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Understanding The Key Dimensions Of Asean-India Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

It has been 32 years of ASEAN –India relations, and this relation has emerged as a key pillar of India's foreign policy. The evolution of this relationship into a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was an outcome of the significant changes in the world's political and economic scenario since the early 1990s. India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, Dialogue Partner in 1996 and Summit Level Partner in 2002. The India- ASEAN Strategic Partnership acquired a new momentum with the announcement of "Act-East Policy" in the 12th Summit in 2014. . The Act-East Policy (AEP) emphasizes on "Connectivity, Commerce and Culture" as the focus areas of action for a greater ASEAN-India integration. The Act East policy builds upon the foundation of the Look East policy (LEP) by adopting a more comprehensive, proactive, and multidimensional approach to engage with the broader AsiaPacific region, addressing both economic and strategic dimensions more effectively. The significance of ASEAN for India is multidimensional and encompasses political, economic, strategic, and cultural aspects. The ASEAN–India relation mainly aims to foster cooperation, stability and peace in the Asia-Pacific region. The key aspect of this strategic partnership includes political dialogue, economic integration, security cooperation, cultural ties, and people to people connectivity between ASEAN- India. This research paper examines the various dimensions of India's strategic partnership with ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

KEYWORDS: ASEAN, Act East policy, Look East Policy, Asia-Pacific, Strategic Partnership.

Introduction

In this period of rapidly changing world dynamics ASEAN-India relations play a very crucial role in the international political system. In recent years, the ASEAN-India strategic partnership has seen significant advancements. In October 2024, during the 21st ASEAN-India Summit in Vientiane, Lao PDR, both parties adopted a joint statement to strengthen their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, focusing on peace, stability, and prosperity in alignment with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and India's Act East Policy. ASEAN-India reaffirmed their commitment to further advance their longstanding relations at the 24th ASEAN-India joint cooperation committee (AIJCC) meeting held at Jakarta on March 2024 at the ASEAN headquarters. The main aim of this meeting was to robust the progress India implementation of Plan of Action (2021-2025) between ASEAN India .The Plan of Action was developed to implement the ASEAN-INDIA partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity. In November 2022, to mark the 30th

anniversary of ASEAN-India relations, ASEAN granted India the status of Comprehensive Strategic Partner during ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. ASEAN-India relations have evolved significantly over the years, from economic cooperation to strategic partnership. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and India share a vision for regional peace, stability, and prosperity. India's cultural and historical links with Southeast Asia date back centuries, providing a strong foundation for cooperation. Trade and investment ties have deepened, with ASEAN being India's fourth-largest trading partner. Both sides are committed to enhancing economic integration through initiatives like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. Both ASEAN and India recognize the importance of maritime security, counter-terrorism, and connectivity for regional stability. They collaborate through forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts strengthen mutual understanding and goodwill between ASEAN and India. India is actively involved in ASEAN-led initiatives such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The Act East policy of India aims to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia, aligning with ASEAN's goals of regional integration and community-building overall. ASEAN-India strategic relations encompass various sectors, including political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions, contributing to the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region.

Recent developments in this strategic partnership are that they both have emphasized on digital transformation by adopting a joint statement aimed at fostering, strengthening and enhancing digital connectivity and innovation. Earlier in September 2023, PM Modi gave a 12 point proposal for deepening and enhancing the ties between ASEAN and India in the areas such as trade, maritime security and digital transformation.

Objectives

- To study the significance of India for ASEAN countries.
- To study the various dimensions of India-ASEAN relations.
- To evaluate the impact of strategic partnership between ASEAN and India.

Understanding the concept of strategic partnership between India and ASEAN

A strategic partnership is a formal alliance between two or more nations aimed at achieving specific goals and mutual benefits. The strategic partnership between ASEAN -India, established formally in 2012, encompasses a wide array of collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing regional integration, economic growth, security, and socio-cultural exchange. ASEAN-INDIA relations have fostered significant economic growth, enhanced security cooperation, enriched cultural exchanges and supported regional stability. The multidimensional strategic partnership continues to evolve, bringing mutual benefits and contributing to a prosperous and secure India-Pacific region. The ASEAN INDIA strategic partnership has grown from a modest beginning to a comprehensive and multifaceted relationship.

