

## India Thailand Relations: In the context of Act East Policy

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**Abstract:** Since past two decades, India's ties with Thailand has evolved into a comprehensive partnership. Both countries' relations are rooted in history age old cultural and social interactions and people to people contacts. Both countries share maritime border in Andaman sea and are located in each other's extended neighbourhood. The shared link of Buddhism is reflected in regular pilgrimages to places of Buddhist interests in India by a large number of Thai people. A large Indian Diaspora living and working in Thailand is another important bond. Thailand is a part of ASEAN, a regional organisation of South East Asian countries. During Cold war, the affinity between India and the countries of ASEAN reduced because of the different paths they took. In present global context, however, there is a need for India and countries of ASEAN to unite if they want to fight a rising hegemon like China. This article covers the need and basis for India to strengthen its ties with ASEAN in general and Thailand in particular.

**Key words:** Buddhism, China, Trade, ASEAN, Globalisation, Cold war, India

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Since centuries India's society, culture and politics has affected and has been affected by many countries of Southeast Asia and even today our cultural imprint is very much visible in the countries of the region. In the entire region of Southeast Asia, Buddhism has been one of the most important sources of their philosophical discourse. There are ten countries in the region and they all are members of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN formed in 1967). It's a regional organisation formed to accelerate cooperation within the region and ensure their collective defence against the rising dragon of Asia. Entire ASEAN region is located in the underbelly of China. In every country of the region, good number of Chinese people are settled and have become backbone of their trade and commerce. Singapore is one of the countries within this region which is affluent but demographically dominated by the Chinese people. Cold war has already started by the time India got independence in 1947. The bitterness of cold war between the capitalist block led by the USA and the communist block led by the USSR had made negative imprints throughout the globe. Majority of the countries of ASEAN came under the influence of USA. Countries of this region became harbinger of

the process of globalization and were determined for their overall growth. During the cold war period (1945-91), ASEAN region became the engine of Asian growth and had been named as 'Asian Tigers'. India after independence had been governed by Nehru dominated Congress and Non-alignment had become the hallmark of the Nehruvian foreign Policy. The policy of non-alignment had detached the countries of this region to work in tendon with India particularly on socio-economic and cultural fronts.

### **POST-COLD WAR PERIOD**

The end of the cold war has changed the contours of Global politics and Asia started gravitating as locus continent of the global politics. Twelve years before the end of cold war, China adopted economic liberalisation process in 1978 and accelerated their economic growth. India also adopted LPG policy in 1991 in the backdrop of the end of the cold war under the able leadership of Prime Minister P. V. Narsimha Rao. The end of the cold war also left immense challenge for India's economic and foreign policy. Rao was pragmatic enough to understand the immense Indian cultural imprint across southeast and East Asia. During cold war, however, it could not be duly used due to Nehruvian model of idealism in the realm of foreign policy.

Post-cold war period had witnessed transforming changes in the realm of Indian foreign policy. Look East Policy was adopted as an initiative to expand India's relationship with countries in ASEAN region. One of the important elements of this policy have been bi-partisan support. Due to this political consensus, which is rare in India due to immature nature of Indian politics, this practice has been the hallmark of respective governments, be it Congress led UPA or BJP led NDA. The result of this hard-earned policy consensus has been positive. India has become member of almost all prevailing platform of the region and ASEAN has become durable friend. Former PM Atal Bihari Bajpayee had however stated in 2002 at Singapore that India did not require any formal recognition in ASEAN and East Asian region but India, by virtue of its location and cultural synergies, has remained an integral part of the region.

