

Special Article

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation

Nazia Hussain*

Situated at the crossroads of India, China, and mainland Southeast Asia, the Mekong subregion has become a theatre for great power competition in an evolving Indo-Pacific regional order. As both regional and major powers – notably the United States, China, Japan and South Korea – strive to engage Mekong countries with their respective cooperative frameworks, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative, involving five Mekong countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam – and India, has managed to stay strategically relevant in a crowded field of 13 Mekong-related intergovernmental cooperation frameworks.¹

To ensure continued relevance of the oldest sub-regional cooperation framework between Mekong countries and an external partner, leaders at the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2023 identified areas for cooperation including tourism, culture, education and connectivity, with an aim to promote socio-economic development of the MGC countries, narrow the development gap among countries, and support the ASEAN community-building process.²

Further streamlining the functioning of the MGC, leaders revisited the lead country mechanism for each area of cooperation and proposed setting up a MGC Business Council with a view to foster

inclusive participation of businesses in MGC-driven projects. While India's trade with MGC countries has increased steadily from US\$1.32 billion in 2000 to US\$33.8 billion in 2022-2023,³ there is potential to expand regional economic integration between the Mekong countries and India. Lao PDR, as Country Coordinator for the MGC and Chair of ASEAN in 2024, could play a role in deepening trade and investment among MGC countries by prioritising the early conclusion of the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), currently set to be concluded by 2025.

Geopolitics of the Mekong

As geopolitics of the Mekong becomes increasingly heated, Mekong countries would want to effectively engage all external partners rather than risk consequences of over-reliance on any one major power. However, many Mekong countries, to varying degrees, face a disproportionate dependence on Chinese investments to address development gaps as Beijing continues to solidify its economic sway on the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to the State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report published by the Singapore-based ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, over 59.9 percent of respondents considered China the most influential

* Associate Research Fellow with the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

economic power in Southeast Asia, even as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have recorded greater concerns about China's economic rise.⁴

Cultivating multi-dimensional ties and accounting for tangible results on the ground is crucial for the MGC going forward as external powers jostle for influence through their respective Mekong cooperation frameworks. India provides an alternative infrastructure development model as well as access to markets, and has been extending several Lines of Credit to Mekong countries worth about US\$1.76 billion for various projects in areas such as hydro power and water resource development, infrastructure development, digital connectivity, rural electrification, irrigation, and installation of transmission lines.⁵

New Delhi's people-centric and results-oriented approach to the Mekong subregion under the Quick Impact Projects (QIP) scheme has directly benefitted the locals in upgrading the physical infrastructure and addressing social issues such as sanitation, water resource management, elementary education and women empowerment. A total of 105 QIP projects have been sanctioned since their inception in 2015-16. Out of 105 QIP projects, 78 projects have been completed and 27 are under implementation.⁶

Furthermore, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with Myanmar in November 2023 to start three QIPs in the fields of solar energy and education.⁷ In light of the internal security situation in Myanmar, continued engagement with the country through sub-regional cooperation frameworks such as MGC and BIMSTEC is imperative for the conclusion of pending connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway – that aims to connect Moreh in Manipur with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar – which has lagged behind the deadline to be operational by December 2019. Myanmar Commerce Minister, Aung Naing Oo, stated that the portion of the highway in Myanmar is likely to be ready by 2026.⁸

Sustained political will from MGC countries owing to their respective geopolitical considerations have widened the scope for engagement as New Delhi and Mekong countries look to deepen security ties – Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia are set to increase joint training and exercises in defence and security with India. In a first, India has transferred a fully operational missile corvette to the Vietnamese Navy to enhance maritime security.⁹ India had

also handed over 12 high-speed guard boats built under a US\$100 million line of credit to Vietnam.¹⁰ Meanwhile, India and Cambodia signed agreements for cooperation between their armies and opened direct communication between their military units. The armies of the two countries subsequently held their first talks in April 2023, where they discussed increasing training cooperation and the sale of military hardware.¹¹

New Delhi will continue to take a proactive approach to the Mekong sub-region as its key foreign policy initiatives – the “Act East” and “neighbourhood first” policies – rely on cultivating deeper ties with the Mekong countries. Drawing attention to India's priorities vis-à-vis its eastern neighbours, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar tweeted: “Much of India's interests and relationships now lie to its East, a testimony of its ties with ASEAN.” From the perspective of domestic interest, development and connectivity of India's frontier north-eastern region requires transnational cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly with its Mekong neighbours which share geographical and cultural proximity to India's northeast. For example, the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project jointly developed by India and Myanmar will enable sea access for India's landlocked northeastern states via the Kaladan river in Myanmar.

Synergies in Mekong Multilateralism

Connectivity remains a priority for the Mekong sub-region and also for broader ASEAN regional integration. Connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway and its eastward extension to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, as well as the impending IMT Motor Vehicles Agreement aimed to facilitate seamless connectivity would benefit from the various sub-regional cooperation frameworks consolidating their overlapping initiatives in the Mekong.

The MGC could consider exploring synergies with the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 (MPAC), BIMSTEC Masterplan for Connectivity aligned with the “Connecting the Connectivities” approach, and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as India and the Mekong states straddle across various sub-regional frameworks involving the Mekong. India is a Development Partner of ACMECS, a BIMSTEC member state, and an ASEAN Dialogue Partner.

Thailand, as a member state of ASEAN, ACMECS and BIMSTEC, is in a unique position to identify lessons from the successful implementation of the MPAC 2025.

Beyond physical infrastructure connectivity, the MGC aims to utilise the opportunities brought about by digital transformation to build soft connectivity infrastructure in the region, such as e-Commerce, e-Government, and digital trade, address the digital gap among the MGC countries and promote digital literacy. It could benefit from the ASEAN experience as the Southeast Asian regional grouping launched, on 3 September 2023, the negotiation of its ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement aimed at creating a sustainable and inclusive digital trade ecosystem.

Prioritising river diplomacy to address climate change and water resource management is particularly crucial as hydrological conditions leading to unpredictable droughts and floods remain pressing challenges for the lower riparian Mekong states and for India along the Ganges basin. The MGC could consider cooperation between the Mekong River Commission – the only international treaty-based organisation in the Mekong with a mandate to promote and coordinate the sustainable use of the water and related resources of the Mekong – and the National Ganga River Basin Authority for improved capacity in early forecasting and disaster management. India has agreed to fund seven water management projects at a cost of approximately US\$350,000 in four Mekong Delta provinces which have long been facing severe saltwater intrusion and the consequent lack of freshwater for irrigation and drinking.¹²

Ahead of its 25th anniversary next year, the MGC should aim to realise the full implementation of MGC Plan of Action 2019-2022, which was extended for another two years till 2024 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is likely to find a willing cooperation partner in ASEAN. With differences between member states putting ASEAN cohesion to the test, the regional grouping seeks to maintain its unity and centrality as the centre of the evolving regional architecture. As competition for influence in the Mekong grows, ASEAN must pay heed to Mekong countries lamenting the neglect of Mekong issues at regional-level forums and elevate Mekong issues on its agenda.

