

*Review article*

## **Political and Security Relations between India and Southeast Asia states after the Cold War**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The political and security relationship between India and Southeast Asia (SEA) has developed beyond the traditional domain after the Cold War era. As the Cold War ended, and new geopolitics were redefined, both parties sought a strategic approach through greater engagement with extra-regional partners. Since 2003, both parties have engaged in various political partnerships with SEA states and a few security challenges collectively. The paper answers the following questions: what is the pattern of this relationship? What kind of mechanism has been adopted by both parties in strengthening their relationship? Is the factor of China imperative enough to ‘boost’ India’s efforts in reinforcing political and security relations with SEA states? Using content analysis, emerging themes from relevant literature by selected scholars in the area of India and SEA states’ relations are explored. This paper also reviews several governmental documents and official websites. In general, some scholars agree that the development of the relationship between India and SEA states is important in creating a regional balance with other international actors especially China. This paper aims to examine the growing relations between India and SEA states in the political and security terms since 2003. The paper suggests that the strong political and security relationship between India and SEA states creates an “external

balancing strategy” to counter-balance the presence of China in the region. Meanwhile, it also shows that SEA states are turning to India as a counterweight to China and the US in the region.

*Keywords:* India-Southeast Asia relations, maritime security, political relation, security cooperation

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## INTRODUCTION

The political and security relationship between India and Southeast Asia (SEA) has developed beyond the traditional domain after the Cold War era. As the Cold War ended and new geopolitics were redefined, both parties sought a strategic approach through greater engagement with extra regional partners. Since 2003, both parties have engaged in various political partnerships with SEA states and a few security challenges collectively. The introduction of India's Look East Policy, later rebranded the Act East Policy, signaled India's determination to strengthen relations with SEA. Some scholars argue that the rising military power of China and its assertiveness in the region is one of the important mutual challenges for India and Southeast Asian countries (Amador et al., 2011; Blank et al., 2015; Naidu, 2010; Pandya & Malone, 2010; Rajendram, 2014; Yong & Mun, 2009). These scholars assert that there is a crucial need for India to enhance its political and security ties in order to confront mutual threats and counter-balance China's rising power in the region in particular.

On the other hand, the approach of SEA states towards India is argued to be an alignment option for them to balance the regional influence of China and the United States (Singh 2011; Singh, 2018). SEA states are seen seeking on power balancing between major powers rather than bandwagon. However, few scholars argue that using realism and balance of power as concepts in understanding the

regional relations with the major powers is no longer significant. They assert that SEA states are more independent in managing their affairs in the post-Cold War (Archaya, 2004; Banlaoi, 2003; Circiorari 2008). Despite this argument, this paper contends that the perspective of balance of power is still relevant to explain the nature of regional relations with major powers. The competition between two major powers i.e. China and India, is real as highlighted by few scholars (Banlaoi, 2003; Frankel 2011; Hong, 2007; Mohan, 2006; Scott, 2008a, 2008b) and it is impossible for SEA states to choose the bandwagon because all the states in the region have mutual benefits with China and India in various domains. It is important to see the development of the relations between SEA states and major powers to understand and foresee the political and security challenges in the region, especially with India as a new heavyweight player after the Cold War.

In spite of the variety of interpretation of the motive in their relations, most agree that both parties have extensively used their security and political engagements beyond the traditional framework scholars (Batabyal, 2006; Brewster, 2013; Muni & Mun, 2012; Mohan, 2008; Naidu, 2010; Singh, 2011; Southgate, 2015). With this in mind, the current paper answers the following questions: what is the pattern of this relationship? What kind of mechanism has been adopted by both parties in strengthening their relationship? Is the factor of China imperative enough to 'boost' India's efforts in reinforcing political and security relations with SEA states?

Therefore, this paper aims to examine the growing relations between India and Southeast Asian (SEA) states in the political and security domains since 2003. Using content analysis, emerging themes from relevant literature by selected scholars in the area of India and SEA states' relations were explored. This paper also reviews several governmental publications (ASEAN, 2010, 2016; Ministry of External Affairs, 2013, 2016) including official websites such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Searching themes in these data sources were based on selected keywords (e.g. India-Southeast Asia relations, political relation, security cooperation, maritime security and strategic relations between India and SEA). The discussion of this paper is divided into three sections. In the first section provides a brief background and explanation of the changing directions of India towards Southeast Asia region after the Cold War. The second and third sections focus on two major types of the relationships between India and Southeast Asia, namely political partnerships and security cooperation.

