-2004 to \$US 65 billion in 2013-2014 [3]. In the same period, two-way trade with ASEAN member states has grown from approximately \$US 13 billion to \$US 74 billion making its trade with the region as a whole even more significant

than with China [4]. At the same time, India also continues to maintain close ties with traditional allies like Russia and groupings like NAM [5].

For the present, two big question marks hover over India’s foreign policy orientation in the coming decade. First, will India be able to resolve its differences with Pakistan or will it remain tethered to its past thereby severely depressing all chances of making good on the country’s economic potential? Second, how will a rising China with whom India shares the longest disputed border in the world and even fought a short but brutal war in 1962, affect India’s future strategic goals in the region, which include a larger role in South East Asia? Unfortunately, Indo-Pakistan relations seem to be more or less in the same impasse where relations have been festering for the past couple of years. China, on the other hand, is the one country that impacts most directly on India’s strategic sphere, the unresolved boundary, the lingering shadow of the Tibet issue, Chinese support to Pakistan in its hostile posture towards India, these are realities that need to be confronted while managing relations with China. Both countries have made efforts to address their problems and there is some progress, but given the historical rivalry, the nature and degree of cooperation between them is of constant concern. China has many stakes in the region. This includes a legitimate interest in protecting its trading and energy lifelines, with

70 per cent of its supply and almost 80 per cent of its total trade being shipped through the Indian Ocean region [6] Without doubt a rich and powerful China may pose challenges to the region even though its rise thus far has been largely peaceful. Already members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have adopted a policy that now prioritizes balance between the United States, Japan and China. In the US-China-Russia triangle, it is China that has emerged as the pivot, which means that the US pivot to Asia to limit China's strategic expansion has become even less credible today than in the past. For India, these developments have serious implications. For one, the value of the US as the leading component of a countervailing coalition in Asia has diminished. Second, US-Russia tensions will make it more difficult for India to pursue closer relations with both without ruffling some feathers. In the post-Cold War era, India did not have to make a choice between the two. Both supported India's emergence as a major power. For example, at the Nuclear Suppliers Group, India's case was immeasurably helped by the joint efforts of the US and Russia, which also overcame Chinese opposition. If the NSG were to meet today, one doubts whether the US and Russia would be on the same page. Would Russia be more amenable to Chinese calculations? These developments limit India's strategic space, so what is the answer? One element in India's response is unfolding today in Japan where it is hoped that the consolidation of an India-Japan partnership that will help the second and the third largest powers in Asia to shape the emerging security and economic architecture in this part of Asia [7]. While the topic of my paper concerns the impact of China's growing ascendancy in the region, let me put this in the broader context of India's Look East Policy now renamed "Act East" Policy beyond just "Look East". Australia and South Korea also fall into the definition of this East for India.

India's Initiatives in South East Asia: India's Look East Policy (LEP) partly prompted by Singaporean Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong [8] was launched in 1991 to expand India's trade and economic cooperation with South East Asia[9] Subsequently it has broadened to include building closer economic, institutional and defense ties across the whole of the Asia-Pacific region [10]. Although the potential of India and Southeast Asia relations is yet to be fully exploited, consistent initiatives within the pragmatic framework of the Look East Policy have most analysts and observers of the Indian reality hopeful, In particular, the recent re-branding of the Look

East Policy as Act East Policy by the Modi Government [11] with its emphasis on intensifying efforts to outreach to key partners such as Japan, Vietnam, Australia and ASEAN has led to a fresh round of debates about India's role in the international system. However, the present Government in many ways is only building on past initiatives in the region that include expanding India's global role, boosting economic output and externally balancing China in the Indian Ocean. With almost 55 per cent of India's trade transiting through Malacca Straits, India does not want to see these crucial waterways dominated by a strategic competitor [12] Hence it is only to be expected that as China's relationship with India's neighbors in the Indian Ocean deepen made easier by its relationship with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, the strategic relevance of India's own connections with neighboring Asian States in the Pacific Ocean will likewise grow. India's motivations for engaging with the region however, exist independently of its relationship with China. India in fact, has always shown a desire for a greater role in Asia including as a security provider [13]