Endnotes

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Augmenting India-Southeast Asia Bonds through Soft Diplomacy

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy* and Saumya Krishna**

Introduction

Indian and Southeast Asian history have created a cultural tapestry that is sometimes disregarded in international affairs. This article explores soft diplomacy and the shared legacy that strengthens India-Southeast Asia ties. The culinary crossroads tells the intricate story of connections of the Maritime spice route, the breathtaking Wayang Kulit puppetry, the glitter of Bollywood cinema, the athleticism of sports, and the modern influence of digital connectivity. As we weave through the rich tapestry of cultural contacts, these threads shape a peaceful and collaborative future between these areas. Culture, commerce, and similar experiences have long bounded India and Southeast Asia. Softer, more nuanced aspects of these links have great enterprising potential, but geopolitical storylines often eclipse them. This article explores how culinary traditions, theatrical expressions, cinematic influences, sporting camaraderie, and the digital revolution can strengthen ties between India and Southeast Asia.

Our voyage begins on the Maritime spice route, filled with spices and tales. India-Southeast Asia culinary exchanges reveal the variety of tastes and centuries-old links. Wayang Kulit puppetry and other theatrical forms continue to tell cultural tales beyond the dinner table. This traditional art form combined with Batik craft enhances the cultural narrative, highlighting theater and fabric technology as distinct soft diplomacy instruments. In the glamorous realm of Bollywood, we examine Indian cinema's impact on Southeast Asia. Bollywood influences narratives and economic partnerships from Singapore's busy streets to Thailand's tranquil countryside. Indian films and TV serials starring Shahrukh Khan transcend cultures across boundaries.

Sport's common language strengthens these areas' relationships. Shared sports love fosters teamwork and progress, from Kabaddi to badminton. Indian

coaches helping Southeast Asian teams win shows the depth of these linkages beyond competition. The digital Unified Payments Interface (UPI) streamlines transactions and improves people-to-people relations. As technology connects people, the paper highlights how India-based UPI spreads throughout Southeast Asia, facilitating business and personal interactions. Cultural harmony underpins India-Southeast Asia natural relations as we journey through these different aspects. Beyond treaties and economic agreements, shared cuisine delights, creative expressions, cinematic encounters, sports achievements, and internet connections create a vital partnership. Each dimension will be examined in the following sections, revealing opportunities for cooperation and understanding between these two culturally rich and linked locations.

Food and Culinary

India and Southeast Asia share common food cultures with ancient roots in the Maritime spice route. This aspect of links and connections is often ignored, but it has a solid potential to be used as an effective soft diplomacy practice for India¹. The cuisines of Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam have Indian elements embedded in them. For example, the national dish of Indonesia, Nasi Tumpeng, has Indian origins, and the South Indian dishes of Appam, Idli, and Puttu have been localized according to the regional needs in the various Southeast Asian states. Furthermore, the usage of curry in Thai cuisine has also been traced back to Buddhist monks and Indian influence. A growing number of Southeast Asians have become familiar with Indian dishes like curries, tea, and Basmati rice. This exchange of cuisine is not one-sided, as the modern-day popularity of Southeast Asian cuisines in India adds up to a reciprocal exchange of cooking and dining techniques and opens new gates

*Founding Coordinator, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies

**Saumya Krishna is a Master's student at Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar.

for India's soft diplomacy in the region. Southeast Asian cuisines have spread throughout India, with Vietnamese and Thai specialties even reaching smaller towns and villages. These days, ASEAN-sourced commodities like tofu, soy, and palm oil are commonly used in Indian cooking. Nowadays, many Indian eateries provide dishes like *Khow Suey*, *Pho Chay*, and *Laksha*.

Theater and Fashion

India and Southeast Asia share linkages in theater and Fashion technologies, a lesser-explored but promising area regarding India's soft diplomacy. The *Wayang Kulit* puppet theater, which dates back to the 1st millennium CE, mentions Ramayana and Mahabharata along with other Hindu references showcased in the shadow puppetry of the *Wayang Kulit*.² These references result from the common cultural heritage and fusion of the two region's theaters. This art form is continued even today in most Southeast Asian nations, including Cambodia, where it is conducted in holy temple rituals. When *Wayang Kulit* is combined with Batik, a customary Indonesian craft that entails the application of wax to cloth followed by dyeing, the resultant is referred to as 'Wayang Batik.' It involves the portrayal of Ramayana characters on the cloth. The design's motif and calligraphy on the cloth further suggest an adaptation of the Indian style. This again highlights the influx of both cultures in this textile and proves to be a very important tool for soft diplomatic influence over Southeast Asia.³ To celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and India and the 150th birth anniversary of Gandhiji, both countries organised a fashion show that collaborated both Khadi and Batik styles and opened a new scope for future collaborations between both nations in the field of fashion, emerging from the common cultural heritage.⁴ These collaborations and *Wayang's* theatrics have tremendous potential to be used as instruments of soft diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is developing as an important vehicle in enhancing India's influence in Southeast Asia by capitalizing on the shared cultural and historical ties between the two regions. It can serve as an effective ways of using soft diplomacy. The region mentioned encompasses Buddhist spiritual sites extending over Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and the North East of India. By fostering

cooperation between governmental and non-governmental groups, the "Buddhist Circuit" has significant potential to establish new infrastructural and cultural connections between India and Southeast Asia, leveraging their shared cultural heritage and digital outreach efforts. The construction of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya opens up new avenues for spiritual and religious tourism, which has immense potential to further India's soft diplomacy along with creating economic opportunities.⁵ The renovation of Ayodhya into a worldwide religious and spiritual tourist attraction can serve as a model for enhancing tourism in India. Given that Ram is a highly revered character in Southeast Asia and that localized versions of the Ramayana have been created throughout the area, the temple and Ayodhya can potentially foster people-to-people relations between the two regions.⁶

Film and Pop Culture

India's film industry opens new gates of soft diplomacy and influence across Southeast Asia in various forms. This is not limited to the film industry but also involves TV serials and other pop culture influences. Countries like Singapore and Thailand have become favorable destinations for the shooting of Indian films over the last decade, with popular films like *Krrish 3* being shot with the collaboration between both regions. The creation of Indian films in Southeast Asia showcases the expanding economic collaborations between the two areas. The sector has significant potential to connect people, influence the fields of diaspora, and represent Indian narratives.⁷ Based on the 2022 Lowy Polls, around 14% of Indonesians were interested in Bollywood and Indian Pop culture. These pop influences can be seen in some cities in the form of films like *Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai* and local recreations of popular songs like '*Chaiyya Chaiyya*.' A further addition to this narrative can be seen with the popularity of Indian TV Soaps of Ramayana and Mahabharata and other common cultural themes of Buddhism and Shiva. The influence of Bollywood actors, such as Shahrukh Khan, over the region can also be used to leverage soft diplomatic influence over the area.⁸ Shahrukh Khan is often mentioned as responsible for popularizing the pop culture of India in the region and has been awarded a knighthood in Malaysia. His influence can be seen in naming a Royal Bengal tiger cub after him in Indonesia and filming his film *Don 2* in Malaysia. Such celebrities can generate a huge influence in the

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Myanmar Envoy Praises India's Assistance in Developmental & Infra Projects

Myanmar envoy to India Ambassador Moe Kyaw Aung has said the development and technical cooperation has played an important role in overall bilateral relationship between Myanmar and India. This bilateral cooperation ranges from the establishment of major connectivity infrastructure to significant initiatives aimed at enhancing capacity building and human resource development in 4 imperative areas of nation building such as agricultural research, education, information technology, skill development, and so on.

"Among others, I wish to highlight some significant cooperation between Myanmar and India. The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTP) is the most significant project undertaken by India in Myanmar. The project includes a waterway component of 158 km on Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa and a road component of 109 km from Paletwa to Zorinpui on the Myanmar-India border," said Myanmar envoy.