### **POST-COLD WAR AND INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY**

This section discusses a brief background of India's direction towards Southeast Asian countries after the Cold War. SEA states became the core point of India's foreign policy in expanding its influence in the Asia-Pacific region post-Cold War. After losing India's major trading partner

with Russia due to the dissolution of Soviet Union, India needs new trading partners. India also needs to reconnect with SEA after three decades of 'frosty relations' that exist due to the ideological influence of the Cold War (Blank et al., 2015; Naidu, 2010). Therefore, finding new trading partners in SEA was the best option for India to expand its power because of the great potential of SEA in economy, security, politics and maritime sectors. Therefore, India launched its economic reforms and its new strategy Look East Policy (LEP) with the aim to establish economic and strategic ties with SEA states.

The introduction of the LEP in 1992 marked a new direction in India's policy toward the SEA region. It aimed to establish India as a "heavyweight player" in the region. There was no official doctrine or blueprint of government document specifying the principle of the LEP by the Indian government; it was only mentioned in Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report (1995, 1996). Most scholars agree that the objectives of the LEP are at least three-fold involving multilateral engagements in politics, economic and defense. Forums for these engagements include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Gupta, 2012; Jha, 2008; Naidu, 2004; Pandya & Malone, 2010; Rajendram, 2014). The main three objectives of the LEP are; first, to strengthen the political ties by institutionalizing linkages with ASEAN and its members; second, to increase economic engagement (i.e. in trade,

investment, technology and tourism); and third, to build strong defense and security relations with ASEAN members.

There is no doubt that the motive of the LEP is driven much by the need for economic reform in India's foreign relations with SEA states as highlighted by several scholars (Brewster, 2013; Haokip, 2011). Yet, scholars like Batabyal (2006), Hong (2007), Garver (2010), Muni and Mun (2012), Brewster (2013) and Pandya and Malone (2010) argued that the main objective of the LEP was not merely to expand India's economic ties with SEA states but to obtain a strategic position in political and security relations to counter-balance China's ascending power in the Asia-Pacific region. However, China had concerns towards the LEP, especially when "The People's Daily" mentioned that India might intend to encircle China's power through the LEP (Lakshminarayan, 2010). Despite India's effort to be a regional economic power, the 'overwhelming dominance' of China in SEA forced India to take a more strategic role in non-economic dimensions such as in political, security, defense and maritime areas. The proclamation of the Act East Policy by India's current Prime Minister as a new 'phase' of the LEP in 2015 looks promising. The new updated policy reflects India's will to play a prominent strategic role in SEA and the Asia-Pacific region (Rajendram, 2014). The Act East Policy is paying further attention to the maritime security (Singh, 2018), focusing on building the Indian navy's capability and promoting India's naval interactions in the Asia-Pacific zone.

This paper identifies two main patterns namely political partnership and security cooperation. The next two sections will discuss these two patterns. The patterns are explored using multilateral institutions such as ASEAN-based organizations as the primary mechanisms adopted by India and SEA states to strengthen their political and security relationship.

### **Political Partnership**

This section focuses on the pattern of political partnership between India and SEA states after 2003 through various regional mechanisms. Essentially, the political partnership between India and SEA states is an extension of their diplomatic relationship. It involves activities in regional mechanisms with ASEAN-based organizations, i.e. ARF and EAS, and promoting bilateral ties (Blank et al., 2015; Brewster, 2013; Naidu, 2004). India became a Sectoral-dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992 and later became a full dialogue partner in 1995. The following year, India became a part of ARF and then became a full partner summit of ASEAN in 2002. The inclusion of India to EAS was supported by Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia in 2005, despite China's refusal (Scott, 2007). The inclusion is because of SEA states deem India as a heavyweight player and strategic partner in the region based on its growing economy and defense capabilities.

