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India-ASEAN Engagement in the Covid-19 Period

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This commentary analyses India's engagement with ASEAN amidst shifting geo-political landscape in the Southeast Asian region and disruptions caused by Covid-19 pandemic. It suggests a new strategy of India-ASEAN engagement.

Perceptions and Misperceptions

The Covid-19 has brought profound changes in global and regional environments in terms of managing disruptions and to deal with economic hardships and other challenges. India's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also badly affected due to these unprecedented disruptions. There are varying perceptions of these changes, disruptions and the causes of geo-political and geo-economic shifts. With this background, this commentary examines perception and counter-perception and how it facilitate or impede a mature and a fuller India-ASEAN engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, the foreign policy of any country is always a function of, apart from other variables, what others think of its policy objectives, how it might influence their own perceived national interests and their position in the regional and global power structure. Thus, the mutual images held by actors affect their mutual expectations of the other's behaviour and guide the interpretation of the other's actions. Perception of a country vis-à-vis the other is generally dictated by the interaction of three factors: the perceived relative capability of the actor; the perceived political culture of foreign policy behaviour of that actor and in the context of the situation in which the perception is made. The way in which one country reacts to an action carried out by another country will then depend on which particular image becomes dominant in a situation and consequently will influence the interpretation of that action. The same action can be interpreted as negative or harmful to the perceiver's country if the actor is perceived as unfriendly, hostile or an enemy, or alternately positive and welcome if it is perceived as a friend, partner or an ally.

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One major assumption here is that our relations with ASEAN are sometimes characterized by misperceptions of each other, particularly on China's relations with ASEAN nations. While some ASEAN countries are undoubtedly concerned by the recent assertiveness of China in the South China Sea, most countries in ASEAN still view China as an economic opportunity. Trade and investment relations with China have played a major role in the economic development of Southeast Asian countries. China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) has facilitated massive infrastructure projects and connectivity promoting further integration within the region. Despite some setbacks and concerns regarding terms of loan and debt-payment, ASEAN countries consider BRI as a great opportunity for promoting their own economic development.

In contrast to the ASEAN perception, India views the BRI more cautiously, as an opaque and a means to economically strangle the countries of the region by imposing a debt-trap. There are, however, other reasons for India to oppose the BRI. Even on the less-controversial issue of Indian cultural influences on the region, there are differences in perception. While Southeast Asian countries do recognize the influence of Indian culture on theirs, they expect their own contribution in improvising it to suit their own needs to be recognized by India. There are many other issues on which the Indian perception of the ASEAN and the latter's perception of the former differ and come in the way of a more coordinated and synergy in their relationship. Even while there are cultural similarities between the Indians and the Southeast Asians, there are significant differences in their manner of responses, which has a significant bearing on policymaking.

Charting out a New Strategy of India-ASEAN Engagement

Differing perceptions and perspectives require inputs and participation of civil society, business and non-governmental organisations, and media to have a better understanding. Media plays a vital role in shaping a country's perception vis-à-vis others. Presently, India-ASEAN relations are more of inter-governmental interactions, and the civil society business groups are not involved as much as it should be in their engagements. Strengthening media cooperation and dissemination of right information could be very helpful in mitigating perception gaps. Further, India and ASEAN should look at each other's strengths and experiences and turn their relationship and interactions to be more productive and meaningful without giving too much thought to what a third party can impinge in their relationship. India will have to be proactive in finding an alternative route to get access to the value chains in the region. The onus for this is not just on India, but also on ASEAN countries, which will have to come out of their comfort zones of the current situation and be little more receptive to India's concerns. After all, it takes two to tango.

Areas of Emerging Cooperation between India and ASEAN

What are the areas that need to be focussed in the current situation to provide new impetus to India's Act East Policy (AEP)? Supply chain management (SCM), public health, education

and skill development, and grey areas in the security and strategic affairs needs greater attention.

In his opening remarks by Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at the inaugural Session of the 6th ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT) on “ASEAN-India: Strengthening Partnership in the Post Covid Era” on 20 August 2020, has practically given a future road map identifying five areas, brilliantly put forth eloquently in the acronym, SHARE – Supply chain, Health, Academics, Regional, Environment.¹ To quote the Deputy Prime Minister: “the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership should be taken forward at this critical time, threaded together by a simple yet powerful word spelt S-H-A-R-E, or SHARE.” Supply chain management (SCM) enables enterprises to source the materials necessary to create a product or service and deliver that product or service to customers. India and ASEAN need to deepen their collaboration to diversify and make their supply chain resilient. As India is seeking to become a stronger, more self-reliant country under the ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ initiative, ASEAN stands ready to work with India in supporting our key industries and integrating them into the global supply chain.

