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The Global War on Terror as a Catalyst for Cooperation: Analyzing India-Southeast Asia Relations from 1947 to the Post-9/11 Period

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Abstract

India's independence in 1947 became the starting point for the South Asian state to tread a path towards its national interests. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned an India that had two core pillars:1) a non-aligned policy 2) a central role in the Indian Ocean and the Asian continent. However, the Cold War period brought a number of challenges upon India that served as a preoccupation from an outward foreign policy approach. The consecutive wars with Pakistan and the border war with China in 1962 became great hurdles for India to interact with its neighbors in the East, particularly Southeast Asia. In addition, India's warming up of relations with the Soviet Union further soured relations between India and the United States and the pro-US Southeast Asian countries. With the end of the Cold War, however, India was seen to be isolated due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decreased significance of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India-Southeast Asian relations continued to remain ambiguous due to the internal and external factors that affected India. However, after the devastating terror attack in 9/11, 2001, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) was spearheaded by the United States. This event took a positive turn for India-Southeast Asian relations, which continued to develop steadily since then.

Keywords: Global War on Terror, 9/11, India, Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

India and Southeast Asian relations have gone through a number of challenges before reaching its current state. The change of events throughout history played a crucial role in forging those very relations. India and Southeast Asia have strong similarities in history, culture, language, and values; however, despite these similarities, much needed to be done to improve their ties. After gaining its independence in 1947, India, through the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru set the stage for other newly independent countries with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The momentum, however, did not remain consistent, especially after the Cold War when India was facing internal issues of its own. These issues also soured India's relations with Southeast Asian countries and

the United States. This circumstance changed after the devastating 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) became an important avenue for India to enhance and develop its relations with the Southeast Asian region. This paper will analyze and evaluate the changing dynamics of interstate relations between India and Southeast Asia from 1947 to the post-9/11 period.

The first section will focus on the theoretical discussion on the GWOT and International Relations. This segment will also encompass the main argument of the paper. The second segment will look into India-Southeast Asia relations from 1947 to 1989. This part will be analyzed against the backdrop of the Cold War. The third segment will uncover India and Southeast Asia relations from 1990 to 2000. This portion will highlight the post-Cold War before the 9/11 attack of 2001. In this segment, the Look East Policy of India will also be discussed as a major platform in reaching out to Southeast Asia. The fourth segment will analyze the post 9/11 period and how it is considered a turning-point in India-Southeast Asia relations. The fifth segment will provide an overview of current trends in India's foreign policy with the Modi Government in power. This would be followed by the conclusion.

2.   Theoretical Discussion: The GWOT and the Study of International Relations

The September 11 terrorist attack is considered to be a destructive and extraordinary point in history. The significance of the depth of the 9/11 attack goes beyond the bombing of the Twin Towers. Two major components of the post-9/11 period carved a new dimension in foreign policy: the first is the response of the United States to the attack through the GWOT and the second is the impact of the attack on the international system (Cox, 2002). These changes became a significant topic of discussion among scholars and academics; in fact, this particular even still resonates in conference discussions and academic publications up to this very day.

The war on Iraq in 2003 and the invasion of Afghanistan brought mixed emotions within the international community. The GWOT shifted relations between the US, the European Union, and Russia. Germany and France were against US actions in Iraq and created an environment of uncertainty for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its collective security mechanism under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (Wagner, 2003). However, on a brighter note, for that particular period, US-Russian relations picked-up and developed in the name of combating the negative effects of terrorism (McFaul, 2001). The same evolution of relations also took place in Asia, particularly between India and the Southeast Asian countries.

My main argument, however, would revolve around India's relations with Southeast Asia against the backdrop of the GWOT. I argue that the changes brought by the 9/11 attack together with the US response through the GWOT catalyzed an avenue of cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. The levels of cooperation brought by the GWOT and the post-9/11 period are multidimensional, which span from defense to commerce and social development.

India – Southeast Asia relations were not at its best during the Cold War period due to the bipolar nature of international relations. Relations did not receive much growth either during the collapse of the Soviet Union and a few years into the post-Cold War era. What made a significant difference was when the GWOT was established after the 9/11 terror attack. This attack served as a pivotal moment for inter-state relations due to the evolving threat of terrorism and transnational crime coupled with the advancements in technology in the age of globalization.

With the spotlight shining on state efforts to reform their counterterrorism policies and look for alternative measures to combat the growing threat of terrorism, Southeast Asian states started looking towards India positively and welcomed its efforts to contribute in the region's security framework. This significant shift created more avenues for cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. Not only did India-Southeast Asia relations develop, but also India-US relations. The United States deepened its strategic engagement with India and cooperated comprehensively to tackle a variety of security and non-security issues in the Pacific.