India's strong willingness to play a greater strategic role in this region is evidenced by the large number of agreements it has signed over the past two decades with the majority of the players. Let me flag some of the major developments. India's interest in the region was seen in BIMSTEC 1997, which has as its members Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand. BIMSTEC can be seen as a link organization as it were between South East Asia and South Asia. The other organization that links India to South East Asia is the Mekong Ganga Cooperation Initiative 2000, established in Vientiane, Laos comprising Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. India also has a free trade agreement with ASEAN and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Japan and RoK. It is a founder member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and is a partner in the ongoing Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations, which group together the 10 ASEAN countries, China, RoK, Japan, New Zealand and India. From a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, India has progressively attained the status of full dialogue partner, a summit partner and since 2012, a strategic partner. India is already a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting plus Eight (ADMM+8), which includes several summit partners of ASEAN. India also has a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership with China, a Special Strategic and Global Partnership with Japan and has concluded a Framework for Security Cooperation with Australia. And

most recently, during US President Obama's visit to India in January 2015, the two countries issued a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region. Nevertheless, despite some of these commendable initiatives aimed at initiating closer contacts with ASEAN and other major players, India's engagement with the region remains way behind China's, which offers much better pre-set conditions conducive for economic investments and developments to Southeast Asian investors. The continuing reality therefore is that the gap between China's and India's level of engagement with ASEAN remains huge. Nowhere is this more evident than in the trade figures of the two countries. While India's trade with ASEAN is currently \$77 billion (2013) China's is \$450 billion. India's trade with the US is \$100 billion (2013) while China's is \$516 billion. And in the case of Japan, against India's total trade volume of \$16 billion, China's figure is over \$300 billion. In terms of intra regional trade in comparison with China, Korea, ASEAN and Japan, India has been frankly insignificant. There are several shortcomings in the Indian economy, where the market is quite closed, the average tariff level high, investment environment poor and the level of development and external trade low. The international environment is favorable for India to expand its role and strategic goals. But turning potential into reality will take time and efforts. For the present, India still has a long way to go before it can catch up with the Chinese Dragon or aspire to become a key player in shaping the economic architecture emerging in this region.

India's strength however lies in the fact that none of the South Asian States see India as a security threat. Besides, its democracy and legal systems are attractive to South Asian investors as the fact that English is generally the language of governance and commerce in India. ASEAN states of course accept that, for the time being, India lacks China's resources, has poor infrastructure and its decision making process is cumbersome with a difficult bureaucracy. India also needs to bring its tariffs closer to ASEAN levels so as to make trade with the countries of the region easier. India also has not done enough to leverage its soft power attributes in pursuing closer relations with the South East Asian States with whom India, as pointed out by a former Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha in a speech made at Harvard University, on "shares an idealistic perception of Asian brotherhood, a shared colonial history and cultural ties" [14] Active cultural diplomacy highlighting and drawing upon the deep-rooted cultural affinities, which India enjoys with some of these countries must become part

and parcel of India's South Asian outreach Coined by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, the terminology suggests, "If a country's culture and ideology are attractive, others more willingly will follow. If a country can shape international rules that are consistent with its interests and values, its actions will more likely appear legitimate in the eyes of others. If it uses institutions and follows rules that encourage other countries to channel or limit their activities in ways it prefers, it will not need as many costly carrots and sticks." [15] In a much-limited manner, soft power, it can be said, has also helped India, which is otherwise a poor and developing country, to exercise a certain amount of influence in the international community without commensurate hard power. It is this – particularly the Soft Power of Bollywood, Indian music and dance, talented entrepreneurs and centers of educational excellence – that offer the United States, Japan and others the most promising avenues for cooperating with India in shaping the future of South East Asia. India with a relatively small but impressive base of world class engineering and management institutes, has much to offer some of the poorer countries of South East Asia – Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and even Indonesia in terms of education and training.

Regional Security: As against the dense web of economic relationships, which bind the countries of the region together, the security landscape is much more fragmented. There are a number of emerging powers most notably China but also several others like Taiwan RoK Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, which remain engaged in competitive military build-up. Military spending by virtually all the states in the region has risen relentlessly in recent years and it should come as no surprise that the emphasis has been primarily on building maritime assets, air capabilities and missiles. While the US continues to retain overall military pre-eminence, there is a growing perception that this is now being eroded by the rapid expansion of Chinese military capabilities. As the recently concluded APEC Summit in Beijing demonstrated, China has been steadily consolidating its regional and global clout through a slew of initiatives such as BRICS Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the maritime and overland Silk Road Projects and now the proposal for an Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area. Keeping this in view, mutual security cooperation in ASEAN is guided by two broad strategic factors – reconciling with US military supremacy in the Asia Pacific region and balancing China's growing ascendancy in the region. China's current focus is on East and South East

Asia but is likely to eventually extend to Central and South Asia. China has already made significant inroads in Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Hence even if Pakistan's value as China's proxy against India were to decline, this is likely to be made up through increasing economic and subsequently security presence in the neighborhood.

