India’s ‘Look East’ Policy: Moving beyond ASEAN

by Prof Swaran SINGH, PhD
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
ssingh@mail.jnu.ac.in

Several reasons can be listed for India’s gradual shift towards East Asia since early 1990s. These can be (a) *domestic* e.g. India’s economic reforms and opening up, (b) *regional* e.g. India’s frustrations with its western and northern neighbours as also with slow progress in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and (c) *global* e.g. the collapse of India’s long-time ally, Soviet Union, and the rise of China as the new global concern. On the other side, the expansion of ASEAN itself, from six to ten, can be cited as one most important trigger for this transformation, making ASEAN and India share long and undisputed land and maritime borders.

More important, India’s desire to bring peace and prosperity in its turmoil-ridden northeastern region remains the other perennial driver underlying India’s growing engagement of East Asian Countries. The inclusion of Indo-China and Myanmar into ASEAN, in this context, has particularly re-enforced the relevance and rationale of India’s engagement with East Asian neighbours and made ASEAN the central pillar of India’s ‘Look East’ policy initiatives. More recent decades have also witnessed India’s rising anxieties regarding China’s rising influence and links in this region. This makes India’s Look East policy, at least somewhat, China driven.

**GENESIS & EVOLUTION**

India’s Look East policy remains deeply entrenched in India’s historical, cultural as well as post-independence political and diplomatic interactions with these countries in India’s ‘extended’ neighbourhood in East Asia. India’s engagement had been especially active during the decades of 1940s and 1950s, i.e. during the Asian decolonization phase, when New Delhi spearheaded the evolution of pan-Asian and Afro-Asian connections that culminated in the evolution of the Nonalignment Movement. Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru shared close chemistry with many of East Asia’s prominent statesmen of those times.

However, beginning from India’s difficult interface with China from the Bandung Conference onwards – followed by China-India war of October-November 1962 and death of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in May 1964 – India’s focus on extended neighbourhood was to shrink to its immediate neighbours in South Asia. Later, it was only from the early 1990s that these historical linkages were to be revived, this time not emotional and political but primarily a trade-led economic engagement with surging ‘tiger’ economies of East Asia. This new format, of course, has its political, diplomatic and cultural
components and together this has come to be known as India’s “Look East” policy with engagement of ASEAN at its core.

The evolution of this policy is generally divided into two distinct phases of early 1990s and early 2000s. In the first phase, for example, was led by India’s economic engagement with the original six members of ASEAN. This was to result in India becoming ASEAN Sectoral Cooperation Partner in 1993, followed by its becoming ASEAN Full Dialogue Partner in 1995 and then member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 as also member of East Asian Summit from 2005 and member of Asia-Europe Summit Meetings from 2006. Given India’s strong economic credential in face of global economic meltdown and its being part of G20 (new manager of global economy), it may soon be invited to also join the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. India’s nuclear tests of 1998 juxtaposed with East Asian financial crisis from late 1997 did lead to a brief slowdown in their mutual initiatives but only for a brief period of time.

**The Current Phase**

In its next phase from 2001, India’s “Look East” policy seeks to engage the expanded ASEAN of ten members, especially Indo-China and Myanmar. In this phase, India and ASEAN have also initiated their Annual Summits from November 2002 and this expanding mutual trust has resulted in India being invited to be part of the inaugural East Asian Summit (EAS) in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 which has since been followed by follow up summits at Cebu January 2007 and most recently in Singapore during November 2007. The next EAS was to be held in October 2008 but (given internal situation in Thailand which is ASEAN Chair) it has since been postponed several times from April to June to now October 2009. All the issues of energy security and climate change debated at EAS remain central to India’s own list of national priorities and this has really opened several new doors for mutual understanding and cooperation at bilateral as well as regional format.

The current phase of India’s Look East policy has transformed multiple strands of India’s foreign relations that include: (a) bilateral relations across East Asia, (b) innovative new formats of sub-regional cooperation and (c) India being part of Asia’s multilateral forums, each re-enforcing the other. Some of these examples of sub-regional cooperation can include the Kunming Initiative, BIMSTEC, GMS involving India’s immediate and extended neighbourhood of continental Southeast Asia. It is interesting to note that both in BIMSTEC and GMS India is seen as responsible for China not being a participant despite Beijing repeatedly showing interest to join these forums.

