

India's Foreign Policy towards Malaysia & Singapore: Evolution and Determinants

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the evolution of India's relations with Southeast Asian countries, particularly Malaysia and Singapore. Over the centuries, India and Southeast Asia have shared history, culture and social values. As a result, the relationships between these two regions exhibit an evolving pattern. During the onset of the Cold War when the world had a bipolar system, India made some weak policy choices due to several factors which affected its relations with Southeast Asia adversely. However, after the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union, India felt a need to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia and thus launched the Look East Policy. This paper traces the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Malaysia through two defining periods – pre- and post-Cold War. An attempt is also made to explain this evolution and shift from time to time in India's foreign policy towards Malaysia by highlighting the factors responsible for this. The paper makes important contributions by helping understand the trajectory of relations between India, a major regional power and Malaysia. This paper also briefly covers some historical importance of Singapore to India and Malaysia, since both Malaysia and Singapore are considered as two tiger economies in the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords: foreign policy, India, look east policy, Malaysia, Singapore, Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

India established its ties with Malaysia in the 1950s and the 1960s. During these years India supported Malaysia against Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) while Malaysia supported India during its war with China in 1962 (Singh, 2011, pp. 11-12). On the other hand, Singapore started its ties with India after its separation from Malaysia in 1965. At that time, Singapore wanted India to provide diplomatic support to enable it to strengthen its international space by its entry into international organizations. Militarily, Singapore also wanted India to train its fledgling armed forces.

In the late 1980s, however, India's close ties with Moscow distanced from its most of the non-communist Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines - the initial members ASEAN. Hence, benign neglect largely characterized India's relations with Southeast Asia during this period.

However, ever since India formulated the Look East Policy, relations between India, Malaysia and Singapore, have been growing in terms of convergence of geopolitical and geo-strategic, political, security and economic cooperation. With the end of the Cold War and India's formulation of the Look East Policy, the phenomenon has changed and Southeast Asian countries, in general and Malaysia and Singapore in particular, have experienced growing friendly ties with India. In this backdrop, this paper sets out to achieve two objectives. Firstly, it historically traces the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Malaysia and Singapore through two defining periods – pre and post-Cold War. Secondly this paper attempts to explain this evolution and shift from time to time in India's foreign policy towards Malaysia and Singapore by highlighting factors responsible for this. The paper makes important contributions by helping understand the trajectory of relations between India, a major regional power and Malaysia and Singapore two tiger economies in the Southeast Asian region.

The rest of the paper takes the following structure. In the second section, we discuss the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Malaysia and Singapore before and during the Cold War. The third section discusses this

evolution after the end of the Cold War. In the fourth section, the changes in India's foreign policy are discussed; the subsections of this section also highlight the factors leading to such changes in the foreign policy. The fifth section presents the conclusions of this paper.

2. India-Southeast Asia Relations during the Cold War

The best period in India's relation with the Southeast Asian seems to be the one that witnessed the conscious deployment of historical narratives and cultural imagery of space. Historically therefore, the ties between India and many of the present countries of South and Southeast Asia date back to over two millennia. The two regions were linked with India by virtue of ethnic similarity through trade, political expansion by Indian kings (during the great era of south Indian empire-building in the eighth century AD) and due to the strong presence of Indian diasporas in these countries. British imperialism further forged this region into an 'India-centered strategic system' (Narlikar, 2006).

During the Cold War period, however, India's relation with Southeast Asia was not particularly good. Several factors contributed to this. According to Naidu (2004), the British colonial rule created major differences between these regions and the re-discovery of Southeast Asia proved to be short lived in the post-colonial era. The beginning of the Cold War and a series of other developments contributed their share to the worsening relationship between India and Southeast Asia as well. American military intervention in Vietnam in 1954 made "India's political plank of neutrality very difficult to sell to the mostly small and medium-sized countries of Southeast Asia". Further, the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 led to a vertical polarization of Southeast Asia along ideological lines whereby India, with the vague concept of non-alignment as its foreign policy mooring, found few sympathizers.

However despite India's preoccupations with its immediate neighborhoods, efforts were made to strengthen the relations. When India got its independence in 1947, the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru considered Southeast Asia as a region whose history, fate, and destiny were somewhat linked with India's (Yong & Mun, 2009). He believed that these regions had seen the rise of great civilizations, but these regions had been suppressed by colonial rule. He also believed that the Second World War had changed the world and that the decline in European imperialism would lead to increase in Asian nationalism thereby helping the Indian and Southeast Asian people rediscover their own identities" (Yong & Mun, 2009). However, since large parts of Southeast Asia still existed as colonies of the imperial powers, relations between India and the Southeast Asian region remained closed (Yong & Mun, 2009).