There are many elements regarding the 'China factor' in India's Act East Policy. Aimed initially at diplomatic and economic engagement with South East Asia, the policy is increasingly driven by India's strategy of counterbalancing China's influence. China has always played a part in India's fraught relationship with Pakistan, which has been partly responsible for India's foreign policy being volatile and dysfunctional in East Asia. India's engagement with ASEAN is essentially a part of its wider strategic objectives since China is at the core of Indian thinking and Indian diplomacy plays on the fears of rising Chinese power. There is a competitive element in India's policy – to get some kind of equal footing with China even while avoiding any direct anti-Chinese alliance, axis or coalition.

While India's multilateral economic and political participation with ASEAN is more formal and symbolic than functional, its bilateral defense arrangements with ASEAN countries have assumed more strategic relevance in tangible terms. Shedding Cold War perceptions of India as linked to the USSR, the ASEAN countries are nearly unanimous in welcoming an Indian strategic presence, though there are some countries that still have some reservations. Neither Indonesia nor Malaysia for instance, was enthusiastic about a larger role for India in patrolling the Malacca Straits with or without the USA and not all the littorals are more comfortable with an Indian as opposed to a US role. On the other hand, Vietnam has been India's traditional friend in ASEAN and these ties have been close ever since the days of Vietnam's nationalist movement [16]. If India were to be the leading power in South Asia, strategists feel it would have to prevent a Chinese advance into South East Asia.. There is thus a convergence of Indian and Vietnamese views since both countries are concerned with checking the advance of China in a southerly direction. Vietnam supported every move by Delhi to up-graduate its relationship with ASEAN. For its part, China saw India and Vietnam as its most probable future adversaries. Beijing is deeply suspicious of India looking east as a move to encroach on China's strategic space and to link up with Japan. Japan's tense relationship with China has prompted it to reach out to India as a potential strategic

partner. As the most advanced Asian naval power and potential source of considerable technological assistance, Japan offers significant partnership opportunities as India deepens relations with East Asia [17]. However, it is the strategic sphere of the relationship that holds out the greatest promise leading India in recent years to prioritize its relations with Japan.

China's assertive stance on disputed territories has given India the opportunity to further enhance its strategic presence in Southeast Asia and ASEAN states are increasingly looking to India to play a balancing role in the region. India also has greater military resources to share with ASEAN than vice versa and India thus helps ASEAN to diversify dependence on other countries, especially the non-Asian ones like Australia, USA and Russia. The US is determined to continue as a dominant actor in the Asian power balance but needs to co-opt regional powers to share the responsibility: Neither India nor the US wants to over-emphasize China in their shared Asian strategic objectives. India has been particularly careful to avoid sending any signals that it is attempting to contain China or intrude on China's strategic space, as the swift demise of the strategic 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' and India's reluctance to speak out on the South China Sea have demonstrated. As such, it is likely to cautiously expand its influence in the region while attempting to avoid overt rivalry with China [18]

India's Look East has helped to place India on the Asia Pacific security radar, but whether the Asian security architecture will be a pan Asian one is not clear and the focus of present mechanisms is more on East Asia in whose problems India does not show much interest. India is so far a moderate player. It is not yet certain that India will want to involve itself in issues like Korea and Taiwan. But it is likely to be prepared to play a role along with the West in maintaining the security of international sea-lanes. This is of constant concern. ASEAN has a far from common approach to regional security. Non-military threats are growing in size but ASEAN countries have no common strategies and on sea-lanes security, they have different threat perceptions and no consensus. Regional differences exist and override collective strategies in terrorism, maritime security and illegal migration. India could profitably collaborate in the creation of an institutional framework to address collective security concerns in Asia since all the countries in the region including India and China are heavily dependent upon the sea-lanes of communication (SLOC) for their economic prosperity and well-being.

Indian ambitions may be great but it has to step in incrementally, facing challenges, mainly concerning its integration with other Asian countries, in which matter India has to make greater efforts. Military power is not as crucial, despite India's thinking, as economic interdependence. Without such integration, it is premature to talk about India's role in any genuine security architecture in Asia.