Ambassador said this in his address at the diamond jubilee commemoration of 75th Anniversary of India-Myanmar diplomatic relations event held at the embassy premises recently. Meenakshi Lekhi, Minister of State for External Affairs and Culture was also present. Ambassadors of Russia, Thailand, Mongolia and head of missions of various countries and Indian bureaucrats were also present on the occasion. "I am happy to reiterate that Sittwe-Kaladan Port were jointly inaugurated by Admiral Tin Aung San, then Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Transport and Communications and Sarbananda Sonowal, Minister for the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways of India on 9 May 2023."

While talking about the ongoing 1400-km long India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway which connects Manipur and Mae Sot via Myanmar, he said that it was the other major connectivity project that India was involved in. He said that 70 percent of the overall project has been completed. Once completed all, connectivity between India and Southeast Asian region will be established, contributing to the development of not only the concerned countries but also the whole region.

All praise for India, Ambassador Moe Kyaw Aung said, "I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep appreciation to India for continuing development assistance, projects and cooperation with Myanmar. I also would like to express our sincere thanks to the Government of India for providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) materials for the people of Myanmar affected by Cyclone Mocha under the operation Karuna in May."

Myanmar shares a long land border of over 1600 km with India in four north-eastern states of India viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. It also shares a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. The geographical proximity of the two countries has also helped develop and sustain cordial relations and facilitated people-to-people contact. India-Myanmar relations are rooted in shared historical, ethnic, cultural and religious ties, he added.

"Given Buddhist heritage, Myanmar and India share close cultural ties and a sense of deep kinship. We are bound by geography proximity, religious, cultural and people to people linkages that go back to antiquity. Myanmar's affinity for Indian cuisine, Bollywood cinema, and music is a testament to our close cultural and geographical proximity. Myanmar and India enjoy good neighbourliness and time-tested friendly relations. Strong people-to-people contacts also reflect the linkages and interactions between the two friendly countries," said Ambassador Moe Kyaw Aung.

The Diamond Jubilee celebrations event commemorating 75 years of India-Myanmar relations was organized by the embassy with the support of Global Trade & Technology Council (India), India International Entrepreneur Federation and Myanmar, and India Goodwill and Development Association on December 23. Previously this year, the India Goodwill Diplomatic Relationship event was held in National Theatre on MyomaKyaung Street, Dagon Township on 14th May.

Excerpted from asiancommunitynews.com 29 December 2023
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ASEAN Urges India to Enhance Bilateral Market Access

ASEAN has invited India to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to enhance mutual market access among partners. Speaking to a delegation of Indian media, ASEAN Secretary General Kao Kim Hourn said an inclusive, open and rules-based trade pact would benefit all partners. He said that joining the RCEP is beneficial for India as it will provide it better market access and also for other countries as trade deals are reciprocal.

It may be recalled that India had withdrawn from the RCEP in 2019, emphasising that the decision was taken in the interest of the local industry and the country. An official statement then said that the structure of the pact was not in India's interest. The RCEP is a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA) involving ASEAN member countries and five other nations - Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. It is one of the largest FTAs globally, representing around 30 per cent of the global GDP. Emphasizing the importance of improved air connectivity between India and ASEAN nations, Kao Kim Hourn expressed the need for an aviation agreement

to facilitate direct flights between the two sides. He highlighted the tourism sector's recovery post-COVID-19 and cited the increasing number of Indian tourists visiting Bali, a popular destination in Indonesia. The ASEAN Secretary General acknowledged the existing collaboration between India and ASEAN across various sectors and called for deeper cooperation in other areas. He mentioned that the free trade agreement between India and ASEAN is currently under review. He highlighted the huge trade and investment potential of India-ASEAN relations while emphasizing the population size of the two countries. Referring to the huge market size, he pointed out that while India has 1.4 billion people, the ASEAN region has 680 million people. Bilateral trade between India and ASEAN is estimated to be \$131.5 billion in the fiscal year 2022-2023. In the current fiscal year, trade with ASEAN accounted for 11.3 per cent of India's total global trade.

Excerpted from the tvbrics, 23 November 2023
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India's Defence and Security Ties with Thailand Flourish Since 2014

The India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that India's defence and security relationship with Thailand has grown after 2014. He noted that the Thailand government has also shown the same sentiment.

While addressing the Indian diaspora in Thailand, the Minister noted that India had a look East policy while Thailand had a look-west policy. He highlighted the changes that took place in terms of India-Thailand ties after Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014.

While interacting with the Indian community, Jaishankar said, "We engage with the countries of the ASEAN. So, for us, this is not just a relationship. It is not even a relationship which began, as I said, in 1947, in the modern form. It is, of course,

a relationship which goes back in history, but it is a relationship that is associated with reform and change in India. So, this period that we are talking about, especially the last 25 years, this is a time when this relationship has grown very much."

If you look after 2014, our connectivity has grown, our defence and security relationship has grown, our economic engagement has grown, our community has grown, and the same sentiment we have also seen from the Thai government," he added. He said that the trade between India and Thailand is close to USD 18 billion annually and it was the highest in the last year.

Excerpted from the Mint, July 16, 2023
© Mint

5th India-Vietnam Joint Trade Sub-Commission Meeting in New Delhi

The 5th meeting of India-Vietnam Joint Trade Sub-Commission (JTSC) was held in New Delhi, after a gap of more than four years since 4th JTSC meeting held in January 2019. The meeting was co-chaired by the Additional Secretary, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Shri Rajesh Agrawal from the Indian side and Deputy Minister, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ms. Phan Thi Thang from the Vietnam side.

Vietnam is the 23rd largest global trade partner of India and the 5th largest among ASEAN countries with bilateral trade of USD 14.70 Bn during 2022-23. Vietnam accounts for 11.2 per cent of India's total trade with ASEAN. Vietnam is an important destination for India's iron and steel and agricultural and animal products mainly meat products, animal fodder, cereals and marine products.

Both sides reviewed the progress on bilateral trade and economic cooperation and discussed ways to unlock the vast untapped potential in bilateral trade to enable the business communities from the two sides to benefit from the partnership of two of the fastest growing economies. Both sides identified potential sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, textiles, footwear, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, fertilizers, machinery and equipment, consumer products,

energy and automobile industry, for expanding trade cooperation and agreed to work together to resolve market access issues and technical barriers faced by the exporters through regular and sustained bilateral discussions.

The Indian side raised the issues of pending registration of Indian fishery and meat establishments for export, restricted market access in public procurement of drugs for Indian pharmaceutical companies and high anti-dumping duties imposed on Indian polyester filament yarn products and sorbitol. They also highlighted the potential in service sector cooperation and suggested cooperation in IT, financial services, education sector, tourism, healthcare, tele-medicine, medical tourism and start-up ecosystem. Further, suggested Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) on professional services, internationalization of RuPay card, QR based payment system, and domestic currency trade settlement. Both sides discussed logistics challenges affecting bilateral trade and agreed to continue efforts for exploring direct shipping services, collaboration in freight movement and improving air connectivity.