Pandya and Malone (2011) point out that from 1950s to 1980s, India felt left alone from Southeast Asian nations barring Vietnam, and a few distant East Asian countries. When Indian got independence, the Indian leaders considered Asia as 'their' own region, a region Jawaharlal Nehru thought would be lead by India. India also recognized the strategic importance of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for the defense of the Indian Peninsula.

Two important conferences □ Asian Relations Conference and the Bandung Conference □ on April 18 and 24, 1955 became symbolic of the early attempts of the emerging Asian countries towards creating a free and neutral pan-Asian identity and assert their presence in the world. These events showed clear convergence of interests between Southeast Asian countries (in waiting) and India. Jawaharlal Nehru's ideas of non-alignment and freedom from any external influences and absence of commitment to both the two power blocs had attracted many like-minded Asians (Naidu, 2004).

However, India got involved in Cold War politics and could not convince the Asian countries about its non-aligned credentials. Besides due to issues closer to India like the border war with China in 1962 and conflicts with another neighbor Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, non-alignment in Indian foreign policy was undermined (Naidu, 2004). Whatever little pretention India had of non-alignment was shed with the signing of the 1971 Friendship Treaty with Moscow (Naidu, 2010). On the economic front, the initial enthusiasm was less intense when Indian reforms failed to match ASEAN's expectations, prompting then Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to remark that his efforts to generate an India fever had been inoculated (Naidu, 2010).

The India-Southeast Asia relations were further aggravated by the happenings in Cambodia. India diplomatically recognized the Cambodian government of Heng Samrin in 1980, becoming the only non-Communist country to do so. In the mid-1980s, ASEAN countries tried to persuade India to stop extending diplomatic recognition to Cambodian government. However, India did not change its policy. As a result, from mid 1950s to late 1980s, this issue in combination with other issues isolated India from most of Southeast Asian countries (Naidu, 2004; Pandya & Malone, 2011).

3. India-Southeast Asia Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, India's attention had shifted to Southeast Asia. As a result of India's sympathy for Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle, India already enjoyed a strong relationship with North Vietnam (Pandya & Malone, 2011). However, a reorientation took place in India in the early 1990s which gradually led to a "renaissance in relations" with South-east Asia (Acharya, 2009; Kaul, 2006). India and ASEAN began to draw closer to each other as, according to Sridharan (1996), they decided to ignore the "hypocrisy and public posturing involved in the western position towards China and Myanmar". Thus the two began pursuing a pragmatic policy to achieve the economic development of the region.

Post Cold War, India's relation with South-east got a new impetus. Many events show this. Yong and Mun (2009) believe that India and ASEAN relations became warmer when the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi helped in solving the Cambodian problem and wanted better relations with the countries in Southeast Asia. Thus diplomatic activities and rhetoric for having closer relations with South Asia were enhanced. Scholars believe that these led to altering geopolitical realities and circumstances after the Cold War which made India rethink its overall posture, specifically towards its eastern neighbors.

In November, 2004, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed on the fact that for the 21st century to be the Asian century, India and the regional groupings should join hands for shared prosperity (Note 1). In this spirit, India and ASEAN pledged to build institutional linkages for intelligence and information sharing, exchange of information and cooperation in legal and enforcement matters, and cooperate in anti-terrorism efforts (Note 2). In November, 2005, India and ASEAN inked another partnership pact for peace, progress and shared prosperity that aimed at boosting trade, investment, tourism, culture, sports and people-to-people contacts. India also took some confidence building measures by allowing visits of regional military attaches to its facility at Port Blair. In addition, India conducted joint naval exercises with Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, and Malaysia. From the perspective of ASEAN countries, such engagements with India were significant. Given the sheer size of India and its position, India was strategically significant for ASEAN countries because the trade routes passing through Southeast Asia also pass through the Indian Ocean (Yong & Mun, 2009). The relation between India and Southeast Asia has thus been evolving ever since the end of Cold war and this could be attributed particularly to the shifts in the Indian foreign policy pattern.

Trying to understand India's engagement with Southeast Asia, Ganguly and Pardesi (2009) state that this engagement was spurred by India's domestic economic liberalization, and by seeking purposeful politico-military engagement with Southeast Asia. India's comprehensive strategic engagement with Southeast Asian countries was reflected in its *Look East Policy* which was introduced as a result of loss of its superpower patron (the USSR) in 1991 when India began to search for new friends and partners. Consequently, searching for a larger role in Asia and trying to ward off China's influence on the region, India began to cooperate with Southeast Asian countries.