However this does not prevent India from putting together the building blocks of a mature security relationship with the countries of South East Asia.

ASEAN, India and China: What can be the basis of some common understanding between ASEAN, India and China? All three are developing and share similar perspectives on most North-South issues and the challenges of globalization. They benefit from open policies on trade and investment and contacts with developed countries. They want a more fair and democratic international economic order and have a stake in the stability of the economic system. They also have similarities in culture and Asian value systems and take pride in cultural identity, though there are differences in how human rights are viewed. And all three are faced with threats to national integration arising from separatist and communal forces. But they have had ideological differences, especially in the Cold War and have divergences in threat perceptions. China supports Pakistan and India had close ties with USSR and both factors aggravated mutual hostility. Vietnam continues to harbor great suspicions of China while some members of ASEAN have close links with USA.

The three units differ on the matter of strategic culture. ASEAN is committed to pacific settlement of disputes and ties that are cemented through shared norms and principles and faith is placed in role of institutions in the construction of peace. India and China on the other hand have more realist and zero sum perspectives of security. They tend to define their security interests in global terms whereas ASEAN has a narrower regional focus and relies mainly on self help. To ASEAN, the Sino-South Asian ties are not seen as having much impact on ASEAN's security concerns, whereas the Sino US, Sino Japanese or Korean problems are seen as far more problematic. However the fact that India, China and Pakistan have all three nuclear weapons is certainly worrisome for ASEAN. Security cooperation therefore means confidence building in removing the layers of suspicion and hostility that had built up in the Cold War period.

ASEAN's approach is pragmatic and based on dialogue. It recognizes the legitimate security of all and pursues a 'non aligned' position when it comes to inter great power competition for influence. The proxy war that had taken place in Indochina makes ASEAN fearful of all great power rivalry. ASEAN and India do share some concern about China's influence and power projection, but ASEAN is not engaged in power balancing against China, whatever the feelings and impulses may be in some particular ASEAN countries. ASEAN's basic principle is to encourage the development of good relations and ARF is still the only forum for all the major players in the Asia Pacific, though the ASEAN + 3 mechanism (China, Japan and the Republic of Korea) is also a contributing factor to this. There is no common ASEAN consensus on the Chinese threat perception, but there is a general concern at allowing China to grow in influence without restraint by countervailing powers or by international rules and regimes.

ASEAN does engage in some hedging activity. A hedge vis a vis China means that excellent relations with other powers need to be developed. This is primarily with the United States followed by Japan, the EU, Russia and India. ASEAN is comfortable with US presence in East Asia while the Taiwan and Korean issues are unresolved. US presence diminishes the need for Japan to play a military role, which is less provocative to China and Korea. But support for US is not evenly shared across ASEAN and nor is it directed necessarily against a putative Chinese threat. For example, Singapore welcomes the US presence but it is the last, as a mainly ethnic Chinese state, to feel a direct threat from China due to close trade, linguistic and cultural ties. The recent initiative taken by the Indian Government to re-brand the Look East Policy as Look Act Policy coincides with India's perception that it needs to strengthen its relations with the countries of Japan, ASEAN, Vietnam, Australia and South Korea.

India's strategic engagement with ASEAN need not necessarily be premised only on the China factor. Perceiving India's Look East policy only as a counter to China is not correct, even as seen by Chinese observers. This policy increases India's interaction with other major powers including China. India of course carefully avoids any anti-China axis or coalition. But while it is not in India's interests to engage in direct rivalry with China, it can be expected that an element of competition will continue to characterize the China-India relationship. Even though India has been stressing the positive aspects of its bilateral relations with China, regional

competition between the two is inevitable. Indeed these tensions can serve to reinforce the relevance of investing in India's relationships with partners such as ASEAN and Japan. Bilateral partnerships with individual ASEAN states such as Vietnam for example, hold particular promise. Acknowledging this, the Modi Government has accelerated its high-level engagement with Vietnam. This was reflected in the presidential visit to that country in September 2014 followed by that of the Vietnamese Premier Dung to India in October 2014. Interestingly, President Mukherjee visited Vietnam just ahead of Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's trip to India and at the same time that the latter was visiting India's neighbors, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Although not necessarily intentional, the timing of the visits sends out a clear signal that India intends to build relations with China's neighbors in the same way China has done in the Indian Ocean.

