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# India's Transforming Relations with ASEAN Countries: A Counter to String of Pearls Theory

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper studies the ancient cultural civilizational connection between India and ASEAN countries. This paper studies the relationship between India and the ASEAN Countries. The relationship is crucial for both India and ASEAN countries to ensure a free and safe Indo-Pacific. The strategic, defense, maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam have a stronger role in ensuring safety and security in the South China Sea. The Military exercise between India and some of the ASEAN countries in the South China Sea has rumbled the activities of China and ensured a free and safe Indo-Pacific. The strait of Malacca has been studied in detail to analyze the petroleum supply of China is large in number. This paper concludes in a positive notion towards the relationship of India and ASEAN countries.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, INDIA, Indo-Pacific, Strings of Pearls and China.

## I. INTRODUCTION

India and ASEAN countries have had cultural ties for centuries from the chola period and even at the widespread teachings of Gautam Buddha. Indian merchants frequented the region as early as 1st century A.D., facilitating the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in pre-colonial kingdoms like Srivijaya in Sumatra, Majapahit in Java, Bali, and the Philippine archipelago. India as a country sees ASEAN as a group of organization having a common region of South China Sea which is formed to grow trade and improve cultural ties among the countries. India brings in the connectivity of ASEAN as India will be the bright spot of the global economy by growing at an average of 7% of GDP. The stronger the relationship between India and ASEAN it will be a great danger to China. It is important for India to have a strategic partnership with ASEAN countries. The ASEAN countries relationship with India has been growing from the UPA-1's Look East policy to NDA-1's Act East policy has provided a long standing relationship with ASEAN countries. The Geopolitical game of China on the Indian border with ports in Sri Lanka,

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Roads in Pakistan and Economic investment in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal has made India adopt this strategy to counter the Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. The long term road map of Indo-pacific security and cooperation also requires a smooth relationship between India and the ASEAN countries. India's relationship with ASEAN is based on important key pillar of our foreign policy and the foundation of our Act East Policy. The up-gradation of the relationship into a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a natural progression to the ground covered since India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, Dialogue Partner in 1996 and Summit Level Partner in 2002. There are, in total, 30 Dialogue Mechanisms between India and ASEAN, cutting across various sectors. This cooperation has resulted in the development of individual relationship with ASEAN countries and India effective and energetically.

## **II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The string of pearls theory is not a recent structure of Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean. This is a geopolitical hypothesis proposed by various American geo political researchers from 2004. This theory of American geopolitical research reveals that there is an imaginary structure of strong pearls connecting the Chinese military and commercial investments and engagements. This extends from the sea ports of Mainland China to the port of Sudan in the horn of Africa. This line runs through various choke points like,

1. Strait of Mandeb
2. Strait of Malacca
3. Strait of Hormuz, and
4. Strait of Lombok.

India has a critical bases near the strait of Malacca and it becomes strategically important for us to counter the Chinese strategy. This theory not only includes straits and ports but also major debt-trap investment made by the government of Communist Party of China in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Nepal. In 2004, the U.S. consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton came up with the "string of pearls" hypothesis, which posits that China will try to expand its naval presence by building civilian maritime infrastructure along the Indian Ocean periphery.<sup>2</sup>

### **INDIA'S RESPONSE TO STRING OF PEARLS THEORY**

The India Navy In 2007, published the "Indian Maritime Doctrine ", which is a document that

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<sup>2</sup> Marantidou, Virginia. "Revisiting China's 'String of Pearls' Strategy: Places 'with Chinese Characteristics' and their Security Implications" (PDF). *Issues & Insights*. 14 (7). Retrieved 22 May 2021.

outlines the perspectives of Indian naval strategies. This document in particular describes the ambitions of Indian Navy for an active Indian naval presence from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.

The doctrine makes explicit mention of the need to police international shipping lanes and control choke points of Indian Ocean trade in particular.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, India opened its second overseas military listening post in northern Madagascar, with the aim of better overseeing shipping movements through the Mozambique Channel. The Indian government has, with the same intentions, hosted negotiations with Mauritania regarding the construction of an airstrip for Indian surveillance aircraft, as well as organised the construction of radar stations in the Maldives.

In 2011, the Indian government further announced that it would fund a deep-water port in Sittwe, Burma; set to be functional by June 2013, with an additional highway connecting the port to India to be completed by 2014. The construction of the Sittwe port is often cited as evidence of a concerted strategy on the part of India to counterbalance growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

### **III. INDIA'S RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASEAN COUNTRIES**

The relationship between ASEAN countries (Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) has started to improve by the first established policy of P. V. Narasimha Rao Government Look East policy in 1992. During the Prime Ministership of P. V. Narasimha Rao, India became engaging largely in ASEAN organization and even became sectoral dialogue partner in 1992 to full ASEAN dialogue partner in 1996 and this led to India becoming member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 itself.