### **LOOK EAST POLICY**

Since 1993 till the arrival of NDA II led by Prime Minister Modi in 2014, Look East Policy was providing philosophical and strategical moorings to our foreign policy in the region. Since 1962 war, India kept alleging that China is encircling India within its periphery of South Asia. Due to its foreign policy which is based on Buddha and Gandhi's peaceful and non-violent traditions, India

never reciprocated in kind and spirit. Look East policy was primarily intended to accelerate economic interest but it had strategical connotations as well. ASEAN came into being in 1967 and besides regional cooperation, it intended to protect the region's uniqueness from assertive Chinese hegemonic assertions. The countries of ASEAN and East Asia were facing problems with irresponsible Chinese behaviour, be it the case of South China sea or East China sea. Since long, the countries of the region were seeking perfect counter balancing to China and Look East Policy provided that exclusive strategic leverage to India in the region. During president Barack Obama's tenure (2009-2016), United States of America has devised the nomenclature of 'Indo-pacific region'. Since centuries, centrality of India into Indo Pacific region is very much vindicated due to its geography, land mass and populace. Lord Curzon had insisted over centrality of India and opined that it will sustain the hegemony of the empire in Asia (Mohan,2003).

An editorial of Jakarta Times reads "The evolving geo-strategic framework inexorably impels countries in South East Asia to accept China and India as major regional powers. In the first case, it is necessary consequence of the former.... Beijing has also shown an unequalled zest in its economic diplomacy with the association of South East Asian nations, ASEAN. Delhi on the other hand has been a late bloomer...ASEAN wants India's presence as much as India needs to be active in the region....ASEAN makes available a strategic framework and regulated forum which India can bluntly interact with economic powers Japan and South Korea along with fellow regional power China. This is an opportunity in which Delhi must not be hesitant. It cannot afford to miss the boat again"(Jakarta post ,2007).

#### **ACT EAST POLICY**

The arrival of Prime Minister Modi in May 2014 has infused speedy momentum into formulation and implementation of Indian Foreign Policy. He visited Myanmar in November 2014 to participate in ASEAN-India Summit and launched 'Act East policy'. He also declared for the first time that South China Sea is a disputed territory and all disputants must adhere to relevant international laws. In 2016, International tribunal in the backdrop of the Philippines gave its decision on disputed South China Sea and affirmed that China's claim over entire South China Sea is illegitimate.

Act East Policy is just a new incarnation of Look East Policy. It is traversing from Myanmar to Australia. It is not a radical shift from the aims and objectives of Look East Policy rather it puts it

in an accelerated mode. Till recently, India's foreign policy has been reactive. PM Modi has made it assertive. It was reflected at Dokhlam in the middle of 2017, when Indian army declined to accept the hegemony of Chinese army and finally PLA had to retreat. This pro-active attitude has become hallmark of Indian foreign policy. In the backdrop of Balakot attack (February 2019), the Chinese had vetoed designation of Masood Azhar as UN designated global terrorist. Under assertive Indian diplomacy, China had to relent in May 2019 and the founder of Jaish-e-Mohammed, Masood Azhar was designated as a global terrorist. This has again sent a positive signal to the countries of ASEAN region about India's growing power and assertive diplomacy. PM Modi has again been elected in May 2019 for the second term in row with a bigger majority and has adequate political mandate to fulfil and promote foreign policy agenda which he has launched during his first term (2014-19).

Act East Policy has been one of the most ambitious agenda of PM Modi government and after his re-election, it is bound to propel. However, this paper will be dealing with Thailand-India relation in the backdrop of Act East Policy particularly in the context of re-election of PM Modi for the second term (2019-24).

#### **THAILAND AND INDIA SHARE RELATIONS**

Thailand and India share relations that spans over a thousand of years. The Buddhist traditions that are prevalent in Thailand find its roots in Ashoka's mission to expand Buddhism all over the world. India shares its land borders only with Myanmar in the region but India shares its maritime border with many countries of ASEAN including Thailand. SAARC was launched in 1985 to promote regional co-operation among the countries of South Asia but it could not propel due to gamut of reasons. To expand the base of regional cooperation, India launched Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997 with like-minded countries of South and South East Asia. Thailand is an integral part of BIMSTEC. Other members are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The permanent secretariat of BIMSTEC was established at Dhaka, Bangladesh. Under the ambit of BIMSTEC, fourteen priority sectors of co-operation have been identified. A BIMSTEC free trade agreement is under negotiation. It has been a successful endeavour so far.