India and SEA states aim to deepen their political partnership in order to enhance confidence building, unite their views towards regional and international issues,

and to ensure India's space in the SEA region. India's inclusion to these institutions enhances its status as a major power (Blank et al., 2015). In this regard, the political partnership between India and SEA states is beneficial for both entities; it promotes peace and prosperity for the whole region. The growing political ties between India and SEA states have achieved prominent milestones. They signed two important treaties. Firstly, both parties signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the second India-ASEAN Summit in 2003. The treaty is a full recognition to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of SEA states and at the same time establishes an understanding of non-interference in internal affairs. For India, this is an important recognition to its role as a major player in the region through ASEAN (Ranjan, 2016) and a benign counterbalance to China in the region (Das, 2013). In sum, besides no latent activity, this treaty acknowledges SEA has a trustful ally and superpower vis-à-vis China.

Secondly, India and SEA states released the Plan of Action (POA) in the Third India-ASEAN Summit in 2004. This plan aims to implement the partnership between them for peace, progress and shared prosperity. From India's perspective, the POA is a roadmap for developing and integrating their ties in the long-term (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India, 2017). Most scholars such as Amador et al. (2011) and Ranjan (2016) agree that the POA has laid a strong foundation for future relations between India and ASEAN. Therefore, the POA

has been renewed twice (in 2010-2015 and 2016-2020). The successful implementation of the POA is measured by a series of consultative meetings under dialogue and cooperation frameworks initiated by ASEAN. These meetings include ARF, EAS, the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC)+1 Sessions and ASEAN Economic Ministers+1 Consultations (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2013). Most scholars like Amador et al., (2011) and Ranjan (2016) agree that the POA is a good achievement for both parties. The treaty is seen as a kind of recognition for both parties in gaining and maintaining mutual respect regarding territorial integrity.

India could actively participate with SEA states through several regional engagements, such as the POA and TAC. Unfortunately, India could not fully implement some of the plans within these organizations because of the influence and affiliation of China with some SEA states. Due to this reason, India also could not reinforce its political ties with all of the SEA states. In spite of that, it appears that India and ASEAN are eager to find channels to expand their political and diplomatic relations. They are attempting to unite their perceptions and efforts to confront challenges that threaten their common interests. The participation of India into EAS is a kind of recognition of SEA states to India as a security player and as a guardian that provides peace and security. This is also a significant gesture for India to maintain the balance of regional power in the region vis-à-vis China's power.

## Security Cooperation

This section examines the pattern of security cooperation through various regional mechanisms between India and SEA states post-2003. According to Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, the security dimension has expanded significantly in the second phase of the LEP, whereas the first phase was mainly focused on the economic context (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2003). As most scholars agree, the security engagements between India and SEA states primarily reflected India's intention to counterweight China's influence and implement its strategic role in the region (Amador et al., 2011; Guihong, 2005; Scott, 2008, 2015). Although the cooperation is more on the basis of non-traditional security, it has given a positive environment for SEA to enhance its regional role beyond security context as indicated by Amador et al. (2011) and Cook (2015). The security relations between India and SEA states developed according to maritime security and counter-terrorism since 2003 (Arenla, 2014; Agnihotri, 2013; Brewster, 2013; Mann, 2017). Therefore, the first part of the discussion in this section is going to emphasize maritime engagement and the second part focuses on counter-terrorism activities.

The security cooperation between India and SEA states has evolved in the maritime domain because of the assertiveness of China in the region. Some SEA states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam and Philippines, have maritime border disputes with China in the South

China Sea (SCS). India established several naval engagements and initiatives with SEA navies due to the significance of the waterways of SEA region, beside the mutual concerns of them regarding safety of the waterways in the region and maintaining unfettered access. Bajpae (2019), Naidu (2010) and Rajendram (2014) asserted that the increasing assertiveness of China was an essential factor to develop the security cooperation between India and SEA states, therefore, India enhanced its maritime engagements with SEA navies to protect its maritime interest in the region. Predominantly, the engagements of India and SEA states are through security cooperation with several regional mechanisms such as; ARF, EAS, ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting (ADMM-Plus), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). They also have some bilateral engagements in few bilateral naval operations and exercises, especially with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand (Mann, 2017; Rajendram, 2014). However, protecting the maritime border of the SEA region is imperative for India's national interests and is an underlying reason to maintain its presence as a naval power. These kinds of efforts reflect a deep commitment and engagement to keep the region safe from any security threat.