Excerpted from the PIB, 8 August, 2023

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Visit of External Affairs Minister to Vietnam and Singapore

External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr. S. Jaishankar paid an official visit to Singapore from 18-21 October, 2023. He had several bilateral engagements with the leadership and senior Ministers of the Cabinet. EAM called on H.E. Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, President of Singapore and congratulated him on his recent election victory. EAM also paid a call on H.E. Mr. Lawrence Wong, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. Both exchanged views on deepening engagement in the identified pillars of our cooperation viz. Fintech, Digitalization, Green economy, Skills development and Food security. EAM also met H.E. Mr. Teo Chee Hean, Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security. EAM had a comprehensive discussion with H.E. Mr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister of Foreign Affairs on bilateral and global issues of mutual

interest. He also met H.E. Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence. During their talks, both acknowledged the close bilateral defence engagement and committed to take it forward. EAM had a productive meeting with H.E. Mr. Gan Kim Yong, Minister of Trade & Industry, to discuss new domains of cooperation. He also met H.E. Mr. K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law to exchange views on strengthening our bilateral partnership.

The visit presented an opportunity to further deepen the Strategic Partnership between India and Singapore. EAM was accompanied by Secretary (East) and other senior officials from the Ministry.

Excerpted from MEA, India, October 21, 2023

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India Participates in 20th ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' Meeting

Shri Rajesh Agrawal, Additional Secretary, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry represented India in the 20th ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' meeting held on 21st August 2023 in Semarang, Indonesia and co-chaired the meeting with Dr. Zulkifli Hasan, Minister of Trade, Indonesia. The Economic Ministers or their representatives from all the 10 ASEAN countries viz. Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam participated in the meeting. Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste also joined the Meeting as an observer.

The Ministers reviewed the bilateral trade and investment relations between India and ASEAN and underscored their commitment to strengthen and enhance the economic partnership between India and ASEAN to ensure that the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership delivers meaningful benefits for both sides, particularly in the post-pandemic era. India and ASEAN registered a bilateral trade of USD 131.5 billion in 2022-23. The trade with ASEAN accounted for 11.3 per cent of India's global trade in 2022-23.

The Ministers also interacted with the ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC) and took note of the activities undertaken by AIBC in 2023, including the 5th ASEAN-India Business Summit held on 6th March 2023 in Kuala Lumpur. The Ministers noted the Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) flagged by the businesses and appreciated the growing exchanges between the stakeholders from both sides.

The Ministers exchanged views on the regional and global challenges, such as the multidimensional

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, heightened volatility in the global financial market, inflationary pressures, and geopolitical tensions. Both sides identified resilient supply chains, food security, energy security, health and financial stability as priority areas of cooperation.

The main agenda of this year's meeting was the timely review of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) which was signed in 2009. The Economic Ministers' meeting was preceded by AITIGA Joint Committee meeting, which deliberated the roadmap for the review and finalised the Term of Reference and the Work Plan of the AITIGA Review Negotiations. After constructive discussions, the Ministers endorsed the above review documents, which would pave way for the formal commencement of negotiations with defined modalities. The review of the AITIGA was a long-standing demand of Indian businesses and the early commencement of the review would help in making the FTA trade facilitative and mutually beneficial. The Ministers agreed to follow a quarterly schedule of negotiations and conclude the review in 2025. The review of AITIGA is expected to enhance and diversify trade while addressing the current asymmetry in the bilateral trade. The decision for review of AITIGA will now be placed in the forthcoming India-ASEAN Leaders' Summit scheduled in early September for further guidance.

Excerpted from the PIB, 21 August 2023

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India announces decision to establish an Indian Embassy in Timor Leste

At the ASEAN-India Summit in Jakarta on 7 September 2023, Prime Minister announced a decision to establish an Indian Embassy in Dili, Timor-Leste. The decision is a reflection of the importance India attaches to ASEAN, and its relations with Timor Leste.

Timor Leste joined ASEAN in 2022 as an Observer, before becoming its full Member.

Excerpted from MEA, India , September 07, 2023

MEA, India

Ramayana mural at Wat Raja Bo under conservation

The unique hand-painted mural at Siem Reap city's Wat Raja Bo pagoda has been placed under preservation, with a ceremony of recognition held on Friday. The event was presided over by Minister of Culture and Fine Arts Phoeurng Sackona, Ambassador of India to Cambodia Dr Devyani Khobragade and Director-General of the Apsara National Authority Hang Peou.

Wat Raja Bo holds great historical and cultural significance for both India and Cambodia as it is linked to the ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana.

The Ramayana is a Sanskrit epic from ancient India, one of the two important epics of Hinduism known as the Itihasas the other being the Mahabharata, and has traversed borders and found its place in the hearts of people across the globe.

Wat Raja Bo pagoda is one of the oldest pagodas in Siem Reap, Cambodia, and has a number of Ramayana mural paintings on its walls that describe the famous ancient story of Rama and Sita. However, over time, environmental factors and human activities have caused the Ramayana murals to deteriorate.

The Government of India, in collaboration with the Government of Cambodia, took this project as a priority. The financial agreement for the conservation of mural paintings was signed on November 12 last year during the visit of India's Vice-President, Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar.

Addressing the gathering, Sackona officially announced the commencement of the Indian Government-funded Mural Painting Conservation and Restoration Project at Raja Bo Pagoda.

"Both countries aspire to breathe new life into Raja Wat Bo, this conservation will preserve the historical significance of Ramayana and will also promote cultural understanding between our nations as Ramayana has connected India and Cambodia since ancient times," she said.

Additionally, on the occasion, an MoU on Training and Workshop on Museum Management and Textiles Conservation at Mekong Ganga Asian Traditional Textile Museum" was also signed.

Ambassador Khobragade said that the conservation of Wat Raja Bo not only preserves the architectural value of the temple complex but also celebrates the shared heritage and enduring influence of the Ramayana on both Indian and Cambodian cultures.

"The Government of India looks forward to collaborating closely with the Government of Cambodia and other stakeholders involved in this project," she said.

"Together, we aspire to breathe new life into Wat Raja Bo, preserving its historical significance and promoting cultural understanding between our nations."

The Ambassador mentioned the Government of India's initiative in Southeast Asia on the Ramayana circuit, aims to encourage religious and other cultural tourism by connecting destinations associated with the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana.

Taing Rinith / Khmer Times, November 6, 2023

@Khmer Times

India & LAO PDR sign MOUs for Five Quick Impact Projects

Five Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed between India & LAO PDR for the implementation of five Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) in the fields of education, health, water facility and IT. The MOUs were signed during the 3rd round of Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) held between India and Lao PDR in Vientiane. Phoxay Khaykhamphithoune, Deputy Foreign Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR led their side and Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs led the Indian side, respectively.

India & LAO PDR share profound religious,

cultural, and people-to-people connections stretching far back into history. The countries also share excellent political relations, which is why Lao PDR has been supportive of regional & international concerns about India, including our claim of permanent membership of the UNSC.

After conducting a comprehensive review of the entire spectrum of bilateral relations, both sides discussed ways to bolster cooperation in various domains, including agriculture, health, education, defence, heritage conservation, development partnership, economic and trade ties. Moreover,

they also exchanged their perspectives on regional & global issues of shared interest while reaffirming their commitment to collaboration within multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and Mekong Ganga Cooperation.

The Indian side expressed gratitude for the cooperation provided by LAO PDR in its role as the Country Coordinator for Mekong Ganga Cooperation. Additionally, the Indian side reiterated its unwavering support for LAO PDR as the country prepares to assume the Chairmanship of ASEAN in the upcoming year.

Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs paid a courtesy call to Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lao, PDR Saleumxay Kommasith.

India's historical and cultural links with the Lao PDR have strengthened with time as both countries share convergent views on many issues of mutual interest in international forums.

