

India's Relation with South East Asian Nations- 'Look East' Policy and the China Factor

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Abstract: *India, in order to cope with the emerging new global order in the Post Cold War days, under the leadership of P. V. Narasimha Rao, heralded a new policy that drastically altered the entire dimension of India's overall foreign policy strategy towards the countries of South East Asia. As we know, that, misperception, misconception, and bungling diplomacy of India, during the Cold War days had badly damaged the cordial relationship which was present between India and South East Asian nation, so this new policy which was proposed in the form of "Look East" policy during the early days of 1990s, had undoubtedly given a new dimension to India's relation with its South East Asian neighbours*

Keywords: China Factor

I. INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, the fall of Soviet Union on one hand and gradual weakening of India's economy due to the international oil market and virtual depletion of India's foreign exchange reserves on the other, made India felt helpless, as it had then lost both of its strategic and economic support. So, the then Prime Minister of India, P. V. Narasimha Rao, then had to take an initiative in order to give a new shape to India, policy in the form of the "Look East" policy, as it then became apparent that, outside South Asia. South East Asia was the only region where political-economic strategic and economic conditions surely would offer India an opportunity to play a distinct role.

This "Look East" policy of India, during the Narasimha era (1991-1996) helped a lot in building both closer economic and strategic ties between India and South East Asia. As since the end of the Cold War, this policy turned India's attention specially towards ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations),² with economic links in mind because of the ASEAN's success as a regional group of countries, so India-ASEAN relationship which truly achieved a new momentum during the post Cold War day, surely helped to promote economic cooperation between India and South East Asian nation. Thus, as the growing cooperation between India and ASEAN led to the formation of India-ASEAN Business Council, ASEAN-India Joint Management Committee and ASEAN-India Fund, hence all these together helped to promote economic cooperation between India and South East Asian nation.

On the other hand, as with this "Look East" policy India succeeded in replacing the old hostility caused by its great military expansion in the 1980's and its close affiliation with Vietnam, so that it helped a lot to promote strategic ties between India and its South East Asian neighbours. Besides, as many South East Asian nation, since the end of the Cold War, began to look upon India as a power that could play a kind of balancing role, so that paved the way to a new strategic interaction with several South East Asian countries, during the Narasimha era.

In order to promote strategic or defence ties during this period, India, under the efficient leadership of Mr. Rao, started holding periodically joint naval exercises with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore³ near the Andaman on one hand, and on other, signed a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) on defence cooperation with Malaysia in February, 1993 India even forgot, similar strategic links with its time tested ally, Vietnam⁴, in order to strengthen strategic cooperation between India and this South East Asian neighbor.

What more, as we know that in the year 1995, India became the Full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, and, in the year 1996, it became a member of ASEAN's security arm i.e. ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum)⁵ so, that no doubt helped India to promote both economic and strategic relationship with its South East Asian neighbours during this Narasimha era.

But, apart from all these economic and strategic programmes, that were introduced as part of a broader “Look East” policy to improve India-South East Asia relation, the only thing that then really changed the dynamics of such relation was, Mr. Rao’s visit to many South East Asian countries, stretching from Singapore and Malaysia to Thailand and Vietnam. With these visits, Mr. Rao not only established what ASEAN leaders called “instant personal chemistry” in these countries, but also recognized and revived India’s historical and cultural links with these South East Asian nations for the first time and converted them into economic and strategic partners of India.

Just like Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao, our former Premier Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, also very efficiently helped in promoting both economic and defence ties between India and South East Asian nation. Mr. Vajpayee, not only put in place some arrangements for FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) for broadening the scope of economic interaction between India and South East Asia, but also, introduced some Joint Security Programmes to protect sea lanes, to fight against terrorism (as many South East Asian Countries like Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines had felt the impact of international terrorism)⁶ which no doubt helped to promote defence ties between India and South East Asian nation. And apart from these security programmes, India, under the efficient leadership of Vajpayee Government, also forged agreements with Malaysia and Indonesia regarding holding Joint Naval Exercises, including naval patrolling of those areas which are strategically vulnerable, like- Western end of the strategic strait of Malacca. Undoubtedly, such security agreements helped to build up closer strategic ties between India and South East Asia.

What more, Atal Behari Vajpayee also showed immense interest in improving India’s relations with Myanmar⁷ not only to gain access to its oil and gas, but also to launch a trilateral highway project, as that would then connect India to South East Asia, would help India to develop trade and defence linkages with this South East Asian nation, further and to protect its north eastern states from the terrorist activities of various rebel groups with the military aid of Junta Government, which were often used to take shelter in Myanmar.

Just like NDA Government, our present UPA Government has also put forward several strategic and economic arrangements in order to promote closer ties between India and South East Asian nation. Under the efficient leadership of our present Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh, India today has developed close economic ties with Singapore, Thailand, and has also taken good care of bilateral economic relation that has developed between India and Malaysia, India’s largest trading partner. And though we know that Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are economically under developed countries of South East Asian region, but still, Mr. Singh has expressed his keen interest in developing bilateral ties with each of these three South East Asian nations⁸ What more, in order to strengthen trade linkages and to open up new vistas of economic cooperation between India and South East Asian countries, Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh has even attended first East Asia Summit, in December, 2005. As this summit has brought together leaders of the ten members of the Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN)⁹ plus those of China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, so active participation of India in this summit, really helped this Asian power to enhance its economic ties with Asian ‘tigers’.