In addition, both India and SEA states have collective efforts in ensuring safety along the maritime routes (Ladwig III, 2010; Mohan, 2008; Pant, 2013; Rajendram, 2014). They have increased their maritime interactions to minimize the security challenges caused by maritime terrorism,

smuggling and piracy. Thus, Indian and SEA navies have expanded their maneuvers along with the crucial choke points, especially the Malacca Strait and exchange their experience with military exercise personnel and pilots (Ladwig III, 2009; Pant, 2007). Moreover, India aims to keep this area free from any dominated powers or security threats because it is a part of its national interest. The Defense Minister of India stated that the “area of interest... extends from the north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea” (Asia Times, 2000). Therefore, India has participated in naval interactions with SEA navies in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea to protect its interests and compete with and counter against the influence of China in the region.

Consequently, it appears that India’s activities provoke China. The country stated it had concerns about India’s intentions in the region (Ladwig III, 2009; Malik, 2012). China has suspected India since 2003 when it extended its operations to the South China Sea and initiated naval exercises in this region. China considers as a part of its periphery (Scott, 2007, 2008a). However, India is expanding its maritime status in the region to ensure the freedom of navigation in the area by preventing any power to undermine the regional security, moreover to exercise its influence in challenging China’s presence.

India is trying to intensify its security engagements with the SEA region through various naval operations and exercises. China’s growing assertiveness in the SCS is the main factor to evolve the maritime

engagements between India and SEA states, meanwhile the latter become more acceptable to expand the Indian naval presence to counter-balance China’s influence in the region (Bajpae, 2019). India achieved remarkable steps (i.e. signed defense cooperation agreements with some of the SEA states such as; Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, signed the agreement of strategic partnership with Vietnam in 2007 and the agreement of naval cooperation with Singapore in 2017). The security engagements cover biennial activities such as a bilateral exercise with Singapore, and joint patrols with Indonesia and Thailand. Multilateral exercises conduct through MILAN<sup>1</sup> with some SEA countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines since 1995 (Hong, 2007; Rajendram, 2014). India also actively supports humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities in SEA states (such as in Tsunami casualties in Indonesia) to show her commitment as a “Net Security Provider” in a bigger strategic context to the region. The active and persistent of the naval presence of India through several maritime engagements and maneuvers in the SEA waters, perceive as efforts of India and SEA states to hedge-counter the influence of China in the region and to ensure the freedom of navigation along waterways, especially the Malacca Strait, Singapore Strait and the South China Sea. Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> MILAN is a congregation of littoral navies conducted biennially by the Indian Navy under the aegis of the Andaman and Nicobar Command.

China perceived these security engagements and naval exercises between India and SEA as a way to contain its power in the region (People's Daily Online, 2012). Despite the perception of China, India still actively engages in naval activities with SEA states to ensure the waterways remain safe and most importantly to curb China's influence in the region.

Counter-terrorism is another dimension of security cooperation between India and SEA states. Their engagement becomes more significant after 9/11 2001<sup>2</sup> in regard to counter-terrorism (Arenla, 2014; Pandya & Malone, 2010; Yong & Mun, 2009). Both entities have suffered from terrorist attacks. Indonesia experienced the Bali bomb blasts in 2003 and the Marriot Hotel in Jakarta in 2003 (Yong & Mun, 2009). India was also affected by terrorist attacks in India's Parliament in 2001, and in Mumbai in 2008 (Pant, 2010). As a result, they expressed their readiness to help each other. India and SEA states are trying to control the threats of terrorism by enhancing collaboration and consultation through regional forums. They utilize regional institutions like ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus to exchange their perspectives, experiences and unite their efforts against terrorism threats.

After the incident of 9/11, security cooperation between India and SEA states is obviously aimed to handle security challenges like terrorism in the whole region (Amador et al., 2011; Pandya & Malone, 2010). India and SEA states believe in

their collective security and the necessity to gather their strength to confront mutual threats. Moreover, this cooperation gives more space to India to ensure its status as a predominant power and expand its area of influence. The Prime Minister of Malaysia in the first EAS in 2005 stated that "India has the potential of being an important partner in our region...we could encourage India to play its role in the promotion of peace, security, and stability in East Asia" (Muni, 2012, p. 4). However, it appears that SEA states are convinced of the pivotal role of India to ensure the stability and peace in the region. Moreover, this role will possibly allow India to exercise a broad influence in the region, as it intends.