This strategic partnership has developed over several decades, evolving through various stages of engagement, cooperation, and dialogue. Initiation of look east policy: In the early 1990s, under Prime Minister P.V Narshimha Rao, India launched the "Look East Policy" (LEP). This policy was driven by the need to integrate India more closely with the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia, counterbalance the influence of other major powers, and capitalize on regional economic opportunities. Sectoral Dialogue Partnership 1992 India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN. This was the first formal engagement between India and ASEAN, focusing initially on trade, investment, tourism, and science and technology. Elevation to Full Dialogue Partner: 1996: Recognizing the potential for broader cooperation, ASEAN elevated India to a full dialogue partner. This upgrade allowed for more comprehensive interactions across multiple sectors, including political, security, and sociocultural domains. Strengthening Ties and

Formalizing Relations (2000s) First ASEAN-India Summit 2002: The first ASEAN-India Summit was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This annual summit mechanism was established to provide a regular platform for high-level dialogue and to chart the course of future cooperation. India and ASEAN signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation agreement in 2003. This agreement aimed to lay the groundwork for a future free trade agreement by identifying key areas for cooperation and establishing a roadmap for reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Free Trade Agreement Negotiations 2003 Negotiations commenced for the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA), aiming to enhance economic integration by facilitating the free flow of goods, services, and investment. Economic Integration and Strategic Partnership (2010s) ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA):2009: The ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement in Goods was signed, which came into effect in 2010. This agreement significantly boosted bilateral trade by reducing tariffs on thousands of products. The ASEAN-India Trade in Services and Investment Agreements were signed, complementing the earlier goods agreement and further deepening economic ties. These agreements aimed to open up service sectors and protect investments, thereby fostering greater economic integration. Upgrading to Strategic Partnership 2012 On the 20th anniversary of their relations, ASEAN and India elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership. This upgrade reflected the growing importance of their cooperation and aimed to enhance collaboration in key areas such as maritime security, trade, connectivity, and cultural exchange.

Act East Policy 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi rebranded the "Look East Policy" as the "Act East Policy," signifying a shift towards a more proactive and action-oriented approach to engaging with ASEAN and other East Asian countries. This policy emphasized improving physical and digital connectivity, enhancing economic ties, and strengthening strategic and security cooperation. Recent Developments (2020s) Enhanced Connectivity Initiatives: Physical Connectivity and Infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have been prioritized to improve land connectivity, while initiatives to enhance maritime and air connectivity are also underway. Digital Connectivity and Efforts to boost digital infrastructure have been ramped up to facilitate better communication and economic activities between India and ASEAN countries.

Various Dimensions of the Strategic Partnership between ASEAN and India

Maritime Security and Defence Cooperation:

India and ASEAN have increased the frequency and scope of joint naval exercises to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. Regular defence dialogues and capacity-building initiatives have been institutionalized to enhance mutual security and address common threats such as piracy and terrorism.

Cultural and Educational Exchanges:

Various cultural exchange programs, including art exhibitions, cultural festivals, and heritage conservation projects, have been initiated to promote mutual understanding and goodwill. Educational Collaboration Scholarship programs and student exchanges have been expanded, promoting academic cooperation and people-to-people connectivity.

ASEAN-India Plan of Action (POA) 2021-2025 Plan of Action:

The current Plan of Action outlines a comprehensive roadmap for cooperation across political, economic, and socio-cultural pillars. This POA includes specific initiatives to enhance trade and investment, improve connectivity, strengthen security cooperation, and promote cultural exchanges. The cultural ties between ASEAN- India are deep rooted and multifaceted, reflecting centuries of historical India civilizational connections. These cultural affinities form a strong foundation for the ASEAN India strategic partnership and contribute significantly to enhance mutual understanding and socio cultural cooperation. They both

share a rich cultural heritage characterized by ancient trade routes, cultural exchanges, and historical interactions. Hinduism and Buddhism have profoundly influenced the cultural landscape of the ASEAN countries. This influence is evident in the Buddhist temples, arts and sculptures throughout the region.

People to people connectivity

The People-to- people connectivity celebrates the cultural diversity and shared heritage of ASEAN and India. It promotes trust and mutual understanding between the citizens of ASEAN countries and India. Direct interactions through cultural exchanges, educational programs, grassroots initiatives foster a sense of shared regional identity and belonging. Initiatives such as the ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit and projects to improve digital infrastructure are currently on going to enhance regional connectivity.

Economic Integration

The economic relations between ASEAN and India are multidimensional, characterized by growing trade India investment flows, economic integration efforts, and collaborations in various sectors. Bilateral trade between India and ASEAN has witnessed significant growth over the years. Both regions are important trading partners of each other. ASEAN and INDIA Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA): AIFTA implemented in 2010 promotes trade liberalization between ASEAN and India. On the economic front, India is one of the ASEAN's leading trade partner. According to a data by ministry of commerce and industry of Government of India, in 2023, the total bilateral trade between India and ASEAN nations was approximately USD 122.67 billion during the fiscal year 2023-24. India's export to ASEAN countries was around USD 44 billion in 2023. However, imports from ASEAN countries to India were around USD 87.57 billion, resulting in trade deficit of approximately USD 43.57 billion.

