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‘Look East - Act East’ Dimension of India’s Foreign Policy

M. Ganapathi*

The essence of India’s post Independence foreign policy was given a thrust and direction by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In the Constituent Assembly Debate on India’s foreign policy he said, “Ultimately foreign policy is the outcome of economic policy, and till that time, when India has properly evolved her economic policy, her foreign policy will be rather vague, rather inchoate, and will grope about”.¹

Situated as India is on the sea lanes, it would not be out of place to again recall his words when he emphasised that India’s independence and survival depended on India’s control of the Indian Ocean. In March 1958, Prime Minister Nehru said,

“I ponder over our close links with the sea and how the sea has brought us together. From time immemorial the people of India have had very intimate connections with the sea. ... We cannot afford to be weak at sea ... history has shown that whatever power controls the Indian Ocean has, in the first instance, India’s seaborne trade at her mercy, and in the second, India’s very independence itself”.²

And from an Asian point of view, it would be appropriate to also borrow from his remarks at the first Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947, when he declared,

“Asia is again finding herself ... One of the notable consequences of the European domination of Asia has been the isolation of the countries of Asia from one another. ... Today this isolation is breaking down

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because of many reasons, political and otherwise ... Asia, after a long period of quiescence, has suddenly become important again in world affairs. ... The old land routes almost ceased to function and our chief window to the outer world looked out on the sea routes which led to England. ... A similar process affected the other countries of Asia also. Their entire economy was bound up with some European imperialism or other; even culturally they looked towards Europe and not to their own friends and neighbours from whom they had derived so much in the past".³

From a Look East-Act East perspective, it might be useful to recall a bit of history also. The Kalingas had looked east for trade some 2000 years ago. Last year happened to be the millennium of the coronation of Rajendra Chola. The Chola Empire stretched from India into many of the countries in today's South East Asia. The effects of their cultural and other ingress into these countries are readily visible. The Chola Empire could perhaps be seen as the first movement towards the evolution of India's Look East-Act East policy.

Europe had been at the centre of global developments and dominated recorded history for some centuries until the middle of the last century when the United States came into its own in the latter stages of the World Wars. The days of the Cold War are way behind us. The Euro-Atlantic dimension of global developments has since shifted eastwards. While Europe and the Atlantic held sway until the 80s, the Asia-Pacific region continued to move into the spotlight in the 90s and beyond. The 21st century will belong to the Asia-Pacific and the India-Pacific regions. In these intersects, India could and would play an important role.

The question also arises as to where East, in India's foreign policy, begins politically and geographically. Until the last decade of the previous century, it was understood that the focus of India's Look East policy would commence with the ASEAN and the region around it. India has now recalibrated this. During the visit of the Bangladesh president to India in December 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned, "India's Act East starts with Bangladesh".⁴ And during President Obama's visit in January 2015, the prime minister had in his remarks at the India-U.S. Business Summit on January 26, 2015 noted, "For too long, India and the United States have looked at each other across Europe and the Atlantic. When I look towards the East, I see the western shores of the United States".⁵ The Joint Statement – "Shared Effort; Progress for All" issued during the US president's visit on January 25, 2015 recalled, "Noting that India's 'Act East Policy' and the United States' rebalance to Asia

provide opportunities for India, the United States, and other Asia-Pacific countries to work closely to strengthen regional ties, the Leaders announced a Joint Strategic Vision to guide their engagement in the region".⁶ Thus, India's Look East-Act East policy could be seen to include the region from Bangladesh to the Western seaboard of the USA and the countries within this geographical sweep.

India-ASEAN

India's relations with the ASEAN region until the late 1970s had been productive and there was even the possibility of India becoming a member of the ASEAN. However, political developments affected progress in this direction. Long and hard discussions coupled with political and economic developments in India saw India becoming a Sectoral Dialogue partner of the ASEAN in 1992. In addition, in 1994, then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao outlined the broad contours of India's Look East policy during his visit to Singapore.⁷ Development and expansion of India's Look East policy with the ASEAN as its core, thereafter, became an important theme in India's foreign policy. In 1996, India became a full dialogue partner of the ASEAN. Then External Affairs Minister Inder Kumar Gujral remarked at the first ASEAN-India Dialogue meeting, "Partnership with ASEAN will have an impact on India's economic, political and security related involvement in these larger, concentric coalitions around ASEAN, in East Asia and in the Asia-Pacific".⁸ India became ASEAN's Summit level partner in 2002. The 20th Anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership and the 10th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Summit-level partnership was celebrated by hosting the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in December 2012. Nine ASEAN heads of state and government and one at the vice-president's level participated in the Summit. The theme of the Summit was "ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity". Moreover, India's interaction with ASEAN was concomitantly elevated to the level of a Strategic Partnership in 2012. While inaugurating the Summit, then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said, "We see our partnership with ASEAN not merely as a reaffirmation of ties with neighbouring countries or as an instrument of economic development, but also as an integral part of our vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and its surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions".⁹

