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Some New Thoughts on India's Look East Policy

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In the light of India's recent attempt to build closer relations with East Asian countries within the framework of India's Look East Policy, it is pertinent to both analyze its current impact and make policy recommendations for implementation.

India's Look East Policy in recent years has assumed a greater economic dimension than a parallel political, strategic or even cultural one. Given India's economic reforms and the attendant efforts to integrate with the regional and global economy, it is but natural that Indian diplomacy, particularly in its relation with ASEAN countries, will focus more on economic issues like trade, investment, goods and services. India's efforts in these areas have no doubt been successful. Beginning initially with its sectoral dialogue partnership with the ASEAN, India graduated first to full dialogue partnership with attendant membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), then to the mechanism of ASEAN-India summit, at par with ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) and finally to the membership of the East Asian summit. These interactions have resulted in considerably greater integration with the rest of Asia than is commonly realized.

This success, was not due to India offering any 'niche' in terms of the creation of a future economic architecture or strategic order in Asia, as in the case of China, which has seized the leadership in practically everything that is happening in the Asia-Pacific region. India's Look East Policy has been more reactive to what

China has been doing in the region than a proactive one attempting to make a distinct Indian mark and "getting others to want what you want." The region now looks towards India because of its potential as an economic powerhouse and partly to balance China's overwhelming economic and strategic influence. However, compared with the clout India has achieved as an economic player, its strategic role in the security of Southeast and East Asia is still quite marginal, notwithstanding its status as a nuclear weapons power and the second largest country in Asia. Apart from its participation in the ARF dialogues and occasional forays into the Straits of Malacca for patrolling in combating piracy, India unfortunately is an insignificant player in the security structure of the region.

What strikes observers of India's Look East Policy is the conspicuous absence of a strategic vision of a future Asia-Pacific, that can inform its policies and actions in the coming years and will allow it to establish its rightful place in the Asian balance of power. If India has to emerge as a major power in the Asia-Pacific it has to have not only a vision of its own economic future but also a vision of its future strategic role in the region. India has not so far clearly spelt out its strategic objectives in the region in any of its policy papers. It has however, sought defence cooperation with countries like Myanmar, Indonesia and Vietnam and secured a role for itself in the security of the Straits of Malacca as a likely insurance against Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia. India's hesitation in taking a more open and assertive role is informed not only by its limits of military and economic power, but also by its intent to avoid a direct confrontation with China, which considers Southeast Asia as its sphere of influence.

Moreover, India's relations with China are on the upswing despite the lack of progress on the boundary issue and New Delhi is loath to see this affected

Promotion of India's strategic objectives need not be through the projection of its hard military power as the 'Realist' school would have us believe, but could be more effective through the exercise of its 'soft' power, in terms of education, culture and democracy. The liberal institutional approach emphasizes soft power aspects with cultural attraction, ideology and international institutions as the main resource. Soft power strategies rely more on common political values, peaceful means for conflict management, and economic cooperation in order to achieve common solutions. India's ability to play a major role in Asia lies not so much in the area of trade and investment where China has overwhelming presence, but in its human resources, democracy and culture in which it has a distinct advantage over other Asian countries. Knowledge of English, the language of globalization, is another advantage.

India's democracy may be messy but it has shown a lot of creativity in managing a multiracial and multicultural society, and in the processes of people's empowerment. It is here that India can make an abiding contribution to the process of

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democratization and nation-building of the region by helping them in human resource development and democratic capacity building. Southeast Asian countries are not only multiracial and

multicultural, but some of them are also in the process of democratic transformation. The Western model of democracy is not of much relevance to these countries, as the societal and historical circumstances are quite different. It is India's experience in nation-building and democracy that is much more relevant to them. Helping these countries in such transformation can further India's interests in Southeast Asia. Organizing elections for a potential constituency of 670 million voters is an incredible undertaking that India is proud of. Countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and even Cambodia, where elections are now taking place periodically, could learn much from the speed and transparency with which votes are tallied and the extensive powers accorded to the Indian Election Commission (EC). Thailand is currently passing through political uncertainty and is now under an interim government, which professes to return the country to democracy once it is able to sort out the mess and carry out institutional reforms. An offer from India to share its experiences in building an independent and transparent Election Commission should be welcome.

Many Indonesians, including the current President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, have great respect for India's ability to practice democracy despite its many shortcomings. While the central government in Indonesia has already implemented devolution of power hoping that a fairer distribution of national wealth will reduce separatist sentiments and regional violence, there is a lack of institutions at the local level to absorb such autonomy. This is where India can help through its ITEC (technical cooperation) programme, training in local self-government and institution-building at the grassroots level. With little investment, India can reap rich dividends in terms of both promotion of democracy in a vitally important neighbouring country and goodwill from the leadership and the people.