Security Cooperation

The Security cooperation has been a cornerstone of the ASEAN-India strategic partnership, reflecting the shared interests in maintaining regional stability, ensuring maritime security, and combating transnational threats. Maritime Security Joint Naval Exercises, these exercises aim to enhance mutual understanding, and collective maritime security capabilities. SIMBEX (Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise): Since 1994, India and Singapore have conducted the annual SIMBEX exercises, focusing on advanced naval combat tactics, maritime security operations, and anti-submarine warfare. Coordinated Patrols: India and Indonesia have conducted coordinated patrols in the Andaman Sea to ensure the security of maritime trade routes and combat piracy. Joint Surveillance: Collaborative efforts in joint surveillance missions help monitor maritime activities, including illegal fishing, trafficking, and terrorism.

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): India is an active participant in the ARF, a key platform for security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region. The ARF addresses issues such as maritime security, non-proliferation, and disaster relief programmes. Through initiatives in maritime security, counter-terrorism, defence collaboration, strategic cooperation, and humanitarian assistance, both regions have enhanced their mutual security and stability. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, ASEAN and India remain committed to deepening their security cooperation, ensuring a peaceful, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific region.

Political Dialogue

The Political dialogue between ASEAN and India plays a vital role in deepening bilateral relations, promoting regional cooperation, and addressing common challenges. Through high-level engagements, discussions on regional and global issues, and bilateral cooperation initiatives, both sides work towards building a resilient and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. As they continue to strengthen their political dialogue, ASEAN and India contribute to peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN-India Summit: The ASEAN-India Summit is an annual gathering of ASEAN leaders and the Prime Minister of India. This summit provides a platform for discussing strategic priorities, reviewing cooperation initiatives,

and setting the agenda for future collaboration. ASEAN-India Ministerial Meetings: Foreign Ministers from ASEAN member states and the Minister of External Affairs of India hold regular meetings to discuss bilateral, regional, and international issues of mutual concern. These meetings serve as important forums for diplomatic dialogue and coordination.

Conclusion

The ASEAN-India strategic partnership represents a significant opportunity for mutual cooperation and shared prosperity. By addressing existing challenges, ASEAN and India can further strengthen their partnership and contribute to a peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. The study concludes that both the parties should work more effectively and efficiently to implement the policies of collaboration agreed between them. They both should take mutual interest and actions to address the challenges of maritime security, terrorism and geopolitical tensions in the Asia Pacific region. Cooperation between India ASEAN member countries is crucial to counter China's growing dominance over the South China Sea region. India's collaboration with ASEAN nations is necessary also for the development of the Northeast region especially to counter insurgency and terrorism among the Northeast states. ASEAN-India relations have come a long way since 1990s this relation has seen a distinct rise in their interaction with mutual efforts to integrate and cooperate with each other in the economic as well as political spheres. Within a decade their partnership has progressed from a sectoral dialogue partnership to a summit level interaction. ASEAN understands the fact that India is an emerging power in Asia and is keen to develop its relations with it which will be beneficial to the countries within ASEAN and to the region as a whole. ASEAN recognizes India's significant strategic capabilities and its potential to be a powerful stabilizing force in the region. Economically, India, with its rapid developing economy, can be a significant market for ASEAN manufactures and consequently, an important source of welfare for the region. India recognizes that the ASEAN grouping comprises nations that have achieved substantial development in the past 20 years. It is advantageous to establish beneficial connections with these countries to benefit from their past experience and current standing.

Overall, ASEAN and India share a strategic partnership that is continuously being strengthened through mutual efforts to address regional challenges and create opportunities for collective growth and stability. There is still need of more efforts and further growth to be made from both the ends in order to achieve the targeted goals and full potential of this engagement is yet to be realised.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Following are some suggestions for future research :

- Academic research in cultural studies and history of relations between India ASEAN countries should be encouraged to foster deeper understanding and appreciation of shared cultural heritage and contemporary cultural dynamics.
- There is a need to improve and expand the ASEAN- India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to address existing barriers to trade. Despite the growth in trade, there are still significant trade barriers and imbalances that need to be addressed. Both should work towards reducing tariffs, non-tariffs barriers and improving market access.
- Both India - ASEAN should put more efforts to enhance maritime co-operation between India ASEAN countries to ensure maritime security and freedom in the IndiaPacific region.
- Joint efforts should be promoted in order to achieve sustainable development, contributing to environmental conservation and sustainable growth in the region. Both should share best technologies for sustainable development focusing on renewable energy, waste management, and sustainable environment.
- Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track the progress of the ASEAN- India Plan of Action and make necessary adjustments.

- Both should focus on creating opportunities in technology and tourism. Encourage research initiatives in technology, artificial intelligence, and other innovative fields to drive mutual economic benefits and technological advancement.
- Joint efforts in green technologies, renewable energy can address common environmental challenges in the Asia- Pacific region.

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