Chatterjee (2007) reveals that India's positive engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era began in the 1990s when India became a Full Dialogue Partner (in 1995) and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (in 1996). Since then, India has regularly, though not always effectively, participated in the deliberations of the forum in both the capacities. India was expected to play the role of a stabilizer and peacemaker in this part of Asia. However, it failed to play this critical role in shaping the destiny of Asia as envisioned by Jawaharlal Nehru, the main architect of India's foreign policy, primarily due to Cold War constraints. India dismissed Southeast Asia's economic capabilities and scorned at the pro-west policies of countries like Singapore; the latter looked upon India as a potential major power that failed to come to terms with economic reforms.

4. Change in India's Foreign Policy and Its Determinants

A country's foreign policy flows from multiple sources: the personal characteristics and world view of its individual decision-makers, domestic politics, cultural factors and the structure of the international system (Mazumdar, 2011). A combination of individual, national and systemic factors influence a country's foreign policy choices (Waltz, 1996). India is no different in this regard. At the individual level, the contribution of India's first prime minister and principal architect of the country's foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru, cannot be overstated. The shift in India's foreign policy with respect to Southeast Asia was a result of domestic and external factors. This can be analyzed while studying the two important phases in Indian foreign policy: first being India's main policy after colonial rule and during the Cold War, namely non-alignment policy and secondly, India's post Cold War policy namely, India's Look East Policy.

4.1 Non-alignment Policy

The term 'non-alignment' was coined by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954. He established 'non-alignment' and 'peaceful coexistence' as the twin pillars of Indian foreign policy (Mazumdar, 2011). According to the realist tradition in international relations, systemic constraints determine the behavior of countries. The structure of the international system forces countries to adopt a particular set of policies in line with their relative position in the international system (Mandelbaum, 1988; Waltz, 1996). The fall of the Soviet Union brought a huge shock to India. The main reason for this was that from 1970s or during the Cold War era, India was hugely dependent on Soviet Union for diplomatic, economic and military assistance. However, the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union made India to reorganize its foreign relations. The reforms resulted in substantial changes in India's economic interactions with the outside world, including Southeast Asia.

4.2 The Look East Policy

Realizing the importance of the Eastern countries, India adopted the Look East Policy. The first decade of the Look East Policy signaled more of India's desperation to somehow identify itself with East Asia rather than the evolution of a well thought out long-term strategy. The influence of geopolitics during the Cold War era had stymied development of all-round relations between India and ASEAN. However after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s and with the burgeoning influence of China in Southeast Asia, India understood the political, economic and diplomatic importance of the ASEAN countries and thus introduced the Look East Policy. This policy was framed post-Cold War to focus on becoming actively engaged with Southeast Asian countries (Dutt, 2007).

India's Look East Policy was the turning point and the first step towards rebuilding the relations with Southeast Asian nations. It was originally aimed at involving the East Asian region; however the focus has largely remained on Southeast Asia. India was in many ways blessed in that despite being economically inconsequential and strategically irrelevant in the early 1990s, Southeast Asian nations found it useful to involve it in regional affairs in the backdrop of super power military race and the rise of China. According to Yong and Mun (2009), India had to make a shift in its policy due to the growing partnerships between China and Southeast Asian countries. These authors however note that China's improving relations with ASEAN may not have come about to ward off India from the region, but as a result of ASEAN+3 cooperation framework.

In view of this and not wishing to lag behind China, the Vajpayee government in India made attempts to get closer and engage with ASEAN countries. India needed to strengthen its bilateral relations with ASEAN countries in maintenance of an equitable strategic balance which was both economically and strategically important for Indian security. As a result, India launched a feasibility study of a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore in April 2002, and signed a Framework Agreement on a Free Trade Areas with Thailand in October 2003. In addition, like China, India also acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation to signal India's peaceful intentions as an ASEAN partner (Yong & Mun, 2009). In addition, India included economic and political factors as an incentive to look at Southeast with a fresh start.

Ganguly and Pardesi (2009) believe that the history of Indian policy can be categorized into three phases. The first phase of India's foreign policy was the most "idealistic phase of India's foreign policy". The second phase started after India had to face defeat at the hands of China in 1962. This led to a shift of the foreign policy away from the early idealism and made India adopt a "self-help" approach to its foreign policy. The third phase started after the Cold War ended when India adopted a more pragmatic foreign policy conforming to the principles of Realism (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009; Morgenthau, 2006; Waltz, 1990). Trivedi (2010), on the other hand, mentions that India's Look East Policy went through two distinct phases. During its first phase, the aim was to rebuild economic ties with Southeast Asian countries and to trade with countries beyond the main trading partners in North America and Europe. The second phase involved stepping up of efforts to improve relations with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) and gathering support for India to hold a summit level meeting with ASEAN. However, whatever the perspective, it becomes clear that India's Look East Policy brought India closer to the ASEAN countries, particularly Malaysia and Singapore.