India is committed to continuing its development partnership with Lao PDR, a valued partner in India's extended neighborhood. The next round of Foreign Office Consultations will be held in New Delhi.

Excerpted from DD News, July 2023

© DD News

Prime Minister's participation in the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit

Prime Minister attended the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Jakarta on 7 September 2023.

At the ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister held extensive discussions with ASEAN partners on further strengthening of ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and charting its future course. Prime Minister reaffirmed ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific and highlighted the synergies between India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). He also emphasized the need to complete the review of ASEAN-India FTA (AITIGA) in a time bound manner.

Prime Minister presented a 12-point proposal for strengthening India - ASEAN cooperation covering connectivity, digital transformation, trade and economic engagement, addressing contemporary challenges, people-to-people contacts and deepening strategic engagement, as follows:

- Establishing multi-modal connectivity and economic corridor that links South-East Asia-India-West Asia-Europe
- Offered to share India's Digital Public Infrastructure Stack with ASEAN partners
- Announced ASEAN-India fund for Digital Future focusing on cooperation in digital transformation and financial connectivity
- Announced renewal of support to Economic and Research Institute of ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) to act as knowledge partner for enhancing our engagement.

- Called for collectively raising issues being faced by Global South in multilateral fora
- Invited ASEAN countries to join Global Centre for Traditional Medicine being established by WHO in India
- Called for working together on Mission LiFE
- Offered to share India's experience in providing affordable and quality medicines to people through Jan-Aushadhi Kendras
- Called for collective fight against terrorism, terror financing and cyber-disinformation
- Invited ASEAN countries to join Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure
- Called for cooperation in disaster management
- Called for enhanced cooperation on maritime safety, security and domain awareness

Two Joint Statements, one on Maritime Cooperation, and the other on Food Security were adopted. In addition to India and ASEAN Leaders, Timor-Leste participated in the Summit as Observer. At the 18th East Asia Summit, Prime Minister reiterated the importance of EAS mechanism and reaffirmed our support to further strengthening it. Prime Minister underlined India's support for ASEAN centrality and called for ensuring a free, open and rules based Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister highlighted synergies of visions for Indo-Pacific between India and ASEAN, and underscored that ASEAN is the focal point of Quad's vision.

Excerpted from MEA, India, September 07, 2023

© MEA, India

India-Cambodia Relations: Diversifying Diplomacy in An Era of Flux

Amid the world's current geopolitical flux, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US-China rivalry, states find it difficult to create strategic space for themselves. However, India and Cambodia are working within these constraints and operationalizing independent strategies, particularly by strengthening bilateral relations. This diversification strategy is an attempt to manoeuvre as geopolitical tensions rise. This relationship is based on converging interests to strengthen bilateral ties and extend cooperation in Southeast Asia, ensuring stability and security.

Converging Foreign Policy Templates: Independence and Multi-Engagement

Although both countries' strategic aims differ, the approach to new partnerships is the same—that is, through multi-engagement. Cambodia has adopted a diplomatic strategy to develop new strategic relations, particularly with countries of the Global South and middle powers. Similarly, India's multi-engagement strategy aims to strengthen relations with states in its extended neighborhood. Due to its strategic location and history, Cambodia shares close bonds with India. Meanwhile, India fits in Cambodia's strategic equation to expand its engagement beyond the region.

India has presented itself as the voice of the Global South, which has echoed in many countries, including Cambodia. Before G20 planning started, India invited Cambodia to the Voice of Global South summit, exhibiting a commitment to South-South cooperation. This showed New Delhi's inclusive approach emphasizing multilateralism on issues of interest for developing countries, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both countries' independent foreign policies go against what many see as a necessary choice between the United States and China. Even as a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), India has not shied away from pursuing relations with Russia, supporting BRICS expansion, and maintaining membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, against the United States' preference. Cambodia, which is seen as having a close relationship with China,

has condemned actions by Russia—China's "no limits" partner—and is eager to improve ties with the United States. Of note: India and Cambodia also do not want to create alliances, the former through its strategic culture and the latter via its constitution.

Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation

The partnership between India and Cambodia dates back a millennium. But the two countries continue to work to further build ties, cooperating in the defense, trade, health, and technology sectors. During the Cambodian king's visit to India this year, the Indian President expressed her privilege in partnering with Cambodia on human resource, socio-economic, and capacity-building projects in agriculture and irrigation. During the pandemic, India supplied Cambodia with the first tranche in 2021, and subsequently, Cambodia also became the first country to receive vaccines under the Quad Vaccine Partnership initiative. This year, defense relations and cooperation touched a new milestone with the first visit to India by the commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, Hun Manet, now the prime minister. India has also supported Cambodia in demining projects with aid and equipment. People-to-people is another domain where both governments cooperate to boost the tourism sector, and direct flights are expected to start in 2024. In education, India is trying to attract Cambodian students across premier institutions, particularly in technical fields like engineering and medicine. For education, scholarships are provided by the government of India under the CLMV program and ICCR Scholarships. This partnership has been beneficial particularly in the technical field, where India has shared its knowledge and skills, helping around 2,600 Cambodians since 1981, working under several ministries through programs like Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Beyond Bilateral Partnership

Strengthening relations with Cambodia is an attempt by New Delhi to step up its diplomatic outreach and show its presence in Southeast Asia. Conducting its first maritime exercise with ASEAN members

was a step in this direction, showing its strategic commitment to the region. This also aligns with the strategic thinking in Phnom Penh on cultivating cooperation with other countries like the United States, India, and the European Union in its efforts to reduce dependence on Beijing. This was reiterated during PM Hun Manet's UN General Assembly visit, where he met with the Indian external affairs minister and discussed vital developmental issues and future trajectories.

Even though Cambodia expects to strengthen its ties with the West, it will not be easy due to its political culture and worldview. Meanwhile, a partnership with India, a growing economic and technological

powerhouse, will help its own development goals. This aligns with the ISEAS Institute survey, which puts India in third place as the strategic partner for ASEAN. It will also help get closer to Western powers through groupings like Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

As both countries want to ensure stability and security essential for their development, forging closer relations will be the first step, followed by expanding cooperation beyond their comfort zone.

Excerpted from pacNet Commentaries, authored by Abhishek Sharma, November 15, 2023.

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India and Vietnam to Foster Deeper Bilateral Economic Ties

H.E. Sandeep Arya, Ambassador of India to Vietnam, shares his thoughts with VET on the trade and investment opportunities between India and Vietnam and the future of their bilateral economic ties.

Given the recent visit to Vietnam by a business delegation from the Indian Electrical and Electronics Manufacturers Association (IEEMA), what is your assessment of Vietnam's potential in manufacturing electrical and electronics equipment?

I have observed over recent years that Vietnam possesses a robust industrial base and a thriving economy, coupled with a rapidly-expanding market. Regarding investment opportunities, the Vietnamese Government has effectively concentrated on establishing a favorable environment for foreign investors to enter and invest in the country. Numerous Indian investors have been present here for quite a few years, and they are all very happy. Therefore, my congratulations and commendations go to Vietnam for achieving great success in attracting investment and fostering the industrialization of the country through investment routes and exports in a very substantive, rapid, and impressive manner.

What factors are of interest to Indian businesses operating in the electrical and electronics sector

when considering the investment environment in the Vietnamese market?

Over the years, India has developed a robust industrial sector, showcasing strengths in various domains where we possess significant national capabilities. Similarly, Vietnam has also seen very strong achievements in the field of electrical and electronic goods. So, I would like to see business-to-business cooperation in terms of three or four components.