The Next important turn in this policy was during the Prime Ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. During this time the foreign policy of extended neighborhood was brought in where we made ASEAN as an extended neighborhood country of India. This was also further extended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

At present under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi from 2014, this relationship has been further grown. Under his leadership the Look East policy was transformed into an Act East

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<sup>3</sup> Eshel, David. "String of Pearls' is Securing China's Sea Lanes". Archived 4 May 2017 at the Wayback Machine Defense Update, 20 December 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Prakash, Vishnu. "India seeks to deepen economic ties with Myanmar". Archived 6 October 2013 at the Wayback Machine, The Times of India, New Delhi, 14 October 2011. Retrieved on 4 May 2013.

policy. This is considered to be an aggressive foreign policy to counter Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea. India has decided, for instance, to boost its partnership with the four least-developed economies of ASEAN – namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam or CMLV.<sup>5</sup>

#### **IV. MARITIME COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND ASEAN COUNTRIES**

There is a clear increase in maritime cooperation between India and the ASEAN countries. This is done to make India have an advantage over China in the South China Sea to counter the strings of pearls theory.

India wanted to engage with ASEAN countries at three different levels which includes,

1. bilateral engagements,
2. multilateral dialogues and
3. liaison visits

This would develop the interoperability and promote regular interactions with the peripheral countries of the Indian Ocean. Under this initiative India has defence agreement with nine countries out of 10 Southeast Asian countries. The defence agreements or the MoU in defence has been instrumental in facilitating high-level visits and exchange of personnel for training programmes. Invariably it has been found that countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia have developed better relations with India's defence establishment. However, on the issue of India being the stakeholder in the Malacca Strait security initiative there has been reservations from Malaysia and Indonesia in the past. India being the 'funnel state' has always stated that it would act as a benign power for facilitating better security measures and protecting the sea lanes of communication for its own strategic interests.

#### **INDIA AND ASEAN COUNTRIES**

1. Brunei Darussalam - The relationship between India and Brunei dates back to the 6th Century and much older. The name 'Brunei' was called 'puni' or 'poli' which was distorted into 'Brunei' which in sanskrit means Karpur dweep ( camphor land). The Brunei Darussalam is the largest producers of camphor. Brunei, then a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, had linkages with the famed Sri Vijaya and Majapahit empires of the region. In the late 14th century, Brunei converted into an Islamic Sultanate when its ruler,

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<sup>5</sup> Chandrajit Banerjee, "From Look East to Act East," Business Line, February 26, 2017, accessed June 17, 2017, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/developing-new-global-value-chains-in-partnership/article9560295.ece>.

Awang Alak Betatar, married a Muslim Johore princess from Malacca, and embraced Islam to become Brunei's first Sultan –Mohammed Shah.

Till 1980s India lost its connection with Brunei which was later established after the independence of Brunei in 1984. There have been regular bilateral visits as well as meetings in multilateral fora between the two states.

It has been stated that Brunei's main port, Muara — one of the main ports in Southeast Asia through which the bulk of the country's oil and gas exports to India take place — is in the South China Sea region and will become a major component of India's growing maritime partnership with Brunei. The Indian strategies to implementation of a counter mechanism to string of pearls theory has a role with Brunei Darussalam also.

2. Burma (Myanmar) - India had an ancient relationship between Burma. It is even stated the Burma was also a Hindu ancient monarchy which later turned to buddhism. India and Myanmar are members in BIMSTEC. This cooperation continues even in relation with ASEAN countries. To ensure India's national security interests from the north-eastern state's left-wing extremists and narcotic trade routes, India and Myanmar armies have carried out several joint military operations, for example, Operation Sunshine.
3. Cambodia - There are major pillars in the relationship between India and Cambodia this includes,
  - Cultural and Historic Ties - India had a long standing cultural ties with cambodia. This relationship is due to the shared heritage of Hindu and Buddhist cultures found in both countries.
  - Diplomatic relations - Both the countries having a smooth diplomatic relations among themselves since the 1950s. This relationship has been engaged constantly by the embassies situated in the each country's capital.
  - Economic Engagement and Development Cooperation - India has been involved in developmental cooperation with Cambodia. This includes assistance in sectors such as capacity building, education, and healthcare. India has also contributed to infrastructure projects in Cambodia. While the economic ties may not be as extensive as with some other countries, efforts have been made to enhance economic cooperation. Both countries have shown interest in expanding trade and investment relations.