4.3 Domestic Factors

Several systemic, national and decision-making factors helped shape post independence India's foreign policy choices (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009; Waltz, 1990). Mazumdar (2011) believes that domestic factors in India affected the development of a grand strategy. The domestic factors in India include the formation of coalition governments at the in the center since the early 1990s, the country's federal structure, weak foreign policy institutions, the absence of strategic culture and leadership. These factors put together also complicated India's search for a post Cold War foreign policy framework.

4.3.1 Emergence of Coalition Governments

Foreign policy is influenced by the domestic political structures and configurations of the national government, including political actors like parties, institutions and factions (Hagan, 1994). Hagan (1987) and Mazumdar (2011) concur with each other in stating that the change (in policy) could be the effect of change in India's domestic politics. According to Hagan (1987), "the linkages between domestic politics and foreign policy indicates that pressures of domestic politics influence a country's response to international crisis, shape the restructuring of foreign policy in light of global changes, influence the development of aggressive and militant foreign policies and indicate the likelihood of them initiating wars with other countries". A central feature of Indian politics from 1989 onwards involved: (i) the emergence of regional and state-level parties, (ii) coalition governments at the national and state level, (iii) the salience of identity-based politics at the national level and (iv) the prioritization of state-level factors at the expense of national priorities by voters in general (national) elections. In addition, the country also witnessed changes in the nature of centre-state relations, which had implications for the country's foreign policy. As a result, the change from a dominant party system to coalition politics had implications for the country's foreign policy (Mazumdar, 2011).

Mazumdar (2011) points out that the year 1990 was the period of great instability in Indian politics. Since the end of Cold War until 1999, there were five general elections and as many as eight coalition governments were sworn in. Unfortunately, majority of the governments were short lived and fell before their five-year terms as they were minority governments dependent on 'outside support' and lacked commonality of ideology and principles (Mazumdar, 2011). As a result, the effect of country's domestic factors in making of the foreign policy becomes more vital "when a coalition government's stability and survival depends on its response to foreign policy demands of political entities and interest groups" (Mazumdar, 2011).

4.3.2 Involvement of States

The involvement of states in international affairs is also an important factor in shaping up a country's foreign policy. The Indian constitution makes it seem that the states in India have little to no involvement in international affairs. However, Mazumdar (2011) mentions that during the past two decades, state governments have, from time to time, forced a reassessment of India's policies towards a particular country. According to Das (2001), the socio-economic order and center-state relations in India need to be reorganized and a common Indian nationhood needs to be enriched. Das (2001) adds that India does not need to be represented down from Delhi, or in terms of West Bengal or Karnataka being an alternative to power in Delhi, but there is a need to create a situation whereby India is represented as Calcutta, Visakhapatnam, Calcutta and Amritsar.

4.3.3 Bureaucracy

Along with the above factors, the Indian system relies excessively on its bureaucracy to formulate and implement the foreign policy. In addition, think tanks, universities, the media, and private business also play a role in policymaking. In view of this, Markey (2009) believes that it is India's own foreign policy establishment that prevents the country from reaching the great-power status. The author highlights four reasons for this: (1) The Indian Foreign Service is small, the selection process is improper and mid career training is inadequate. Besides the Indian Foreign Service tends not to use any outside expertise; (2) India's think-tanks do not have access to sufficient information or resources that may be required to conduct cutting edge research which is relevant to policymaking; (3) India's public universities face limitations in terms of funds and regulations due to which they fail to impart quality education in fields related to social sciences and foreign policy; and (4) India's media and private firms that debate foreign policy agenda do not have the capacity to conduct sustained foreign policy research or training.

4.3.4 Shift of Focus to Economic Issues

Initially, India viewed Southeast Asia through the prism of the Cold War while trade and economic interaction with the region was miniscule (Mazumdar, 2011). However, in the Post Cold War period "India began to pay greater attention to Southeast Asia and the Far East" (Haokip, 2011; Mazumdar, 2011). Accordingly, Indian diplomacy in the post-Cold War era focused on economic issues more than political matters (Rana, 2002). This change in India's approach happened towards other countries also. For instance, with non-alignment having lost its meaning and appeared irrelevant in an international order where there was only one superpower (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009; Gordon, 1997; Mazumdar, 2011), the failure of India's non-alignment policy and fall of Soviet Union left, India was left with no choice but to build a new relationship with the United States of America (Chiriyankandath, 2008; Mazumdar, 2011).