Another area India can make an impact in, is in the field of higher education. During his visit to Indonesia in April 2005, commemorating the Bandung Conference, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that India intended to stay engaged by sharing experiences "gained from

our own development process – with nations in Asia.” To quote Singh, “Human resource development holds the key to employment and wealth creation, particularly in this age of globalization. This has been our strategy and we have laid particular emphasis on training and skills development as we globalize. We have extended technical assistance valued at about US\$1 billion. We stand ready to do more.”

Undoubtedly Indonesia has been one of the prominent beneficiaries of Indian technical cooperation programmes meant for fellow developing countries. Around 1,000 Indonesian experts as well as officials received training in India under ITEC and India offered more than 1,100 scholarships to Indonesian students to study at Indian universities. In May 2006, India opened a US\$750,000 Vocational Training Centre in the country and it will open another in Aceh soon. But, there are greater potentials for India-Indonesia cooperation in education, which will be of benefit to both countries. Everywhere in Asia, there is greater demand among the younger generation to learn English, the language of globalization. Myanmar and the two least developed countries of Indochina, Cambodia and Laos, can benefit from India’s abundant English language teachers, who could help those countries at much less expense than the British or Australians. One of the important reasons for the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s was that while there had been a shift in the production line, there was no commensurate development in higher education in most of the Asian NICs to keep pace with such a shift.

India has a lead in information technology and Indian IITs and IIMs have a very high reputation in those countries. Many Southeast Asians have expressed their interest not only to come and study in these institutions, but also to have these institutions open their campuses in their countries, particularly in Indonesia. There are businessmen of Indian origin who would only be too glad to raise the money for opening these campuses and support the faculty. What they want is the brand name and some experienced backup faculty from India. Again the dividends that India will get will be rich and unmatched.

Yet another area that can promote India’s soft power in Southeast Asia in general, is its culture. Indian culture is an inseparable part of Indonesian customs, and our cultures and values are closely related, bearing in mind the history of the civilizational contacts between India and the countries of Southeast Asia which span over 2000

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years. If carefully pursued, Indian cultural diplomacy can further cement the bond between the two regions, based on pluralist traditions and the need for maintaining ‘unity in diversity.’

Promotion of tourism as a means of people-to-people contact can be an important instrument of Indian cultural diplomacy. Indonesia, for example, happens to be the largest Muslim country in the world, yet its cultural heritage is essentially Hindu-Buddhist in origin manifest in the temple architecture of Prambanan and Borobudur in Central Java and innumerable Candis scattered all along the nation. While their origin might have been from India, Indonesians themselves have contributed significantly in improvising and enriching that culture. Indian tourists could be encouraged to travel in larger numbers to those sites to discover the inherent genius of the Indonesian people in preserving such

culture and values, and in the process build a common bond between the two countries.

Similarly, Islamic cultural heritage and monuments are part of the composite Indian civilization, which need to be presented before the Muslims of Indonesia and Malaysia. The Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, Ajmer, Delhi, Hyderabad, the abode of Tipu Sultan in Mysore and innumerable Islamic cultural sites and Sufi shrines in India could be a spiritual feast for these tourists. For pilgrimage, Muslims all over the world will surely go to Mecca, the birthplace of Prophet Mohammed, but for spiritual experiences, they need to be exposed to India in discovering pluralism and multiculturalism in India.

Similar things can be done with Buddhist heritages in India. Nalanda is one of the oldest universities in the world, whose revival in the coming years with the help of countries like Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and China will herald a major transformation in regional cooperation. Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Nalanda could be developed as places of pilgrimage for Buddhists in Southeast Asia. The interest of East Asian countries in such endeavours was expressed when Prime Minister Singh held discussions with leaders of ASEAN countries and its dialogue partners during his last visit to the Philippines in 2006.

The Nalanda project with mentors like Amartya Sen envisages the setting up of an international university, recalling the glorious past of the 5th century, making the future university an "icon of Asian renaissance" and a "centre of civilizational dialogue and inter-faith understanding." The vision for setting up such an institution was first spelt out by Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam. Durable and abiding relationships are based not on inter-governmental contacts, but on people-to-people contacts. Culture is the best bond between people and Nalanda can be the bridge between the peoples of Asia.

Even though tourism is an important item of the

Indian dialogue with ASEAN, not much has been done to develop this area to promote people-to-people contacts. So far, tourism has been moving in only one direction – Indians going to Southeast Asia but not the reverse. Imaginative packages need to be evolved and sufficient incentives offered to attract tourists from countries in Southeast Asia, and from Indonesia, in particular. This will not only bring revenues to India but will also cement civil society interactions, an important component of mature and enduring state-to-state relations. Let India initiate an innovative political and cultural charm offensive to give more substance to India's Look East Policy.



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