The strategic dimension of India's engagement with the ASEAN received impetus with its membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. ASEAN overruled objections from some of its other partners on India's

admission to the ARF. The scope of India's Look East philosophy was expanded from a mere trade and economic engagement to include issues of strategic and geopolitical significance. In addition, the geographical reach was extended eastwards towards Australia and Oceania in a couple of years.

At a book launch in November 2003, then External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha noted, "It was only in the last decade of the last century that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao came out with his Look East policy and after that we have been engaging countries in East Asia.... This was interpreted somewhat narrowly as Indo-ASEAN engagement. We felt that if we engage the ten countries of ASEAN that was engagement with East Asia... We have entered Phase-II of our Look East policy, which is both, more comprehensive in its coverage territorially and materially. In terms of territorial expanse, besides the ten countries in ASEAN, we are engaged with North East Asia, with Japan, with China and the Koreas. Down South, there is much greater engagement with Australia and with New Zealand. Therefore, when we talk of India-East Asia engagement we are including this whole region".¹⁰

"Look East" is a passive adumbration. "Act East" incorporates greater action and dynamism. This has been brought about in the recent statements of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has expanded on this thought. When India looks at the region to its east, barring few fulminations, this area is relatively peaceful and cohesive for its engagement. This does not distract from India's extensive contacts with the countries in the Gulf, Europe and elsewhere where it continues to be engaged economically, socially and from a geostrategic point of view.

The 12th ASEAN-India Summit at Nya Pyi Taw expressed satisfaction with the progress in the implementation of the ASEAN-India Plan of Action, the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity for the period 2010–2015. The third ASEAN-India Plan of Action for the period 2016–2021 to serve as an action-oriented document to further deepen the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership is under preparation. It would build on and strengthen the strong sense of community between the peoples of the ASEAN member states and India. At the 12th ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalibrated India's policy towards the region thus, "Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become 'Act East Policy'".¹¹

ASEAN is the fourth largest trading partner of India. Bilateral trade between ASEAN and India reached US\$ 74.40 billion in 2013–2014 (Ministry of Commerce, Government of India figures).¹² Both sides have renewed their

commitment to arrive at a target of US\$ 100 billion by 2015. In addition, they have expressed their desire to see a trade turnover of US\$ 200 billion by 2022. Investment from the ASEAN in India was around US\$ 25 billion in the period 2007–14. Investment from India into ASEAN during the same period was over US\$ 30 billion. India and ASEAN have an Agreement on Goods. The recently concluded Agreement on Trade in Services and the Agreement on Investment of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and India and their early operationalisation should allow for greater opportunities towards expansion of trade, and economic cooperation between India and ASEAN. At the Nya Pyi Taw Summit, the importance of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as a key instrument in realising the ASEAN Economic Community was emphasised with a need to expedite the ongoing RCEP negotiations.¹³ The RCEP involves ASEAN and six of its Dialogue Partners.¹⁴ The summit underscored the need for timely implementation of the ASEAN-India FTA. The recent appointment of an Indian Ambassador to deal exclusively with ASEAN and the East Asia Summit process is timely and opportune.¹⁵

As a strategic partner of ASEAN, India is actively associated with various ASEAN-led fora dealing with defence and strategic issues. These include the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ADDM+ (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. India's defence ties with the region have expanded significantly. India is also engaged in bilateral defence cooperation activities with the ASEAN and other regional countries.

Besides organisations involving ASEAN as a whole, India has taken a leading role in other sub-regional fora. These include the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (the MGC, in which Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam are members), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (the BIMSTEC involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand) and other organisations.

The Neighbourhood

With Bangladesh, the first port in India's Act East policy, relations have been excellent with the Awami League in office. India hopes to address some of the pending issues on the table at the earliest. These include the Land Boundary Accord and the Teesta Waters issues. Bangladesh has been responsive to some of India's strategic and security concerns.