The security cooperation between India and SEA states manifest by outstanding counter-terrorism movements (Arenla, 2014; Naidu, 2010; Pandya & Malone, 2010; Yong & Mun, 2009). India shows its intention to help SEA states to fight terrorism by signing an agreement to combat terrorism in 2003, which aims to prevent and combat international terrorism by exchanging information, intelligence and capacity-building. India and SEA states confirm their readiness to counter-terrorism by gathering their capabilities. Through POA, India and SEA states recommended three major efforts of counter-terrorism (ASEAN, 2010, 2016). First is reinforcing training and consultation for maintaining efforts of capacity-building. Second is enhancing security cooperation in the field of border customs and transport to control the movement of terrorists across borders and cut off transferring materials

<sup>2</sup>The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States.



that are possibly used in terrorist attacks. Third is establishing institutions in sharing information and legal assistance for law implementation. India has strategic interests in this region and attempts to keep this region protected from any threat. The Indian Prime Minister Modi stated that “Our engagement with ASEAN...[is] driven by our common strategic priorities of securing our societies and bringing peace, stability, and prosperity to the region” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). Overall, mutual concerns of India and SEA states in securing the region, and maritime borders in particular, demand consolidating their efforts to confront their mutual challenges. Their activities and initiatives may have relative success, but still there is no real action to undermine the non-traditional threat.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, because India made a significant attempt to maintain comprehensive and extensive relations with SEA states through political and security mechanisms regarding ASEAN and its regional mechanisms in the early 1990s (ARF, EAS, ASEAN-India Summit), India is positioned to protect the region and counter-balance China’s expansionist policy and behavior. Through the LEP, India actively expands its relations with SEA states and becomes a major power in the region. It is easy for SEA states to give a warm welcome to India to the region because of the historical connection, most importantly her capability in economy through long-lasting trade relationships and military strength. The growing relationship

between India and SEA states in political and security fields reflect a momentum in their ties since 2003 and reflects a post-Cold War posture and outlook. The rising military power of China risks the regional security of the SEA region, therefore ASEAN and its multilateral mechanisms provide a platform for other regional powers to check-balance the power of China in the region (Kuik, 2018). The invitation for India by ASEAN to be a member in EAS, despite the rejection of China in 2005, shows the recognition of SEA states towards India through security partnership. It also shows the ‘acceptance’ of the region to India’s essential role to be a player in the security architecture in the region. The political relations between India and SEA states look permanent since India became a full partner summit with ASEAN in 2002. The bilateral ties between India and SEA states are relatively weak considering solid relations of some SEA countries with China, such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos but India intends to develop its relations with all the countries bilaterally and multilaterally to balance China’s role in the region.

After the Cold War, the relationship between India and SEA states improved significantly through ASEAN-based multilateral mechanisms in both security and maritime partnership. India was actively involved in several regional security institutions and in bilateral naval operations and exercises. In maritime security, India and SEA states demonstrated their collective commitment in maintaining the safety of maritime borders and the crucial choke

points (i.e. the Malacca Strait) in order to keep the region away from any dominant power, especially China. However, besides their readiness to cooperate with agreements on a few arrangements and mechanisms within security institutions such as EAS and ARF, their real commitment in minimizing terrorism threats in the region is still ambiguous. So far, there are no real physical, active or effective plans of counter terrorism from both parties.

This paper shows that first, the pattern of the relations between India and SEA states is beyond the traditional move and it is more than ordinary strategic alliance. India employs its resources to be an active partner preparing for the long-term strategy in the Asia Pacific Region. Second, India and SEA states pursue robust and comprehensive mechanisms with the aim to protect the regional balance of power. Finally, China is an essential factor that boost the relations of India with SEA states, especially with the activities of China in the Indian Ocean Region, and the growing assertiveness in the South China Sea which considers as a part of national security of India, and it has to keep the stability of regional security and maintain the balance of power in the region. Overall, the strong political and security relationship between India and SEA states establish an “external balancing strategy” to counter-balance the position of China in the region. However, SEA states are turning to India as a counterweight of the power of China and US in this region. Based on this argument, the scenario of SEA region

perhaps is in line with the proposition made by Ciociari (2008) that it is beyond balance of power, but more balance of great power influence.

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