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ASEAN and India: A Growing Partnership in International Relations

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ABSTRACT

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with its objectives being to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, strengthen regional peace and stability, encourage cooperation, and develop training and research facilities. ASEAN member states adhere to principles such as respect for freedom, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, National identity, commitment to non-interference in other nations' internal affairs, peaceful dispute resolution, and rejection of threats of force. ASEAN-India has forged a multifaceted partnership that highlights their historical, cultural, economic, and strategic ties. The relationship has evolved from regional integration to a nuanced strategic partnership over the past three decades. Economic cooperation is the cornerstone of ASEAN-India relations, with initiatives like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) promoting cross-cultural understanding. However, challenges remain, including trade barriers, connectivity gaps, geopolitical rivalry, and institutional constraints. Future possibilities for ASEAN-India relations include deepening economic integration, advancing connectivity, strengthening multilateral cooperation, and promoting regional stability.

Keyword: ASEAN, AIFTA promoting regional stability, Future possibilities

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was officially formed on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, through the signing of the ASEAN Declaration, also referred to as the Bangkok Declaration. The founding members included Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Later, Brunei Darussalam became a member on January 7, 1984, followed by Vietnam on July 28, 1995, Laos and Myanmar on July 23, 1997, and Cambodia on April 30, 1999. This expansion brought ASEAN to its current composition of ten member states.

History of ASEAN:

On August 8, 1967, the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand convened at the Department of Foreign Affairs building in Bangkok, Thailand. Together, they signed a historic document that marked the birth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The five signatories—Adam Malik from Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos from the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak from Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam from Singapore, and Thanat Khoman from Thailand—are now recognized as the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, a regional organization regarded as one of the most successful in the developing world. This landmark document would later be known as the ASEAN Declaration or Bangkok Declaration.

The ASEAN Declaration was concise, consisting of only five articles. It outlined the creation of a regional association named the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), along with its goals and objectives. These included fostering cooperation in economic, social, cultural, technical, and educational fields, as well as promoting peace and stability in the region. The declaration emphasized respect for justice, adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter, and the collective desire for unity, peace, and prosperity. It also invited all Southeast Asian nations that shared these objectives and principles to join the association.

The idea of forming ASEAN emerged during Thailand's efforts to mediate disputes among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Reflecting on this process, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman recalled suggesting a regional organization to his Indonesian counterpart, Adam Malik, who supported the idea but needed time to consult with his government and normalize relations with Malaysia. Soon after, Thailand prepared a draft charter, and with support from Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, negotiations commenced.

In early August 1967, the five Foreign Ministers gathered in Bang Saen, a coastal town near Bangkok, to finalize the ASEAN Declaration. The discussions, often described as “sports-shirt diplomacy,” were informal but challenging, as each participant brought unique historical and political perspectives. Through goodwill, humour, and camaraderie, they worked through their differences, blending formal negotiations with casual exchanges on the golf course.

Once the declaration was completed and signed, formalities followed. Narciso R. Ramos, the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, reflected on the arduous negotiations that required patience, creativity, and mutual understanding. He emphasized the urgency of the initiative, given the challenges facing Southeast Asia at the time. Ramos highlighted the fragmented economies of the region and the need for collective action to harness its untapped potential, reduce dependence on industrialized nations, and promote growth and self-reliance.

The establishment of ASEAN, despite the difficulties faced during its inception, laid a strong foundation for regional cooperation, marking the beginning of a united effort toward peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

Goal and Objectives of ASEAN:

According to the ASEAN Declaration, the organization's objectives and goals are as follows:

1. **Economic, Social, and Cultural Development:** Foster economic growth, social advancement, and cultural development across the region through collaborative efforts based on equality and partnership, laying the groundwork for a peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asian community.
2. **Regional Peace and Stability:** Strengthen regional peace and stability by upholding justice, the rule of law in inter-state relations, and adherence to the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter.
3. **Collaboration and Mutual Assistance:** Encourage active cooperation and mutual support in areas of shared interest, including economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative matters.
4. **Educational and Technical Support:** Provide mutual assistance in developing training and research facilities in educational, professional, technical, and administrative fields.
5. **Sectoral Growth:** Work collectively to advance agriculture, industry, and trade, while improving transportation and communication systems. Additionally, undertake studies on global commodity trade to enhance the living standards of people in ASEAN member states.
6. **Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies:** Support and advance studies focused on Southeast Asia to deepen understanding and knowledge of the region.
7. **Cooperation with Other Organizations:** Build close and productive partnerships with existing international and regional organizations that share similar objectives and explore opportunities for deeper collaboration among member nations.

Fundamental principles of ASEAN:

The ASEAN Member States, as outlined in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), adhere to the following fundamental principles in their interactions:

1. Respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations.
2. Recognition of each State's right to govern itself without external interference, coercion, or subversion.
3. Commitment to non-interference in the internal matters of other nations.
4. Resolving disputes or differences through peaceful means.
5. Rejection of the use or threat of force.
6. Promotion of effective cooperation among member states.

ASEAN and India:

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India have forged a multifaceted partnership that highlights their historical, cultural, economic, and strategic ties. Over the past three decades, this relationship has evolved from a shared sense of regional solidarity into a robust strategic partnership. This chapter examines the historical evolution, key areas of cooperation, challenges, and future prospects of ASEAN-India relations within the context of international relations.

ASEAN's Role in the Region

ASEAN, established in 1967 with five founding members, aimed to promote economic growth, regional stability, and collective resilience in Southeast Asia. Over the decades, ASEAN has grown to ten member states, emerging as a key player in global diplomacy and a driver of regional integration. Its centrality in frameworks like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) underscores its role in shaping the Indo-Pacific order.