Relations have settled into some quietude with the change of government in Sri Lanka. However, areas of concern to those in Sri Lanka and in India have to be addressed as soon as the new administration settles down in office. Further delays in this regard could be detrimental not only for Sri Lanka, but also for the region. The recent visit of the Sri Lankan foreign minister to New Delhi and his statements do offer considerable hope. More high-level visits and discussions are on the anvil.

Myanmar occupies an important geostrategic position, as a neighbour, in India's North East. Relations that had been somewhat dormant, received considerable fillip over the last couple of years. Myanmar could be involved to advantage in the development of India's North East Region. Issues of connectivity, cultural contacts and commercial ties dominated the discussions during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with President Thein Sein in Nya Pyi Taw in November 2014. The leaders reviewed the progress of major connectivity projects between the two countries, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project. On completion, these projects could be a gateway for the states of the North East to the world outside. The prime minister also met Aung Sang Syu Kyi.

India has excellent relations with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and other ASEAN members. While India's interaction with Indonesia has been productive, India needs to give some more ballast to its partnership with this important ASEAN member. Both, India and Indonesia, have two newly elected leaders with similar approaches to developmental and strategic issues. The visits of President Pranab Mukherjee to Vietnam and to India by the Vietnamese Prime Minister last year saw further consolidation of India's strategic partnership with Vietnam, a crucial partner and friend in that region. Bilateral relations with these countries have been premised on an economic and commercial partnership and have been expanded with some of them to include greater defence and security cooperation. These interactions have seen to be mutually beneficial.

The mood and developments in Sino-Indian relations will continue to be an important element in India's foreign policy. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi went out of his way to make the visit of President Xi Jinping to India in September 2014 a success, the incidents at the border did cast some shadow on what otherwise would have been excellent visit. The sponsored reports in the Chinese media post-President Obama's visit following the release of the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region¹⁶ has seen the Indian media go into a tizzy. However, the opportunity to discuss the entire gamut of India-China relations standing on its own merits irrespective

of the strength of India's relations with other countries will be available during External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Beijing in early February 2015 for bilateral discussions and for the 13th Meeting of the Russia-India-China Trilaterals. Prime Minister Modi is expected to visit Beijing by the middle of this year. It is hoped that the Chinese will not queer the pitch in the run up to the visit. China is India's largest trading partner with a trade turnover of US\$ 65.8 billion.¹⁷ The balance is heavily weighted in China's favour. Investments have also been rising. The border issue will continue to be a major irritant. Despite five major border related agreements, documents, and 17 Special Representative Talks, no breakthrough is in sight. The Chinese side has not even been willing to provide its version of the maps relating to the Line of Actual Control.

Interestingly, the McMahon Line was drawn up 100 years ago in 1914. There are provocations on the border, even though no bullets have been fired recently. Sino-Pak relations will continue to be closely watched. India's reaction to various issues relating to China in the bilateral interactions should be measured, but more importantly, should be confident and self-assured.

The Extended Neighbourhood

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan in August-September 2014 provided greater impetus to the further development of India-Japan relations. The excellent rapport between the prime ministers of Japan and India should augur well for India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. During his visit, the prime minister announced that a special management team would be set up directly under the Prime Minister's Office to facilitate investment proposals from Japan where two nominees selected by Japan would also be a part of the decision-making team to evaluate business proposals.¹⁸ Japan ranks 16th as India's trading partner. Investments would play an important role in this partnership. India-Japan defence cooperation has been formalised. The next couple of rounds of discussions to finalise the civil nuclear agreement with Japan should lead to the conclusion of this important document. The Japanese foreign minister was in India in mid-January 2015 to co-chair the India-Japan Strategic Dialogue and to follow up on the decisions arrived at during the prime minister's visit to Japan.

India's relations with South Korea will continue to be governed with trade and economic relations predominating. India and the Republic of Korea have a friction-free relationship.¹⁹ The External Affairs minister's visit to

Seoul in December 2014 allowed for an in-depth review of the current state and future direction of the India-Republic of Korea Strategic Partnership.

The oft-repeated statement of Indo-Australian relations being seen through the prism of the three Cs viz. cricket, the Commonwealth and curry is relevant but not predominant today. Both countries have moved since then into a comprehensive engagement shedding the prejudices of the past to embrace the opportunities of the future. Bilateral visits by the prime ministers of both countries within a span of two months last year, saw significant forward movement on a spectrum of issues. Most importantly, the civil nuclear agreement was concluded during Prime Minister Tony Abbot's visit to India in September 2014 providing for supply of Uranium by Australia for India's nuclear power plants once the administrative arrangements were put in place. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Australia was significantly the first by an Indian prime minister to Australia in 29 years. Then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had visited Australia in 1986. The prime minister addressed a Joint Session of the Australian Parliament.