3.   India – Southeast Asian Relations (1947 – 1989)

During India's independence in 1947, the security environment was altered by the effects of the Cold War between the two global superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Bearing the scars of colonialism, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru stressed on two important pillars of India's foreign policy: non-alignment and the centrality of India's role in Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Non-Alignment Policy emphasized India's independent position and strategic autonomy at a time when the international system was categorized as bipolar. So much so, India's leadership of the NAM brought it prestige and appreciation most, especially from newly independent countries. Additionally, during the colonial period, the British Raj was the security provider in the IOR; Prime Minister Nehru sought to continue this tradition and emphasize India's role as an emerging power (Mohan, 2015).

Nehru's policies were, however, constrained by the changing dynamics of international politics. The signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between India and the Soviet Union in 1971 significantly tarnished India's reputation as a significant voice of the NAM. Moreover, India's involvement in the affairs of its neighbors in South Asia further complicated the situation as well. India has fought three wars with Pakistan between 1947-1990 (1947, 1965, and 1971) and engaged in a border war with China in 1962. India's rough relations with its immediate neighbors significantly misconstrued its interests, particularly in the East.

India's security environment and the trends that have occurred since its independence have significantly strained its time and resources and became a critical preoccupation. This preoccupation further deviated New Delhi's attention from enhancing its interaction with its other neighbors in Asia, specifically, Southeast Asia. India and Southeast Asia are linked by a shared culture and history. Despite their similarities, the Cold War period was not too favorable for the enhancement of relations between India and Southeast Asian states.

The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 was received with a lack of enthusiasm by New Delhi. The regional block was perceived to be pro-West. In addition, ASEAN members such as the Philippines and Thailand were committed to US military assistance through the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Such military alliances were not in accordance to the non-aligned belief India had been adhering to. Ironically, India's defense of Soviet action in Afghanistan during the time of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Garver, 1991) and India's support of the North Vietnamese regime (Pant, 2018) fueled ASEAN's suspicion and doubt for India. India tried to reach out to the ASEAN states in the 1970s to iron out misconceptions; however, despite the attempts made, the security environment of the Cold War prohibited an enhanced interaction between the two.

4.   India – Southeast Asia Relations (1990-2000)

The period between 1990 and 1991 was marked with turbulence for India. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decreasing significance of the NAM, India found itself near isolation. In addition, the issues of terrorism and insurgency coupled with economic instability further pressed down on the South Asian state. India had to face violent insurgencies in Punjab, India's Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Pakistan had also grown to become more hostile towards India, which can be noted through its support for militants in J&K (Haokip, 2011). The South Asian region also suffered security and political instability due to various ethnic conflicts. The Sindhi and Baluchi movements in Pakistan, the Nepalis in Bhutan, the Terai against the hill people in Nepal, the Chakmas in Bangladesh, the Tamils in Sri Lanka and various tribes India's Northeast (Nanda, 2003, 265–266) provoked the peace structure of the entire South Asian region.

India also faced severe economic issues due to both internal and external factors. During this period, India suffered politically as well with three successive governments being formed within two years. The 1990-1991 Gulf war took a huge hit at India's oil imports, which rose to 21.9 percent in rupees (Ministry of Finance, 1991). Concurrently, India's trade with the Eastern European countries suffered significantly with the collapse of the

communist system. By mid-1991, foreign exchange reserves had fallen critically to the point that India had to seek the help of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Hoakip, 2011).

The fall of the Chandrashekhar Government led to new elections in July 1991. As a result, the Congress-led government was formed with Narasimha Rao as the Prime Minister. Confronted with a devastated national economy, Prime Minister Rao had to take significant steps to bring the country towards recovery. India's economic policy took a crucial turn during his administration with Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Finance Minister. This resulted to India opening up its arms to economic liberalization, privatization, and globalization. India's economic liberalization directed India to look outwards rather than inwards and engage with states beyond its immediate neighborhood. As part of the Rao Government's external approach, the Look East Policy was initiated.

The early 1990s paved the way for India's Look East policy which was initially focused on ASEAN countries but later encompassed others such as Japan, South Korea, China, New Zealand and Australia (Sikri, 2009). The Look East Policy encompassed economic, defense, and political levels of engagement. In relation to Southeast Asian, India became a full dialogue partner of the ASEAN in 1995 and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996. The Look East Policy generated a positive response from countries in Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, mostly because of the economic benefits the policy may bring to the region (Raman, 2012). Other ASEAN countries also considered that India could be a counter-weight and alternative in the region vis-à-vis China.