Things have though have begun to change since with India becoming Observer at China-dominated SCO and China becoming Observer in SAARC and the future may facilitate as also change some of India’s original motivations in engaging ASEAN. In some ways this has also been triggered and re-enforced by the fact that ASEAN has also facilitated India’s rapprochement with China and in
strengthening India’s ties with Japan. However, in spite of being the second largest country in terms of population and fourth largest economy in purchasing power parity, India is is still found lacking in demonstrating strong political will or in taking initiatives in East Asia.

As regards the future of India’s multivariate motivations in engaging East Asia, one can include various strategic, political and even diplomatic explanations. But above all, this remains driven by India’s desire to be part of Asian economic integration where China and India contribute now nearly 40 per cent of the global incremental output. And here, EAS, ASEM and APEC promises to emerge as world’s next locomotives and emerging center of gravity in world economy and India can not afford to miss the bus. But as of now, India is seen often to focus on and resort to bilateral rather than multilateral initiatives.

RESURGENCE IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

In the end, however, the greatest strength of India’s Look East policy lies in its ability to transform the tenor of India’s bilateral relations with several East Asian countries, especially, China, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. While Singapore has increasingly projected itself as bird with China and India its two large wings, Thailand and Vietnam have emerged as two major new partners of India in East Asia. Vietnam remains the beneficiary of India’s major investments in sectors like IT, pharmaceuticals and agriculture and both sides with to double their trade from $1 billion for 2006 to 2 billion by 2010. India has also been seriously engaging Myanmar’s military rulers and has completely metamorphosed its traditional pro-democracy policy towards Yangon.

Amongst these bilateral relations, India’ relations with Japan remain the pillar of India’s growing interest and initiatives in East Asia. Following the Russo-Japanese war, Japan had been the home for Asia’s (and India’s) revolutionaries and India was amongst the first countries to sign the peace treaty with Japan after World War II. As a result, Japan remains India’s strongest support in facilitating India’s presence in East Asian forums. Japan is India’s largest donor, largest investor from East Asia and their bilateral trade carries strong potential as this remains an example of India’s most balanced trade in the region. Their mutual trust is demonstrated in Japan’s investment in strategic sectors as also in their joint military exercises, the Malabar been the last India-Japan-US naval exercise to be held in May 2009. Both Japan and India share common values (free-market, democracy and commitment to democracy and peace) as also common concerns about issues of terrorism, climate change, energy security and, of course, rise of the People’s Republic of China. India-Japan relations remain traditionally strong ties and one which confronts no fundamental irritants. This is what partly makes this relationship devoid of media headlines.

In the post-9/11 context, India and Japan have started ‘Security Dialogue’ as also annual meetings of their prime ministers and foreign secretaries. The October 2008 visit by India’s prime minister had resulted in two important
documents (a) Joint Statement on the Advancement of the Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India, and (b) Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India which outline the current tenor of their partnership in ensuring stability and peace in East Asia. Currently, Nuclear North Korea has emerged as another major security concern in East Asia and both India and Japan have strongly condemned North Korea's nuclear and missile tests and they see these posing a major threat of proliferation. Both have sought to strengthen dialogue as well as effective sanctions. Some of these issues are expected to come up for discussion at the coming July 23, 2009 meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the next 23-25 October EAS meeting being held in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, therefore, India's Look East policy has had its own reasons to tilt to the East but the traditionally strong India-Japan ties have greatly facilitated India's growing acceptance and confidence in engaging East Asian countries at both bilateral and multilateral forums. The efforts had begun focused on engaging ASEAN and India's trade with ASEAN for instance has gone up from being $ 7.6 billion for 1999 to $9.88 billion for 2001, $9.7 billion for 2002, $30.64 billion for 2006, $38.4 billion for 2007 and $48 billion for 2008. As a result, India's Look East policy has since moved much beyond ASEAN launching initiatives with major players and forums across the Asia Pacific. India becoming the founding member of EAS has brought India's Look East policy a full circle and it is now ready to launch itself to the next step of exploring partnerships with the larger Pacific Asian community and other pan-Asian initiatives.

Thus starting while engaging Indo-China and Myanmar to ensure peace and prosperity for India's northeastern region remains one end of India's Look East policy, the other end is today marked by India's engagement with far away countries like Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines and this has become institutionalized with India's entry into EAS which has also reinforced the centrality of ASEAN in India's future foreign relations. And, with Japan playing an ever increasing role on a larger canvass of pan-Asianism, the future portents not only closer India-Japan relations but also possibilities of these two developing joint strategies and joint initiatives.