China, on its part, has heavily invested in the US economy and will do whatever it takes to retain the competitiveness of its own economy and currency, whether India is in alignment or not. Concerning mutual relations China refers to mutual suspicions, unresolved border problems, issues with Tibet and the Dalai Lama and the need for India to change its mindset. Even more, Beijing sometimes equates India's terrorism problems with the non-resolution of the Kashmir issue and urges India to seek a resolution that takes into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Beijing's attitude towards India's wish to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council is deliberately ambiguous, while its attitude towards Japan's similar desire is openly negative – thus making an expansion of the Council's permanent membership doubtful. China also remains India's most important contender in policy initiatives in this region led by ASEAN. Whether the ASEAN countries showed sympathy or antipathy towards China, China is much too strong and influential to be ignored in their perceptions and policies towards India. China's ASEAN policies have also been conditioned partly by the 'India factor' as Chinese scholars have called it. Although the India-China rapprochement and their common participation in various regional forums have helped to blunt the negative effects of Sino Indian rivalry, mutual acrimony tends to erupt from time to time. The increase of China's influence however need not necessarily be at the expense of India and vice versa. Both sides have asserted that there is sufficient space to play respective roles on regional and international affairs taking care of each other's sensitivities and expectations. India's and China's

presence in ASEAN could result in healthy competition stimulating the two economies. This could be termed competition, but it can be called cooperation as well. Can the two countries be partners of ASEAN and with each other? Interestingly while Indian public opinion views Pakistan as the greatest threat to India's security, opinion on China is somewhat divided. 83 per cent believe that China will pose a security threat to India in the next ten years while 63 per cent would like to see relations with China become stronger [19] If the exponential growth of Sino Indian trade, which reached \$US 65 billion in 2013-2014 [20] is anything to go by, the two big countries whose rise as major world powers promises to test the established global order in the coming decades with profound implications for themselves, the United States and the world - seem to be headed in the right direction.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that much of India's engagement with East and Southeast Asia in recent years has been driven primarily by the challenge posed by China. Should China persist with its current accelerated rate of incursions along India's disputed border, which is on track to exceed the levels of previous years [21] or should China's presence in the Indian Ocean acquire a significant military dimension, India under the present leadership will be likely to pursue a deeper relationship with critical partners such as Japan, Vietnam, Australia, ASEAN and Indonesia. Should China's assertive behavior in maritime territorial disputes in Asia continue to be regionally destabilizing, it can be expected that States in East and Southeast Asia will look more seriously towards India to assume an influential role in the region's security architecture. However, although India's partners in the region can expect greater Indian involvement in multilateral maritime security initiatives particularly in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, transnational crime and joint bilateral naval exercises, it is unlikely that India will engage in any security initiatives that could be perceived as overtly threatening or containing China [22].

It is natural to be concerned about Chinese inroads into the subcontinent but once again, one cannot deal with this by trying to compel neighbors to restrict their interactions with China or by urging China to stay away from what we regard as our backyard. Foreign policy in the contemporary world must contend with the reality that there can no longer be fine distinctions between what is domestic and what is non-domestic. Nor can it ignore the fact that there are now a growing number of common

issues, which require India to work together with other countries for their resolution. These include international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cross-border criminal activities, climate change etc. The only effective answer therefore would be build a countervailing presence superior to China, which is eminently possible given our geographical as well as cultural proximity to our neighbors. Indeed India's ability to be a pivotal power in Asia is to a large extent contingent on the restoration of the strategic and economic unity of the subcontinent and in particular with Pakistan to its west. Relations with Pakistan deserve special mention here. The historical narratives of the two countries are widely divergent. We have different interpretations on the 1947 Partition, on Kashmir, on the 1965 war, on the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, on the Shimla Agreement, on the Kargil War in 1999 and on the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008. Until we begin to have a more convergent view of our shared history, there can be no reconciliation. Germany and France reconciled after the Second World War primarily because post war leaders of the two countries articulated a shared perception concerning the origins of the war, the ensuing peace and the future shape of Europe. Until similar convergence begins to emerge between India and Pakistan and that may take a long time coming, India will have to settle for managing an adversarial relationship with its neighbor as best as it can. This must include enhanced people to people links, trade, culture and commercial relations. But if required, it must also include elements of coercion, which in plain terms means the ability to inflict pain if India's security is threatened. Should relations with Pakistan presently perceived as the number one threat to Indian security [23], substantially deteriorate or a major Pakistan backed terror attack occur on Indian soil, it is to be expected that India's primary international focus will revert swiftly to its own neighborhood.

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