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India-ASEAN maritime Cooperation prospects

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As India looks towards its extended neighbourhood - South East Asia and the geopolitical prospects of the Indo-Pacific concept, the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a natural partner for engagement. This is so, as the India and ASEAN countries share land border and contiguous maritime zones. India-ASEAN partnership has traversed a long distinct path by appreciating similitudes of ethnicity, culture, history, and economy. The celebrations of 25 years of partnership in 2017, only exemplify the magnitude of their achievements. India's Look East Policy (LEP) enunciated by the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992 and now rechristened Act East Policy (AEP) propounded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, only displays India's continuous endeavours to strengthen geopolitical relation with ASEAN countries.

Though the relations between India and ASEAN is considered to be at a nascent stage, there is potential for them to converge in the realm of economic, maritime security, and geopolitics in the region. Further, this can become the cornerstone of a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific regional architecture. The partnership is seeking to develop a leadership role to preserve maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, especially considering the uncertainties of United States' policy for the region. However, in the existing scenario, the challenge for India-ASEAN partnership is to identify their converging geostrategic concerns arising from the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region specifically under the cloud of Chinese assertiveness.

Geo-economics

Discourse on India-ASEAN geo-economic furtherance requires no special emphasis in light of the evolving narrative of the shift to the "Asian Century". India has trade relations

with South East Asian economies, and also has Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements (CEPA) with ASEAN countries, enunciated as the ASEAN –India Free Trade Area (AIFTA). Since 2005-06 to 2015-16 India’s sea-born merchandise trade with ASEAN has a positive trajectory. According to The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), the exports to ASEAN have increased since 2005-06 to 2015-16 from US \$ 10.41 billion to US \$ 25.20 billion and imports over the same period quadrupled from US \$ 10.81 billion to US \$ 39.84 billion. Additionally, the ASSOCHAM report states that India’s total imports from ASEAN went up from 7.3 percent in 2005-2006 to 10.5 percent in 2015-16.

In the India-ASEAN geo-economic paradigm, Malacca Strait is considered a key maritime chokepoint. In other words, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore are considered to be a strategic trade route for India and for the countries of Southeast Asia. As a result, India and ASEAN geo-economic interests lie in the safety and security of the International Shipping Lanes (ISLs) traversing the South China Sea (SCS) and beyond. Thus, India-ASEAN needs to accord high priority and uphold each other’s geo-economic interests within the evolving geostrategic calculus of the Indo-Pacific region.

Maritime Connectivity

Connectivity is the new “Great Game” and the promotion of maritime connectivity between India and ASEAN is one of the priority areas envisaged by the multilateral partnership. Both India and ASEAN are littoral states with rich history of maritime trade. It is important to revive and reinvestigate those ancient links in a contemporary set-up. The revival and reinvigorated ancient links is argued to be the driving force of Asia’s maritime resurgence. Improving connectivity is therefore essential for the region’s prosperity, continued growth, and reliability. India-ASEAN connectivity has the potential to become the main driver for lower trade costs, increased industrial transport, enhanced trade and investments, developed production technology, and platform for vast opportunities deepening the regional integration process.

Some of the important features of India-ASEAN maritime connectivity architecture include –*first*, India has committed to put into action the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) promulgated by the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee (ACCC) in October 2010. *Second*, India’s vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) aims at connecting Indian ports (Sagarmala) to transnational docks for greater benefits to all in the region. For instance, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and Project Mausam can collectively facilitate cruise tourism between India and ASEAN.

Enhanced ASEAN–India connectivity will not only help realise the potentials of the multilateral cooperation but also will eliminate constrictions and bottlenecks to development. Though shipping is considered to be the mainstay of ASEAN-India trade, without a strong maritime connectivity devoid of constrictions and bottlenecks; optimum utilisation of regional free trade and cooperation agreements will be rendered useless.

Geopolitics

In the constantly shifting dynamics of Indo-Pacific, the reinvigoration of India-ASEAN relationship has a direct implication on the region. However, re-calibrating their relationship in the complexity of contemporary international politics remains the main challenge in realising the full potential of the otherwise promising convergence. To address this challenge and pave the way for a greater transformative cooperation, India and ASEAN has to jointly work on strengthening diplomatic relations to become a significant actor in the evolving balance of power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.

India-ASEAN geopolitical convergence assumes great significance in the context of China's ability to develop strong geostrategic assertion in the Indo-Pacific region. While China is aggressively asserting itself in SCS, the United States, besides considering India and ASEAN countries as "allies and partners" believes that a strong India-ASEAN convergence can act as the linchpin in the evolving dynamics of Indo-Pacific. US's beliefs of India being an important actor in the politics of Indo-Pacific can be substantiated from the December 2017 US - National Security Strategy (NSS), which states the US's realisation of India's emergence as a global power and an important strategic and defence partner. The NSS has also significance in understanding US's views on the importance of major players in the context of Indo-Pacific considering it seeks to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India. Seriousness of the US in striving for balance of power in Indo-Pacific can be highlighted from the first senior officials' level quadrilateral meeting in Manila on November 2017 in the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit.

However, to convert the converging geopolitical interests of India-ASEAN into substantive cooperation, it is necessary to engage with each other at all levels. Thus, for a realisation of converging visions, the partnership needs to achieve more substantive cooperation that goes beyond symbolism. While India and ASEAN aim to maintain peace, progress, and prosperity in the region, they also have to strive to develop a multipolar Asia to augment relations with regional countries. Consequently, both India and ASEAN countries need to enhance their geopolitical interface with other key countries in the Indo-Pacific region to achieve the desired objectives.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that India-ASEAN relationship has grown in tandem with the idea of ushering progress and prosperity in the region. Accordingly, endorsing maritime cooperation prospects in their contiguous maritime zones needs to be given due cognizance by the policy makers.

As India-ASEAN relations are reinvigorating, its immense potential to advance their geopolitical power in the region is clearly visible. India's apex level leaderships interface with ASEAN member states has noticeably augmented in the last three years and it is to be seen if it fructifies at India's 69th Republic Day where all 10 ASEAN leaders are invited as the chief guests. India-ASEAN partnership has convergences that can become the basis for a more reliable cooperation. The Silver Jubilee celebration of India-ASEAN relations will closely align their quest for prosperity, stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, to utilise the prospects of strengthening partnership, ASEAN countries need to believe that India can be a reliable partner. For this to happen, India needs to project that it has the potential to provide a strong economic prospects, advancing capabilities, and can be a net security provider to its member states in the Indo-Pacific. It is therefore, rather exigent for the multilateral partnership to synergize their respective maritime visions to achieve their shared visions of maritime resurgence in the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century.

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