One obvious area is investment opportunities for Indian manufacturers of electrical goods of various kinds. There is a large presence today of power manufacturers in electrical power, including power generation from coal power plants, gas power plants, and solar, renewable, and wind plants, etc.

The second component is power transmission, including activities such as laying transmission lines. Consequently, there is a robust presence of companies engaged in power production and project execution.

The third component is power distribution. Many small components come into play, starting from transformers to motors to various equipment, cables, and more. So, in all three areas, we have lots of substrates, and many companies have a

significant presence in India. They are also looking for investment opportunities.

But I believe that, apart from investment, there are lots of opportunities for trade in many of these electrical and electronic items between the two countries. There are also a lot of opportunities in technological exchange, because I think Vietnam has strengths and we have strengths, and I think it's good for companies to talk to each other to try to see whether they can either share the knowledge that they have or share various techniques that they have developed for power plants, power distribution, or power transmission lines. So I think the fourth component is basically business-to-business partnerships. These can be joint ventures trying to work together or trying to cooperate in executing big projects in Vietnam and in India.

As Vietnam is trying to move towards a green economy, how does India plan to support that process?

India has witnessed remarkable progress, particularly in the solar power sector, over the last five to seven years. Installed capacity has soared to around 150,000 MW for solar and wind power plants. The opportunities in Vietnam are vast, especially with its ambitious plans outlined in the National Power Development Plan VIII (PDP8). The focus of upcoming initiatives is expected to be on wind power, solar power, and the establishment of gas-based power plants.

I believe there are significant opportunities once again, particularly in the upcoming large-scale transmission projects in Vietnam. Several robust Indian companies are poised to participate in these projects. They may explore various models, including direct investment, business-to-business partnerships, and potential joint ventures to effectively undertake and execute these projects. These avenues present noteworthy opportunities for collaboration and growth.

Can you tell us about the prospects for trade and investment cooperation between the two countries in the years to come, and especially in 2024?

Bilateral trade volumes between India and Vietnam, according to official data, stand at \$15 billion. This is an area where we are putting in significant effort. Direct investment stands at approximately \$1 to \$2 billion between the two countries. It's worth noting that some Indian investments go through

third countries, so the actual investment may be higher than that reflected in the numbers. Our focus is on fostering more interaction between businesses in both countries. When businesses engage with each other, the discussions go beyond simple trade or investment; they involve sharing, forming partnerships, collaborating on projects, and even exploring opportunities in a third country.

We are actively engaged at the government-to-government level, putting significant effort into various initiatives. In August, a meeting took place between the industry and trade ministries in both countries, resulting in fruitful discussions and progress in some areas, though more work remains in others. Additionally, there was a meeting in October for the joint commission between the two countries on economic, trade, and scientific cooperation, where it was recognized that more efforts are needed. Another crucial aspect is the ongoing review of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, initiated earlier this year and scheduled for completion in 2025.

These two years are crucial for establishing a new framework at the government-to-government level. This framework will encompass tariff arrangements, technical standards, Rules of Origin, and the facilitation of the movement of goods and trade. Concurrently, there are three ongoing levels of government-to-government processes. Simultaneously, there are plans to facilitate a greater movement of business delegations in both directions at the business-to-business level.

We are planning a major exhibition of Indian products sometime next year. We are also planning to take more Vietnamese companies to visit India and attend exhibitions, fostering more extensive business engagement between the two countries. So, we have plans at both the government-to-government and business-to-business levels, and these efforts complement each other. Positive developments at the government level encourage businesses, and as businesses thrive, the interaction between governments also intensifies. This synergy is our plan for 2024.

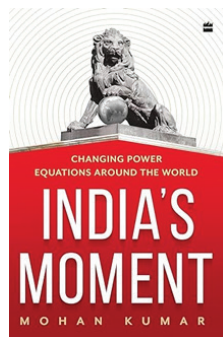
Excerpted from *Vet Exclusive*, by Linh Tong - Giang Hoang, 7 December 2023.

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Important Reading

India's Moment: Changing Power Equations around the World

by Mohan Kumar
HarperCollins India, 2023
ISBN-10 : 935699952X
ISBN-13 : 978-9356999527



The idea of how India negotiates with the world is at the heart of this book. Career diplomat Mohan Kumar represented India at multiple international fora over a career spanning three and a half decades.

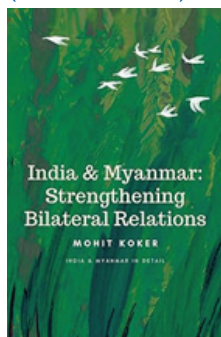
During this time, he would invariably be told that Indian negotiators were among the best in the business. And yet, several of his interlocutors would ask, in the same breath, why India was such a tough customer when it came to multilateral negotiations. Indeed, it was hard to escape the view, held even by India's friends, that the country was somehow more of a naysayer than a partner in key international parleys.

This book, then, is a sincere attempt to set the record straight. At one level, India is not very different from other countries inasmuch as it seeks to protect where necessary, and advance where possible, its national interest. There are several unique aspects about India and the way it approaches multilateral negotiations with the world. This book dwells on some of those fundamental factors and traces how India's positions have evolved over time.

A central contention of this book is that India has moved, slowly but surely, from being an alleged naysayer to becoming a putative partner for the world in key multilateral negotiations. More broadly, this reflects India's growing political, economic and strategic clout in the world today. It is only when this transformation is fuller and more substantial that India will be able to fulfil its manifest destiny of becoming a leading power, capable of shaping global rules.

India and Myanmar: Strengthening Bilateral Relations

by Mohit Koker
ASIN : B0C9TZB8ZF
(Kindle Edition)



This book has examined the multifaceted relationship between India and Myanmar, delving into various aspects of their historical, political, economic, and cultural ties. Throughout the

chapters, we have explored the shared history, geographic proximity, and common challenges faced by both nations, as well as the potential for collaboration and growth.

Emerging Dynamics in Contemporary India-Malaysia Relations

by Sarjit S Gill, Ravichandran Moorthy, Suseela Devi Chandran and Others (Editor, Contributor)
Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023

ISBN-10 : 1666936987
ISBN-13 : 978-1666936988

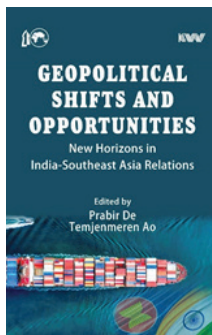


This edited volume examines the many facets of contemporary Malaysia-India bilateral relations. The contributors provide analysis from the perspectives of trade and economic

relations, people-to-people connections, tourism, security cooperation, ethnic identities, comparative religiosity, and revisiting the historical links between these countries.

Geopolitical Shifts and Opportunities: New Horizons in India-Southeast Asia Relations

by Prof Prabir De and Temjenmeren Ao (Editors) | 18 December 2023
ICWA, KW Publishers
ISBN-13-978-9394915800



India and Southeast Asian countries share a strong civilisational connect. India's relationship with Southeast Asia is continued to be shaped by the changing geo-political environment. India's engagement with the Southeast Asia

is deeply rooted in culture, commerce and connectivity. Both highly value friendship and mutual trust. The relationship between them has truly become multidimensional and has scored an impressive performance over time at bilateral and regional levels. This book sheds light on changing profile of the India-Southeast Asia relations and underlines the desire of the countries to diversify and further strengthen the relations in challenging times. This book is an important companion for policy makers, academia, students of international relations and economics, diplomats and the general readership as well.