4.3.5 India's Leadership

Jawaharlal Nehru is regarded as the architect of the second largest democracies in the world, India. It was indeed not an easy task to manage a big country like India, even at the time of its independence given that it was faced with many domestic issues. Mazumdar (2011) believes that even though Jawaharlal Nehru had his way on defining India's early foreign policy, there was little in the way of a national consensus on foreign policy after independence. According to Ganguly and Pardesi (2009), Jawaharlal Nehru's expertise in international affairs, his nationalist credentials, his leadership of the Indian National Congress Party and the national government and his assumption of the position of foreign minister (in addition to being the prime minister) allowed him to play a central role in formulating India's early foreign policy.

However, one of the reasons for weak foreign policy in the case of India, especially during Cold War was the uncertainty in the leadership. As early as in November 1959, the seventieth birthday of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, there were debates over whether Jawaharlal Nehru should resign from his post and who should take his post if he resigned. Even British policy makers became concerned about the future of India as Jawaharlal Nehru's health deteriorated and his grip on power weakened (McGarr, 2011). Like many others, Ronald Belcher, Britain's Acting High Commissioner in New Delhi, expressed his frustration over how old age and illness had replaced once formidable political powers of Jawaharlal Nehru. As the opposition shared a similar sentiment, they tabled a motion of no confidence against Jawaharlal Nehru's government in the Lok Sabha in 1962. While Jawaharlal Nehru survived the challenge, his parliamentary opponents strongly demanded that he quit (Wolpert, 1996).

According to Gupta (1981), the excessive reliance on loyalty to personalities created serious problems concerning the hierarchy of allegiance in India. These problems became more severe after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru when there was unavailability of his replacement. Secondly, a similar situation occurred when another Prime Minister of India Sanjay Gandhi, died and another, Indira Gandhi, faltered and no new objects of unifying loyalty came along. As a result, the weakness of the organizational system was matched by the uncreative nature of the policies and reforms. On the question of basic social reforms and institutional innovation, the new leadership failed to offer any new directions (Gupta, 1981). Consequently, the country was left with a sense of loss and political abandonment after the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and the foreign policy suffered as a result.

5. Conclusion

India and Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia and Singapore, have been important to each other due to several factors: culture, geography, social values, security and economy. It has been noted that Southeast Asian countries will continue to be important for India because of the social and ecological links between parts of Southeast Asia and northeast India. These conduits provide India and the Southeast Asian countries with immense possibilities in different spheres. There are many Southeast Asian countries that have already become vital investment and joint venture destination for Indian businesses and a source of commodities to fuel India's economic growth (Yong & Mun, 2009). This paper shows that the relationship between India and Southeast Asia has had a pattern of growth and evolution. This paper also discussed the shifts in India's foreign policy from time to time. A country's foreign policy flows from multiple sources: the personal characteristics and world view of its individual decision-makers, domestic politics, cultural factors and the structure of the international system (Mazumdar, 2011). A combination of individual, national and systemic factors influence a country's foreign policy choices (Waltz, 1996). The shift in India's foreign policy with respect to Southeast Asia was a result of domestic and external factors which were discussed in this paper. The evolution of India's relations with Southeast Asian countries was analyzed by studying the two important phases in Indian foreign policy: first being India's main policy after colonial rule and during the Cold War, namely non-alignment policy and secondly, India's post Cold War policy namely, India's Look East Policy.

New Delhi's stakes in regional peace and security are high. Inevitably, India will have to brace for steadily intensifying competition, not just for capital and commodities but for political influence too and possibly there may be even a clash of interests with China, which is already evident in Myanmar and Indochina. (Note 3) However, Southeast Asia continues to be an important region for India, and India's bilateral relations with select countries acquire enormous salience. As Naidu (2010) states, if the experience since the early 1990s and present trends are any guide, India's foreign policy in the twenty-first century will reap rich dividends through a robust engagement with the East.

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Notes

Note 1. This was stated in ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity pact with leaders of ASEAN countries at their third annual summit on 30 November 2004.

Note 2. ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2004). Retrieved on May 28, 2007 from <http://www.aseansec.org/16839.htm>

Note 3. Indochina is the former name of a region of southeast Asia, which dates from the period when it was a colony of France under the full name of French Indochina.

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