However, the excitement and enthusiasm of the policy did not meet realistic outcomes in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's hope for big infrastructural projects with India did not push through. Singapore's attempts to associate with the Tatas on possible modernization projects for India's civil aviation infrastructure were futile. Additionally, Thailand's inland water prawn culture project was also given up due to fears of its negative effect on the agriculture industry (Raman, 2012). This disappointment clarified ASEAN countries that India is not yet a China in terms of economic capabilities. In fact, India still has a long way to go to match China's economic capacity in the region. During this period, India had also grown suspicious of Pakistan's growing alliance with China in the Indian Ocean. Terrorist and insurgent attacks in South Asia further complicated the security environment for India. This led to India's further military modernization and the development of its nuclear weapons. When India conducted its nuclear tests in 1998, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) severely criticized India's actions (United Nations Security Council, 1998). In addition, the US and Japan slapped economic sanctions on India due to the series of tests made. This led to the stagnation of India's relations with Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian states were also wary of conducting any kind of security cooperation such as counterterrorism measures with India out of the fear of getting embroiled in the complex situation of the South Asian region. This perception towards India changed after the devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11.

5. India Southeast Asia Relations after 9/11

The 9/11 terrorist attack signaled a new era of international security. With the easy access and advancement of technology, not even a powerful state could be spared from the effects of terrorist activity. This became a wake-up call for President George W. Bush who spearheaded the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and led the invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq War of 2003. The post-9/11 period saw a series of terrorist activities that spread throughout continents and regions (Roser, Nadgy, & Richie, 2013). Examples of which are the terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001, the coordinated attacks on 21 petrol pumps in Pakistan in 2003, suicide attacks in Indonesia in 2002 and 2005 and the explosion in Super Ferry 14 in the Philippines in 2004 (Acharya, 2006). Countries have started reforming their counterterrorism policies in order to address the growing and evolving issue of terrorism.

The GWOT opened doors for India to enhance its cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and close the gaps of misunderstanding and misconception. Before 9/11 India's call and warning for the spread of terrorism were not taken seriously and seen as propaganda; however, the post-9/11 period recognized India's importance as country

with one of the richest experiences in counter-insurgency and terrorism (Raman, 2012). Even for the US, it was impossible to counter the effects of terrorism in the Pacific without the help of major military powers such as India. In fact, in 2002 and 2003, the Indian Navy escorted US ships transiting through the pirate-swarmed Malacca Strait (Paddock, 2010) – a very important maritime chokepoint in the Pacific. To the surprise of many, the US also reaffirmed India's role in the region and urged states not to perceive India's growing role negatively (Raman, 2012).

There has been greater acceptance of India's role in Southeast Asian security. In fact, the mutual desire to fight terrorism has brought Southeast Asia and India closer. After 9/11, Southeast Asian countries started seeing India's contributions as positive and neutral. Southeast Asia also welcomed India to play a bigger role in the region regarding issues of terrorism and piracy. India's vast experience in dealing with cultural, linguistic and religious minorities in the context of a democratic system would serve beneficial to Southeast Asian countries who are dealing with the same scenario in their respective national levels (Acharya, 2006).

India's warming up of ties with ASEAN countries through the strategic and security level after the 9/11 terrorist attacks became a stepping stone for further engagement in other levels of development. In 2002, India was elevated to a Summit level partner of ASEAN, which shows India's growing importance in the region. A few years into the post-9/11 period, trade between India and ASEAN also significantly developed. India's exports to ASEAN countries grew from USD 10.41 billion in 2005-2006 to USD 12.56 billion in 2006-2007. ASEAN's exports to India also grew from 10.88 billion in 2005-2006 to 18.08 billion in 2006-2007. Additionally, a framework for the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) was signed in 2003 with the final agreement signed in 2009. This would be a significant platform to further enhance trade between the India and the ASEAN countries.

Bilaterally, India – Singapore trade grew 31 percent from 2005-2007. India's trade with Malaysia also grew from 3.57 billion in 2005-2006 to 6.72 billion in 2006-2007. India-Indonesia trade also increased 44 percent from 2005-2006 to 2006-2007. Thailand – India trade also increased from 1.22 billion in 2000-2001 to 3.14 billion in 2006-2007. India-Vietnam trade increased 40.26 percent in 2006-2007 from the previous year. Myanmar's trade with India also increased significantly to 44.1 percent from 2005-2006 to 2006-2007. During this time, however, trade with Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, and the Philippines did not grow exponentially (Raman, 2012, 75-76).