ASEAN and Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific

Sueo Sudo (Editor), Chosein Yamahata (Editor), Springer
ISBN 9789819940202 (electronic bk.)
2023, Singapore

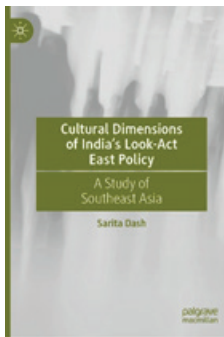


The volume provides valuable insights into the Indo-Pacific region's complex dynamics, including cooperation and collaboration among regional actors for long-term stability

and prosperity. The interdisciplinary composition of the book invites readers from various backgrounds to engage with constructive debates on general perception, contextual discussion, and the highlights of engaged research from local and international perspectives.

Cultural Dimensions of India's Look-Act East Policy: A Study of Southeast Asia

by Sarita Dash (Author), Palgrave Macmillan
E ISBN- 9789811935299
September 9, 2023



Tracing the cultural interactions between South and Southeast Asia since prehistoric times, the book critically scrutinizes the current cultural diplomacy initiatives of India's Look-Act

East Policy. Reminding the need to look at culture as a two-way process and the need to re-define the understanding of culture in its Space Age setting, the author emphasizes on India realising its unique multicultural potentiality to broaden the outlook and parameters of cultural diplomacy to suit the unfolding World Order in the region. The nature and composition of the demography of Southeast Asia and its Indian diaspora calls for a balanced approach in covering the land and maritime sectors, the book further observes. Adopting a peoples-centric approach, the author argues for cultural interactions to go beyond the union government and its agencies and advocates for the role of state governments, non-governmental actors, and other community initiatives as well.

Continued from page..5

region. Apart from these, Southeast Asia is a popular destination for award shows in Indian cinema and television. Again, this has immense potential to be used as a form of people-to-people connection and promote tourism. These awards ceremonies symbolize the reciprocal alliance between India and Southeast Asia and have good potential to be used as a tool for mutual benefits and soft power diplomacy.

Sports

India and Southeast Asia share sporting traditions, which can be seen through the similarities in the games of Kabaddi and Theechub of Thailand. The South East Asian teams often come for training and coaching in India for the sport. Indian coaches are often appointed to coach the Indonesian teams. For instance, Chhaju Ram Goyat, a former coach at the Bhim Stadium in Bhiwani, is the current coach of the Indonesian team.⁹ The contribution of Indonesian coaches to the success of Indian badminton adds another layer to the exchange and interaction between both nations and contributes to the nation's glory. The combined efforts of Indian and Indonesian coaches helped PV Sindhu earn the 2017 silver medal at the BWF World Championships in Glasgow. Further, Mulyo Handoyo's role as the National Center for Excellence coach and in shaping the top players' games also highlights his indirect role in giving glory to India. Furthermore, the appointment of Agus Dwi Santoso as the coach of both Sindhu and Kidambi Srikanth adds to the role of Indonesian coaches in bringing glory to India. The Indonesian coaches such as Wiempie Mahardi played a crucial role in the Thomas Cup victory of India in 2022. The expansion of cricket to Southeast Asia is also one of the areas with the potential for collaboration and support between the regions of India and South East Asia¹⁰. The inclusion of cricket in the South East Asian Games last year and in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, combined with the market and brand reach of cricket, opens a bright corridor for future people-to-people connections and collaborations.

Digital Payment Networking

Unified Payments Interface (UPI), India's dominant digital payments mechanism with a market share of over 60 percent, has recently gained traction in other nations. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced in September 2021 its collaboration with the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) to establish a connection between the UPI and PayNow, the rapid payment systems of the two countries. In September 2021, NIPL disclosed a collaboration with Liquid Group, a digital payment supplier operating across borders.¹¹ This agreement aims to facilitate the acceptance of UPI QR-based payments in 10 countries spanning North

Continued on page..17

and Southeast Asia. Liquid Group consolidates a vast merchant acquiring partner network throughout ten nations, including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. In August 2021, NIPL partnered with Merchantrade Asia to allow Merchantrade and its network to facilitate money transfers using UPI IDs to recipient banks in India. This allows individuals to engage and communicate more openly, influencing the relationships between people in the Indian and Southeast Asian areas.¹² These technologies will facilitate commercial operations and streamline transactions, ultimately influencing the interactions between residents in both areas.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia and India have a long history of rich culture. As a nation we respect our cultural heritage and history, but we also observe modifications, additions, and the infusion of new elements into our relationships. The region's current dynamics and the world society's quick evolution bring with them both new possibilities and apprehensions. An external interface's softer aspects can be an invaluable diplomatic tool for nations. In addition to fostering cooperation and interest convergence in the pursuit of common solutions, a sound strategy may fortify the fusion of our shared cultural heritage.

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Statistical Indicators

Socio and Macro Indicators of MGC Countries, 2022						
	India	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
Population	1417.17	16.76	7.52	54.17	71.69	98.18
GDP (current billion US\$)	3417	30	15	62	495	409
GDP, PPP (current billion US\$)	11905	90	71	272	1483	1322
GDP per capita (current US\$)	2411	1760	2054	1149	6910	4164
GDP growth (annual %)	7.2	5.2	2.7	4.0	2.6	8.0
Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP)	16.73	22.23	14.87	22.33	8.81	11.88
Industry (including construction), value added (% of GDP)	25.66	37.90	34.11	38.25	35.00	38.26
Services, value added (% of GDP)	48.44	33.85	40.28	39.42	56.19	41.34
Trade (% of GDP)	49.23	123.19	..	..	133.88	185.73
Gross fixed capital formation (% of GDP)	29.16	22.01	..	..	23.40	31.69
Gross savings (% of GDP)	29.95	36.77	..	..	26.61	32.57
Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)	6.70	5.34	22.96	..	6.08	3.16
Annual freshwater withdrawals, total (billion cubic meters)#	647.50	2.18	7.35	33.23	57.31	81.86
Water productivity, total (constant 2015 US\$ GDP per cubic meter of total freshwater withdrawal)	3.91	10.54	2.53	2.08	7.54	3.96
Renewable internal freshwater resources, total (billion cubic meters)	1446.00	120.60	190.40	1002.80	224.51	359.42
Total natural resources rents (% of GDP)*	3.16	0.84	5.38	8.68	1.82	2.55

Source: World Development Indicators (WDI), The World Bank, Washington, D.C.

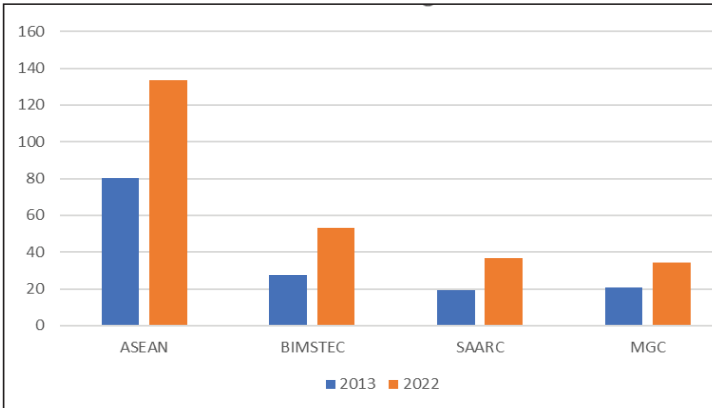
Note: # Date for year 2020, * data for year 2021

Intra-regional Trade								
Year	ASEAN		SAARC		BIMSTEC		MGC	
	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade
2010	495.6	24.7	32.0	4.5	49.6	4.8	56.2	5.0
2022	858.5	21.9	13.6	1.3	67.0	5.4	42.5	3.5
CAGR (%)	4.7		-6.9		2.5		-2.3	

Source: Calculated based on ITC Trade Statistics Database and WITS Database.