On the other hand Mr. Singh has also taken good care of all those strategic ties which India has forgotten with many South East Asian nations like –Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand in order to check illicit drug trafficking and to defend terrorist activities¹⁰. Mr. Singh has even taken special care of bilateral defence programmes, which have been jointly agreed upon by India and Indonesia on one hand, and, India and Myanmar on other, in order to strengthen strategic partnership.

Now, undoubtedly, such growing economic and strategic cooperation or partnership, between India and South East Asian nation, today has helped India to spread its influence over the South East Asian region. But, as we all know, that South East Asia is China’s traditional “zone of influence”, so, growing affiliation of India with all these South East Asian nation, has irked China very much.

Actually, China wants to maintain its sole control over South East Asian region, and to keep India away from this region at any cost. But during this post Cold War era, growing inter-dependence and inter-linkages has helped India to strengthen both strategic and economic ties with its South East Asian neighbours on one hand, and on other, the growing dominance of China over South China Sea, has brought these South East Asian nations more close to India, because that has threatened their security and now they that it is India which can counter weigh China’s growing dominance. So such growing closeness and dependence, has undoubtedly irked China very much, because, growing economic and strategic partnership has slowly started to send a single message to China¹¹ that, any Chinese interference in

South Asia, from now on would be countered by India I China's backyard. And, no doubt that has created a real problem for India today.

It is true that, today India is trying to maintain a friendly relationship with China and also trying to convince China that it has intention to challenge China or to encircle China strategically, but that has not reduced the tension. As, till now, India has not yet succeeded in controlling China's growing influence over this South East Asian region on one hand, and on other, has failed to promote friendly relations with its close neighbours like Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and specially with Pakistan, so taking the advantage of such bungling diplomacy of India, China has today succeeded in promoting loser linkages with these South Asian neighbours of India. And thus,, today, China is using these countries which are hostile to India efficiently, to encircle India strategically, thereby posing a threat to its security.

Now, many can think that the opening p of historical Silk Route i.e., Nathu-la-Pass¹² on 6th July, 2006 and signing of various bilateral agreements between India and China during Hu Jintao's recent visit to India (26th November, 2006) will surely ensure concrete resolution to the on going tension between India and China as opening up of Slik Route, and these bilateral agreements will surely encourage economic cooperation between these two "Asian Giants". Would contribute to peace, and will bring these two countries closer. So, there will be no place for misunderstanding anymore. But I think tht unless and until, India promotes closer ties with its South Asian neighbours and takes initiative to solve problems related to borders which it share with China, Its is really difficult to reach at any concretesolution f the problem.

The truth which we all need to accept even today is that, unresolved Indo-China border issue can provoke China to attack India any times. As we all very much aware of China's claim over Arunchal Pradesh¹³ so we should not overlook the fact that opening up of such routes can easily invite the Chinese Trojan Horse inour backyard, where, the Chnina's traditional "Zone of dominance". India today must protect its own region first. What more, India must also increase its influence over its next door South Asian neighbours so that, they could be weaned away from China, as today, they want this "Asian Giant" to be their partner to checkmate India.

Thus, though this "Look East" diplomacy of India has promoted its positions and has helped to forge closer ties between Indiaand South East Asian nations a lot, but this policy of welcoming guest at the front door. While keeping the backdoor open for intruders. Has today proved to be blunder for India, Hence, India's ostrichism must be thrown overboard before it is too late.

REFERENCES

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- [3]. To know about strategic relation that developed between India and Singapore and the joint naval exercise. See – The Hindu March 14, 1996 and, The Times of India, May 13, 1992.
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- [5]. ARF is the platform for a security dialogue in this South East Asian region.
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- [7]. It was since the year 1997, i.e. when Myanmar (Burma) became a member of ASEAN, that an abrupt change inIndia's attitude drew our attention. Before that, Our previous Governments were very much critical of the military junta and its brutal crackdown on student led demonstration, and often was found to support anti-government movements, led by national League for Democracy (NLD). But as being the closest neighbor of India. Its membership I ASEAN brought India close to its South East Asian neighbours, so, NDA Government began to shelve its criticisms, A.B. Vajpayee began to show immencse interest in improving India's relations with Myanmar.
- [8]. A number of bilateral treaties and agreements for cooperation in trade, science and technology, agriculture, tourism air service, and, visa exemption for diplomats and officials have been signed between India and these nations.

- [9]. Ten member of the Association of South East Asian Nations are – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei and Myanmar.
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- [12]. Nathu-la Pass is a Himalayan pass at 14,400 feet on the Sino-India border.
- [13]. China has strong intention of liberating Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan also.