In other levels, India and ASEAN countries had constant exchanges in culture, education, tourism, and sports. It is important to comprehend that both India and Southeast Asia have a shared history, culture, and language. These assets would further enhance India-Southeast Asian relations. This was further cemented during the celebration of 20th-anniversary Commemorative Summit at New Delhi in 2012 when India-ASEAN relations were elevated to Strategic Partnership (Indian Mission to ASEAN, n.d.). This shows how India-Southeast Asian relations significantly took off during the post-9/11 period. The momentum has significantly improved throughout the years especially during the time of current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Act East Policy.

6. Current Trends in India-Southeast Asian Relations: MoDiplomacy and the Act East Policy

The Look East Policy of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao became beneficial to India's external relations particularly in Southeast Asia, but when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government came to power in 2014, he vowed to further enhance India's diplomatic capacity by transforming the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy (Saint-Mezard, 2016). To illustrate India's commitment, New Delhi set up a mission to ASEAN in April 2015 and sent a high-level delegation led by former Minister of Defense, Manohar Parrikar to the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2016. The Act East Policy is seen to put great emphasis on strategic and defense components of engagements; however, there are also other dimensions to the policy that need to be looked into as well.

Land and sea connectivity is well highlighted as a priority for both India and ASEAN countries. At the 13th ASEAN-India Summit in 2015, Prime Minister Modi announced a line of credit of $ 1 Billion for connectivity projects in Southeast Asia (Balasubramaniam, 2015). Economically, India's trade with ASEAN has almost

doubled over the past ten years from USD 35 billion in 2007 to USD 65 billion in 2016. Exports and Imports also significantly increased over the period from USD 14 billion and USD 21 billion respectively in 2007, to USD 26 billion and US$ 38 billion respectively in 2016. In fact as of the year 2017, India stands as the 11th largest trading partner of ASEAN (Export-Import Bank of India, 2018, 59).

Prime Minister Modi has significantly invigorated his Act East Policy to show India's commitment in engaging with its neighbors in the East, especially Southeast Asia. This commitment can be further seen when Prime Minister Modi invited the ten ASEAN leaders to become the chief guests in India's 69th Republic Day Celebration in 2017. India-Southeast Asian relations have gone a long way since the Cold War, and it has also steadily improved since the post- 9/11 period.

The Act East Policy also formed a bridge to a closer relation and strategic partnership between the US and India. India has also become more willing in mentioning the South China Sea issue in discussions and consultations with the US as a way of deepening its position in the region (Saint-Mezard, 2016). In fact, Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam look towards India to act as a strategic counter-weight against China's growing power in the region. The United States also welcomes India's contributions in the Pacific and recognizes its value as a strategic partner. In June 2016, the US designated India as a major defense partner and supported its military modernization. With India and the US sharing perceptions of democracy and human rights, it can be seen that a strong India would complement US strategic interests.

7. Conclusion

India – Southeast Asian relations have gone through the changing events in history and have witnessed their positive and negative effects. The Cold War period was marked with uncertainty in interstate relations. The bipolar system drew out lines that affected how countries interacted with each other. This period was also when India tried to establish its non-aligned policy through the NAM; however, there were loopholes in India's projection of its neutral position in international affairs especially with its warming up of relations with the Soviet Union. In addition, India's preoccupation with the wars it faced with Pakistan and China further distanced itself from other priorities.

These events did not come off positively for the United States and the Southeast Asian countries. The Cold War significantly soured relations between India and Southeast Asia. During the end of the Cold War, however, India found itself in isolation with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decreasing significance of the NAM. In addition, the years 1990 to 1991 was a tumultuous time for India as it faced political and economic issues that occupied its attention greatly. When Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government took power, India was headed towards the path of economic liberalization. This resulted to a more external-looking foreign policy which brought forth the Look East Policy. Despite the enthusiasm revolving around the Look East Policy and its positive implications for India-Southeast Asian relations, there were still gaps that widened the divide, such as India's military development and nuclear tests. Fortunately, the situation changed during the GWOT when countries all around the world had to reform their counter-terrorism policies due to the changing dynamics of terrorist activities. India's rich experience in counter-insurgency and terrorism, coupled with its familiarity in dealing with diverse ethnic and religious minorities proved to be a stepping stone to forge stronger relations with ASEAN countries. The post-9/11 period brought dramatic changes upon India-Southeast Asian relations in political, economic, strategic, and social levels. This momentum further developed during the government of current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi through his Act East Policy. In summary, the Post-9/11 period and the GWOT brought positive change into the relations between India and the Southeast Asian countries. By analyzing current trends, it can be seen that this momentum would further develop as long as both parties realize the significance of each other's crucial roles in regional and global affairs.

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