Fiji occupies an important place in the East due to the strong presence of the Diaspora. Since Indira Gandhi's visit to Fiji in 1981, no Indian prime minister had visited Suva. Difficulties of the post-coup developments in Fiji have been overcome. The Fijian side warmly welcomed Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Suva in November 2014 – the visit was taking place after 33 years. He was given the honour of being the first leader to address the “newly re-opened and re-invigorated” Parliament. While in Suva, Prime Minister Modi hosted a Regional India- Pan-Pacific Meeting with 14 South Pacific Island Leaders. A number of measures were announced to strengthen India's outreach to that region. A significant outcome of the meeting was the agreement to hold a forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) on a regular basis with the next meeting in 2015 in India.

The visit of President Barack Obama to India and the status of bilateral India-US relations have been extensively covered in the media and elsewhere and needs no elaboration. It suffices to say that the visit was exceptionally successful. India had a US President as the chief guest for its Republic Day celebrations. A US president in office was also visiting India twice during his term of office. Both were a historic first. The leaders of India and the USA were also meeting for the fourth time within a short span of four months – twice bilaterally and twice on the margins of international meets. The visit saw important results and agreements in the areas of trade and investment, education, infrastructure development, civil nuclear deal, clean and renewable energy, defence, counterterrorism, among others. Discussions

on many global and regional issues saw a meeting of minds between the leaders. The compendium of bilateral documents signed or released during the visit was significant.²⁰ Moreover, there was perfect chemistry between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Barack Obama.

The role of the over 6-million strong Indian diaspora in the east in acting as a bridge and platform in developing close partnership with the countries of their adoption, and in the economic development of India needs no reiteration. Their identification with India was evident in the enthusiastic reception given by the diaspora members to Prime Minister Modi in Australia, Myanmar and Fiji in November 2014. This had been earlier visible in the overwhelming reception accorded to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York by diaspora members.

Security Challenges

The challenges confronting India and its partners in the East should lead to enhanced joint cooperation and action in combating the malefic effects of international terrorism, piracy, organised crime, drug trafficking and arms trading. The need to eliminate the scourge of international terrorism found greater resonance following the 9/11 and 26/11 attacks. The need to combat issues like the rise of the IS, the lone wolf attack in Sydney, the Paris terrorist attack, etc. have preoccupied the minds of policy planners. Clandestine proliferation of nuclear materials and missile technology has been a cause for worry. India hopes to obtain greater support from the regional members to the Indian draft document of a Comprehensive Convention for International Terrorism at the UN. The question of freedom of navigation and overflight has been a subject of discussion within the region and outside. The security dimension of India's Look East-Act East policy has been well integrated into the available security architecture as also bilaterally. Besides security related discussions, Indian assistance has been pursued through aggressive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surveillance and anti-piracy patrolling of the seas in India's immediate neighbourhood and beyond. India has also been involved in providing support to countries through hydrographic surveys of their EEZ. It has provided assistance in disaster management. The most notable and visible activity was the Indian navy's support to Sri Lanka and Indonesia following the Tsunami in 2004. The Australian defence and security analysts saw this as India's arrival onto the world stage as a naval superpower in the region.

The Next Steps

India has based its ties with its east on the platform of a vigorous engagement in the following areas:

- Economy (including trade and investment, financial services, banking);
- Engineering (infrastructure, construction, etc.)
- Electronics (including IT and ITES and communications)
- Environment (climate change, defence and security)
- Energy (both renewable and non-renewable and nuclear)
- Exploration and Exploitation (mineral resources)
- Education (university, vocational and skills development)
- Entertainment (leading to greater people-to-people contacts including through cultural cooperation, tourism, sports etc)

This engagement has paid good dividends and India needs to continue to maintain the momentum in this direction. This will have its own result in providing for India's growth, development and security.

Notes

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- ¹³ <http://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?24243/Chairmans+statement+of+the+12th+ASEANIndia+Summit+in+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>.
- ¹⁴ ASEAN + China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand.
- ¹⁵ <http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/23245/Suresh+K+Reddy+appointed+as+Indias+first+Ambassador+to+the+separate+Indian+Mission+to+ASEAN+and+East+Asia+Summit>.
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- ¹⁸ http://pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-keynote-address-at-the-luncheon-hosted-by-nippon-kiedanren-the-japanese-chamber-of-commerce-and-industry-and-the-japan-india-business-cooperation-committee/
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