4. Indonesia - the relationship between India and Indonesia is multifaceted, this includes diplomatic, economic, cultural, and strategic cooperation. The key aspects of the relationship are,
  - Defence Cooperation - the defense cooperation between India and Indonesia ensures the strategic outlook of India in the Strait of Malacca and has engaged in defense collaborations, including military training programs and defense equipment exchanges. This cooperation aims to enhance the capabilities of both countries and contribute to regional security.
  - Maritime ties - the strategic importance of Indo-pacific has been well recognized by both the countries through ensuring maritime ties. This also ensures India in managing the Strait of Malacca from Andaman Islands.
  - Cooperation in Counter terrorism - India and Indonesia both have been involved in counter terrorism activities and they both coordinate in an effective manner to strike down terrorism from Indo-pacific. It is essential for Indo-pacific to be free from terrorism.
  - Economic partnership - Economic ties between India and Indonesia have been growing, with efforts to boost trade and investment. Both countries are members of forums like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), contributing to economic integration.
5. Laos - India and Laos has directly engaged in various aspects such as Cultural, Economic, Educational Exchanges, Defense and security cooperation. There is an historic linkage of relationship between India and Laos which are,
  - Development Assistant - India has provided a large amount of development assistance in various sector such as, building, healthcare, education and infrastructure.
  - Economic Ties - There is growing economic linkages between India and Laos. Efforts have been made to enhance economic relations, and discussions on trade promotion and business partnerships have taken place.
  - Defense and Security Cooperation - there is not much increase in defense cooperation between India and Laos but there are talks to connect with. Maritime ties.

6. Malaysia - the relationship between India and Malaysia is relation with the Important aspect of Economic Cooperation, Corporate relationship, the cultural and people to people connect, and the strategic cooperation.

During the period earlier president the cooperation went to some downsides which has now been again in increasing cooperation at the new regime

India and Malaysia have engaged in discussions on strategic and defense cooperation. Shared concerns about regional security and the importance of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region have been areas of focus.

7. Philippines - Both the countries have stronger support to each other in respect to defense and sovereignty issues. If it comes to China in South China Sea, India supports Philippines and when it comes to Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, the Philippines take active support to India. The increase in defence between both countries can be understood by following points,

- the Indo-Pacific region, India and the Philippines share concerns related to maritime security challenges. Cooperation in this area may involve information sharing and joint efforts to address common security threats.
- defense technology cooperation and the exchange of defense-related equipment have taken place.
- There have been instances of India and the Philippines participating in joint exercises. These exercises focus on improving interoperability and sharing best practices.
- India has offered training programs and capacity-building assistance to the Philippines Armed Forces. These initiatives aim to enhance the capabilities of the Philippine military through skill development and knowledge exchange.

8. Singapore - India and Singapore are interconnected with people to people connect. The workers in Singapore are largely from southern India. The workers of Indian origin take further the diplomatic and governmental relationship to the higher level.

There is ongoing defense cooperation between India and Singapore, including joint military exercises and defense dialogues. The two countries share common concerns about maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region.

9. Thailand - India and Thailand are culturally and anciently interconnected by various exchanges. India has always been culturally more connected to Thailand than any other



countries of the ASEAN group. This is because of the shared heritage of Hinduism and Buddhism. India and Thailand have engaged in strategic dialogues and defense cooperation. Both nations have participated in joint military exercises and discussions on regional security issues. Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region is a common area of interest.

10. Vietnam - India and Vietnam have always been considered to be growth engines of future Asia after the decline of China. So, naturally the cooperation and relationship between both the countries will be effective and stronger. There are following sections were both the countries have a well established relationships they are,

- Comprehensive Strategic Partnership - Both the countries have recently developed their relationship from Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This proves my point of insurrection between both the countries in every sector is focused.
- Agreement relating to Defense - Both the countries have a good cooperation in defense and strategic sector. India and Vietnam have signed defense agreements and engage in regular dialogues to enhance defense cooperation. These agreements provide a framework for military collaboration and exchanges
- Joint Military Exercise - India and Vietnam conduct joint military exercises, fostering interoperability and sharing best practices. These exercises contribute to building mutual trust and strengthening the capabilities of their armed forces.
- Maritime Cooperation - Given the maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, India and Vietnam have focused on naval cooperation. This includes joint patrols, information sharing, and efforts to address common maritime security threats.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

India and the ASEAN countries have a common role to play in the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific region. This cooperation among ASEAN and India will make East Asia a terrorism free and a single Hegemony of China in control. This relationship is built on trust and connection among people. The diplomatic relationship has ensured us to be connected in particular to maritime and defense cooperation. The increasing presence of China at the coast of Sri Lanka has made India act aggressively in the South China Sea. To act in South China Sea India requires effective cooperation between ASEAN countries as they share the borders either

land or by way of South China Sea share with mainland china. India's strategy to implement a stronger connection with ASEAN countries has ensured an effective counter balance to China's string of pearls theory. The Maritime, Defense and strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN countries have ensured a safe Indo-Pacific and free Indo-Pacific.

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