India's Position and Interests

As one of the world's largest democracies and a major emerging economy, India's foreign policy has increasingly emphasized regional integration and multilateralism. The adoption of the Look East Policy in the 1990s and its successor, the Act East Policy, reflects India's intent to deepen its engagement with Southeast Asia. For India, ASEAN represents a gateway to the broader Asia-Pacific region and an essential partner in achieving its geopolitical and economic goals.

India's ties with Southeast Asia date back centuries, marked by cultural exchanges, maritime trade, and the spread of religion. The influence of Indian civilization on Southeast Asian art, architecture, and governance remains evident to this day. However, the post-colonial era saw limited engagement as India pursued a non-aligned foreign policy while ASEAN focused on regional stability amid Cold War tensions.

A significant shift occurred in the early 1990s with India's Look East Policy under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, which aimed to rejuvenate economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. This policy evolved into the Act East Policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, signalling India's intent to deepen its engagement with ASEAN through enhanced political, economic, and cultural collaboration.

Historical Evolution of ASEAN-India Relations

The relationship between India and Southeast Asia is deeply rooted in history, marked by centuries of cultural and trade exchanges. From ancient maritime links to the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism, India's influence shaped the art, governance, and social fabric of Southeast Asia.

1. Pre-Colonial Era: Indian traders, scholars, and religious emissaries established enduring ties with Southeast Asian kingdoms such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Angkor.
2. Colonial Period: The colonial partition of South and Southeast Asia disrupted historical connections. Economic interactions waned, and the focus shifted to national liberation struggles.
3. Post-Independence Period: Following decolonization, India and ASEAN countries adopted divergent foreign policies. While India pursued non-alignment, ASEAN focused on Cold War geopolitics, often aligning with Western powers.

The Turning Point: Post-1990s Re-engagement

The end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalization in 1991 marked the beginning of a new era. Recognizing the strategic and economic potential of Southeast Asia, India launched the Look East Policy. This pivot laid the groundwork for comprehensive engagement with ASEAN, culminating in India becoming a full dialogue partner in 1996 and a summit-level partner in 2002.

The main areas of cooperation:

Economic Collaboration

Economic engagement forms the cornerstone of ASEAN-India relations. The ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA), signed in 2009, has boosted trade and investment flows. By 2023, trade between ASEAN and India reached approximately \$131 billion, making ASEAN India's fourth-largest trading partner. Key areas of economic cooperation include:

1. Agriculture and Food Security: Collaborative projects in sustainable agriculture and agribusiness enhance regional food security.
2. Infrastructure Development: Initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project aim to enhance connectivity.
3. Digital Economy: India's expertise in information technology aligns with ASEAN's push toward digital transformation.

Strategic and Security Cooperation

The evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific have necessitated greater strategic alignment between ASEAN and India.

1. Maritime Security: Both partners prioritize freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and countering maritime threats like piracy and illegal fishing.
2. Defense Cooperation: Regular military exercises, such as the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME), strengthen interoperability and mutual trust.
3. Counterterrorism: India and ASEAN collaborate to combat transnational crimes and terrorism through information sharing and joint operations.

Cultural and Educational Exchange

Cultural diplomacy remains a vital component of ASEAN-India relations. The shared heritage, including Buddhism and Hinduism, fosters people-to-people connections.

1. Scholarship Programs: India offers scholarships to ASEAN students under initiatives like the ASEAN-India Student Exchange Program.
2. Cultural Festivals: Events such as the ASEAN-India Youth Summit promote cross-cultural understanding.

Health and Development Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of health diplomacy. India supplied vaccines to ASEAN countries through its Vaccine Maitri initiative and engaged in joint research for pandemic preparedness.

Challenges in ASEAN-India Relations

Despite significant progress, challenges persist in ASEAN-India relations:

1. Trade Barriers: Non-tariff barriers and regulatory complexities hinder the full realization of trade potential.
2. Connectivity Gaps: Delays in infrastructure projects like the Trilateral Highway limit physical connectivity.
3. Geopolitical Rivalries: The rise of China as a dominant power in Southeast Asia complicates India's efforts to strengthen its influence in the region.
4. Institutional Constraints: Divergent priorities and decision-making mechanisms within ASEAN can slow down collaborative initiatives.

India and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific Context

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point for ASEAN and India's engagement, driven by the rise of China and the U.S.-led Quad alliance. ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) emphasize inclusivity, connectivity, and regional stability. Their convergence on principles like freedom of navigation and adherence to international law underscores shared interests in promoting a rules-based order.

India's participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) reflects its commitment to ASEAN centrality in Indo-Pacific governance.

Prospects for the Future

The ASEAN-India relationship is poised for growth as both partners navigate emerging global challenges. Key priorities for the future include:

Deepening Economic Integration: Enhancing trade agreements, streamlining regulatory frameworks, and leveraging digital technology can unlock greater economic potential.

Advancing Connectivity: Fast-tracking the completion of infrastructure projects and integrating with regional frameworks like the ASEAN Smart Cities Network will enhance physical and digital connectivity.

Strengthening Multilateral Cooperation: Both partners can play a proactive role in addressing global issues such as climate change, food security, and cybersecurity through multilateral platforms.

Promoting Regional Stability: Balancing strategic ties with major powers like the U.S. and China while maintaining ASEAN centrality will be critical for regional peace.

Conclusion

The ASEAN-India partnership exemplifies the growing importance of regionalism in international relations. By fostering economic, strategic, and cultural ties, ASEAN and India contribute to the vision of a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific. While challenges persist, their shared commitment to multilateralism and inclusive development provides a solid foundation for sustained cooperation. As the global order evolves, ASEAN-India relations will remain a cornerstone of regional stability and growth in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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