Disruption in the physical channel of collaborations has resulted in a rise of digital platforms and significant growth in digital-related businesses. India and ASEAN, therefore, need to allocate more resources to enhancing the digital infrastructure and to create a digital ecosystem conducive for new growth. Together with digital connectivity, it is imperative to complete ongoing physical connectivity projects as well to ensure seamless movements of goods and passengers across borders. One of the foremost challenges that India faces in implementing AEP is a credibility deficit at both institutional and popular levels in Southeast Asia. The Covid-19 crisis provides a window for India to fix some of this deficit.

Strengthening collaboration in the field of public health is another vital area for India-ASEAN cooperation. India enjoys an important position in the global pharmaceuticals sector, having a large pool of scientists and engineers who have the potential to steer the industry ahead to an even higher level. India is the largest provider of generic drugs globally with the Indian generics accounting for 20 per cent of global exports in terms of volume. It is expected that Indian pharmaceutical companies will be in the forefront of producing Covid-19 vaccines once it is found. India is already collaborating in ongoing research on Covid-19 vaccine. Once available, India has the capability to produce vaccine at an affordable price, as it has done in the case of other vaccines and can leverage it to build cooperation with the countries of ASEAN in the public health sector and contribute to the welfare of the people.

Given the enormity of the health crisis that India and ASEAN countries are facing currently and are likely to face in the future from another variant of virus, India must give up its piecemeal strategy so far and broaden the scope of its Covid-19 outreach eastward to strengthen its Act East Policy (AEP), fortify its credibility in Southeast Asia, and balance Chinese interventions. For India, institutionalising crisis-time trans-regional cooperation carries both short and medium-to-long term imperatives. India’s outreach to the ASEAN

region appears oddly scant, as Prime Minister Modi has so far directly spoken to his counterparts in many ASEAN countries to discuss health and economic challenges. India has also supplied HCQ tablets to Malaysia, and received assistance from Singapore. The Indian Embassy in Manila has supplied masks, sanitizers, and medicines to the Philippine government officials, university students, and regular citizens.² As ASEAN and BIMSTEC have emerged as core areas of interest for India in the past decade within the broad framework of its AEP and the Neighbourhood First Policy, spirited engagement with both regional formations through multi-sectoral initiatives in the areas of both traditional and non-traditional security, these should now receive a much greater priority and be furthered within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Joint action and shared learning during a crisis can create complementarities, pursuance of which helps to forge common bond and shaping public and institutional memories in partner countries. The pandemic thus offers India an opportunity to shore up “its public diplomacy in Southeast Asia, and show its willingness—and wherewithal—to undertake mutually-beneficial collaborations, broadening and deepening the scope of AEP and secure greater legitimacy for future regional projects,” to quote two young researchers from the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) in a recent article.³

Cooperation in Education and Skill Development

Education is another important area which calls for greater interaction among India and ASEAN. India has a large pool of English-knowing educated elite, both in social science and pure science including information technology and space science that can be leveraged to build cooperation with the ASEAN countries, more so with the CLMV countries. The existing cooperation through Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme needs to be strengthened further to build greater interdependence between the two regions. More importantly, technological transformation is opening up new vistas of knowledge and the need for learning new skills to cope with the 4th Industrial Revolution and the digital economy. As more and more visa and other restriction are coming up for students from Southeast Asia from Western Countries, it is necessary that India and ASEAN chart out a strategy to promote greater educational cooperation.

Grey Areas in Security and Strategic Sphere

When it comes to strategic and security issues, there are grey areas where there seem to be some differences in perspectives of India and ASEAN, even though it is never clearly and frankly spelt out by either of them. Basically, it relates to balancing the rise of China and major power relations in the ASEAN region. While many ASEAN countries prefer to maintain neutrality, Covid-19 and emerging geopolitical churning are creating situations for ASEAN when countries will have to take a definitive position on emerging challenges.

This is related to the notion of ASEAN centrality in any emerging political, economic and security architecture. ASEAN centrality was premised on a close understanding and convergence of interests between the United States and China. ASEAN institutions have all emerged under a situation where both Washington and Beijing subscribed to a common economic and security framework and architecture. ASEAN has to reinvent itself to preserve its centrality in the emerging regional architecture of the broader region of Indo-Pacific.

End Notes

¹ Refer, <https://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/news3>

² Refer, Sakhuja (2020) and De, et. al., (2020)

³ Refer, <http://www.ipcs.org/searp.php>

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About AIC



Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.



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