India and Thailand cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally within the ambit of BIMSTEC and ASEAN. All members of BIMSTEC share either land or maritime boundaries with India. They have enormous potential to grow. India and Thailand cooperate bilaterally to contain piracy and drug

trafficking in the region of Bay of Bengal. Milan is a biennial conglomeration of Asia-Pacific maritime navies. One of the important things is that Milan is a non-military forum, so it does not seek to create a security bloc. It also signifies interaction, and mutual understanding between the navies and It is more of a socio-cultural engagement. Milan is part of India's reengagement with Indo-Pacific Region as a part of "Look East" policy, which was launched in 1991 as a result of India's two decades-long effort to focus its diplomatic, economic and military energies eastward. Milan is a good initiative by Indian Navy for the multilateral engagement and an example of progress in increasing maritime cooperation between the India, and South-east Asian countries. The MILAN aims at fostering bonds of 'Friendship Across the Seas' and sharing views on common maritime issues. It also promotes India's tourism. Thailand remains one of the core members of this biennial naval exercise with the participation of Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and many others. The aim of this exercise is to foster cooperation in the areas of common interest and safeguard SLOC's (sea lanes of communication) from poaching, piracy and terrorist activities, promote interoperability to the extent possible and engage in joint search and rescue and humanitarian operations. The Milan exercise with a primary focus on how these Navies can work together to mount humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in times of need. India hosted this naval exercise at the Andaman sea in 2018. This exercise is important because it traverses from Indian ocean to up to South China sea. Since South China sea connects Indian ocean to Pacific Ocean, it is an important international lane of sea communication. Over 50 percent of Indian trade commutes through South China sea and this is the reason that India wants to ensure that international law is abided by all disputant parties. Thailand has been one of the proponents of justice based maritime order in the region.

For the past 10 years, many bilateral visits have taken place between India and Thailand. These high-profile visits have propelled the contours of bilateral relationship. In the year of 2017, both countries celebrated their 70th Anniversary of diplomatic relations.

India-Thailand bilateral relations have become increasingly focussed on military engagement and co-operation. Both are co-operating to contain low intensity arm conflicts, narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, safety of sea lanes of communication, arms trafficking in the sea and so on. During 2004 tsunami, India was the first country to reach to the source of calamity in order to provide support. The Indo-Thailand Joint Working Group on security co-operations was established in 2003 which provided the useful framework to push forward co-operation in maritime fields including counter terrorism and security co-operation. Apart from bi-annually held MILAN exercise, both India

and Thailand navies also interact in another multi-lateral forums such as Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) (Saran,2013).During Thai Prime Minister Chan-o-Cha's visit to New Delhi in June 2016, both countries expressed their keen interest in strengthening cooperation in strategic areas of trade, defence and security. In this connection, during the visit, it was agreed to work towards the completion of the negotiation for the signing of the White Shipping Agreement between India and Thailand (MFAoT,2017).9/11 incident has propelled terror activities at the global level and Thailand has not been aloof. Thailand has gained major international attention as a hide-out and transit for Muslim extremists' groups. An article in the Wall Street Journal alleged that Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has used southern Thailand in January 2002 as a pivotal planning area for the Bali bombing. Given its location, porous borders and large Muslim minority population in the age of global terrorism, Thailand becomes a likely target of organisations like Al Qaeda and JI(Chhibber &Shishodia ,2013).India have been confronting with the menace of terror since last many decades and has devised mechanism to contain it successfully. Thailand is earning over 15% of its GDP from tourism therefore establishment of peace and stability in the country is much needed to facilitate tourism. Thai-Indian co-operation in countering terrorism would be a win-win situation for both the parties.