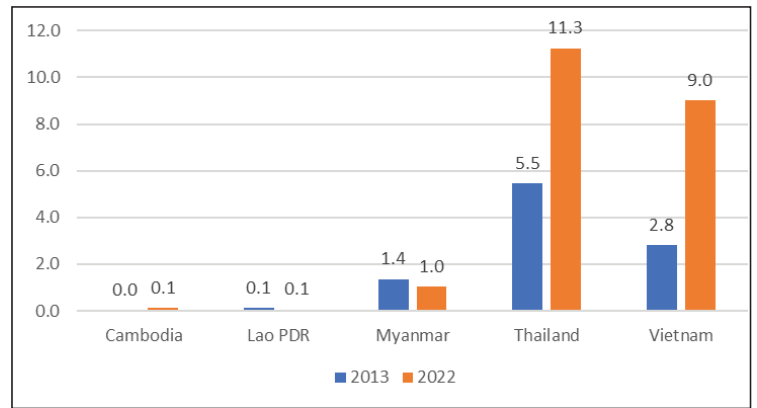
Statistical Indicators

India's Trade with Regional Block



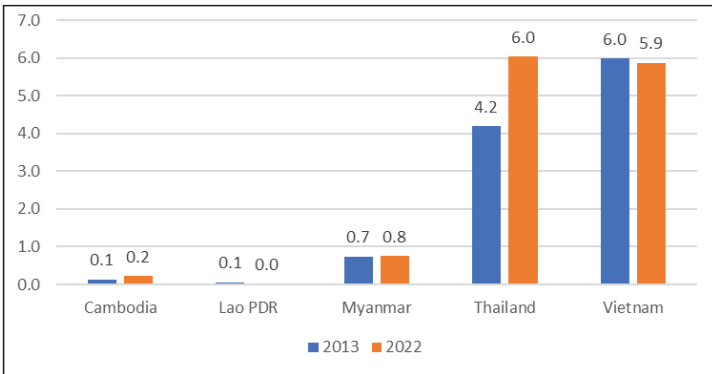
Source: UNCONTRADE

India's Imports from MGC



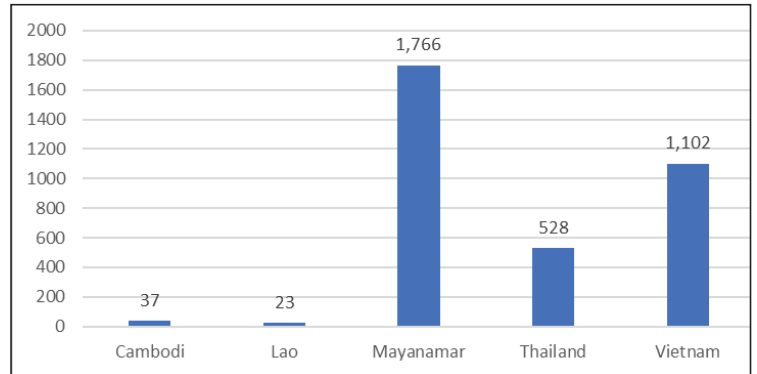
Source: UNCONTRADE

India's Exports to MGC



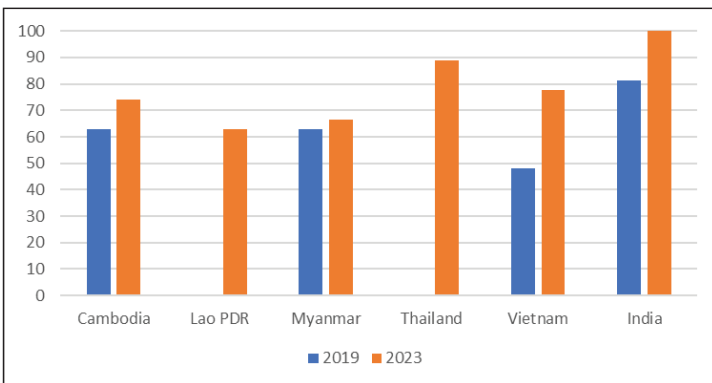
Source: UNCONTRADE

Indian Investment in MGC Countries (April 2000 to January 2024)



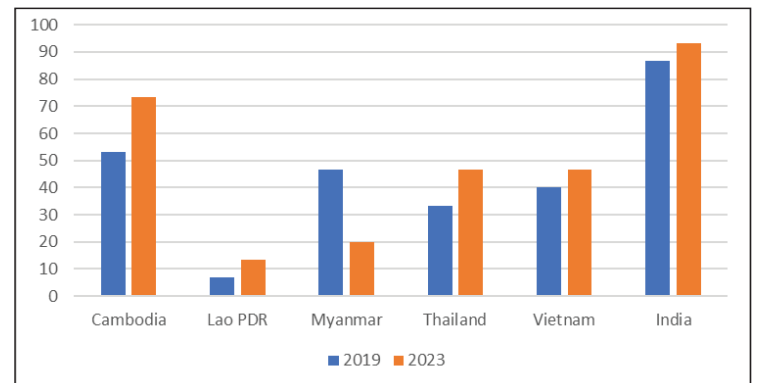
Source: Ministry of Finance, GoI

Paperless Trade in MGC Countries



Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation

Trade-Facilitation for SMEs in MGC Countries



Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation

Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief

An RIS Publication on Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

The *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief* seeks to disseminate the policy-related research, news, viewpoints, and information about resources among the policy circles and think-tanks to promote the cause of deeper cooperation between India and Mekong countries. Views expressed by the authors in this policy brief are their personal, and do not represent the views of AIC or RIS. The information contained has been compiled from various sources, as cited, purely for education and dissemination, and not for commercial purposes. The copyrights of the material included remain with the original sources. *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief* is available from AIC or RIS or can be downloaded from www.ris.org.in.

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Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) is a New Delhi-based autonomous policy research institute that specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. RIS is envisioned as a forum for fostering effective policy dialogue and capacity-building among developing countries on global and regional economic issues. The focus of the work programme of RIS is to promote South-South Cooperation and collaborate with developing countries in multilateral negotiations in various forums. RIS is engaged across inter-governmental processes of several regional economic cooperation initiatives. Through its intensive network of think tanks, RIS seeks to strengthen policy coherence on international economic issues and the development partnership canvas. For more information about RIS and its work programme, please visit its website: www.ris.org.in

About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) using existing resources at New Delhi. AIC was set-up at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC undertakes policy research, advocacy and networking activities with organizations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN, with an aim to promote the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership. For more information please visit <http://aic.ris.org.in>

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AIC
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

Core IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003, India
Ph.: +91-11-24682177-80, Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: dgoffice@ris.org.in; aic@ris.org.in , Website: www.ris.org.in

Editorial
Team

Editor: Dr Pankaj Vashisht, Associate Professor and Coordinator,
ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS
Managing Editors: Dr Beena Pandey, Assistant Professor, RIS; Dr. Sampa Kundu, Consultant, AIC