Economic growth of Southeast Asia in general has been positive since last four decades. From 1991-96 the overall growth rate of Southeast Asia stood at 7.6%. However the Asian financial crisis which started in July 1997 with the devolution of the Thai Baht set in motion an economic and financial crisis that not only consumed the Thai economy but also affected every other important ASEAN economy, with impact felt on the global economy as well(Nehru,2017).The Thai economy has been in doldrums since then. At the end of 2017, Thailand achieved a GDP growth of 3.5%. According to Thai India business Economic Centre, Thailand's economy in 2018 was growing with roughly 4%. India and Thailand have concluded many bi-lateral and regional trade agreements along with Export Import (EXIM) policy that ushered in an environment free of restrictions and control. India's Foreign Trade Policy considered the fact that the Regional Trading Agreements (RTAs) and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) would help supplement and complement the bi-lateral trading system, while also helping India to expand its market (Moorthy&Srinivas ,2005).Thailand's Look West Policy complements the "Act East" mission of Prime Minister Narendra Modi providing a new Phillip for enhancing bi-lateral economic co-operation between India and Thailand in 21st century. Both have inked many bilateral and multilateral agreements to facilitate free trade.The volume of current annual

bilateral trade between the two countries is nearly \$9 billion. Thailand is India's second largest trading partner in ASEAN after Singapore. In January 2018, all ASEAN head of the state were collectively invited for the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi. It was maiden presence of all ASEAN leaders together in Delhi and that coincided with ASEAN-India summit. This summit had further facilitated the growth saga of ASEAN and India in general and India and Thailand in particular.

India has over 1600 KM land linkages with Myanmar. Myanmar is connected physically to all ASEAN countries. It was planned a long time ago to have a physical connectivity with the ASEAN making Myanmar as a land bridge. The area is connected to Indian North-East region. Four North-Eastern states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram shares land border with Myanmar. It was conceived almost 20 years ago but till date proper land route has not been established. Once it gets established, it will be a game changer for both India and ASEAN in the areas of trade and commerce, cultural relations, tourism and people to people exchange. Majority of road network has already been constructed in Myanmar, only few bridges and missing link has yet to be constructed. Once network will be ready in Myanmar, it will be extended up to Thailand and then it will be connecting India to Hanoi, Vietnam. According to Union Minister of Road Transport, Mr Nitin Gadkari, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is likely to be operational by December, 2019. According to him, extension of trilateral highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam is being planned and are at different stages of implementation(PTI,2018). This 1400 km long India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway would be accelerating the base of bilateral trade with Thailand in particular and rest of ASEAN countries in General. It has grown a lot since last 20 years but yet to realize its full potential.

### **Concluding Remarks**

India and Thailand are civilizational neighbours and also close to each other geographically. Bilateral trade and commerce have reached \$9billion but the potential has not been harnessed properly till date due to many prevailing hurdles. The arrival of Modi government for the second term (2019-24) is a big booster of foreign policy initiatives, particularly Act East Policy. PM Modi has invited leaders of all BIMSTEC countries to witness his historical second in row swearing in ceremony on 30th May 2019 in New Delhi. BIMSTEC has been propelling its intra cooperation on diverse issues of bilateral benefits. Thailand is an important fulcrum of BIMSTEC. Thailand's strategic location also offers variety of strategic convergences to India. With the synergy of our civilizational roots, we can



deepen our relationship. Pro-activeness had been hallmark of Modi-I foreign policy and bound to accelerate in Modi-II as well. Act East Policy has been one of the most significant signature policies of Modi-I regime. Thailand has the potential to become one of the important fulcrums of India's Act East Policy and time has come to realize this reality. Both countries have enormous potential which has yet to be utilised. Modi-II regime is bound to cement the deepening of bonhomie between Thailand and India. This will not only be a win-win situation for both the countries but could be a facilitator of justice-based order in ASEAN in particular and in Asia in general.

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