

Received: 10-01-2020
Accepted: 15-01-2020
Published: 20-05-2020

India-ASEAN Relation In The Framework Of Indo-Pacific

Abhiram Singh Yadav

Postgraduate Student at Pelita Harapan University

Email: abhiram_sy@yahoo.com

Abstract

Despite decades of successful implementation of multiple regional cooperation policies in East and Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific concept is yet to be institutionalized. This paper attempts to examine the challenges that face the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific concept by focusing on previous foreign policies and their significance in the region. Based on the findings, recommendations are generated to reflect the way Indo-Pacific can successfully be institutionalized.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, geo-strategy, trade, security

Abstrak

Meskipun puluhan tahun keberhasilan dalam mengimplementasi berbagai kebijakan kerjasama regional di Asia Timur dan Asia Tenggara, konsep Indo-Pasifik hingga kini belum dilembagakan. Makalah ini mencoba untuk menguji tantangan yang dihadapi dalam melembagakan konsep Indo-Pasifik dengan berfokus pada kebijakan luar negeri sebelumnya dan signifikansinya di kawasan ini. Berdasarkan temuan pada makalah ini, rekomendasi dihasilkan untuk mencerminkan cara agar Indo-Pasifik dapat dilembagakan di masa depan.

Kata Kunci: Indo-Pasifik, geo-strategi, perdagangan, keamanan

Introduction: Scope of Study

Regional cooperation and economic integration in East and Southeast Asia began decades ago. While some countries such as India were reluctant to join the regional ties, they eventually complied due to the need to grow their economies and strengthen territorial defense and security. Since then, various regional and international foreign policies have been established in the area with the primary objective of enhancing socio-economic and political ties as well as fostering social order.

Thus, this unsuccessful attempt to institutionalize the Indo-Pacific concept forms the basis for this study. This discussion will explore the history of regional cooperation between India and Southeast Asia, India's foreign policies from "Act East" Policy to the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," ASEAN's Strategic Positioning in the regional geopolitics of major powers, geo-strategy of Indo-Pacific, challenges and opportunities that face the Indo-Pacific concept and potential solutions for successful institutionalization of the idea. Although the majority of these policies are widely accepted and institutionalized, some initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific concept have received massive opposition from

various countries including People's Republic of China (PRC, China).

India and Southeast Asia: A Historical Perspective

Before, during and after the post-Cold War period, India and Southeast Asia shared cultural, religious and economic ties. Scholars observe that India spread its cultural influence on Southeast Asia during the raids conducted by Cholas on Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Saran, 2018). As Cholas, a dynasty of Southern India, raided Southeast Asia, it significantly spread the Indian culture of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam which was later adopted by a large population of people living in the region. The move led to the building of several temples in Southeast Asia such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia (Saran, 2018) and Borobudur and Prambanan temples in island of Java of Indonesia.

In addition, India and Southeast Asia relationship was shaped by their vibrant economic ties. Notably, during the pre-modern period, the two regions traded in textile which was manufactured in India, and spices as well as woods as natural products from Southeast Asia (Otsuka & Sugihara, 2019). The trade pattern, cultural and religious influence were the most profound ties between Southeast Asia and India in the post-Cold War period.

While India and Southeast Asia shared multiple cultural and religious ties, the two regions were virtually disengaged due to political reasons. Scholars argue that one of the most significant reasons for their disengagement was the occurrences in the 1980s where India through its then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru exhibited naval ambitions (Bajpae, 2017). From this event, Southeast Asia perceived that India was trying to gain leadership power in the region hence, the two ---India and Southeast Asia countries developed mutual mistrust.

India's relation with Vietnam and the creation of ASEAN were also a cause of political disengagement with Southeast Asian region. In particular, New Delhi's support for the Vietnam invasion of Kampuchea (Cambodia) ruined the relationship between India and Southeast Asia, amidst the planned diplomacy dialogue to include India in ASEAN (Bajpae, 2017). From time immemorial, India and Vietnam had been allies, and so are New Delhi and Hanoi.

Thus, New Delhi was in full support of Vietnam when it invaded Cambodia and replaced the communist administration with the Vietnamese-installed Phnom Penh government. India's decision to support Vietnam marked the beginning of a

significant setback in its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that the creation of ASEAN led to poor political relations between India and Southeast Asia. India viewed ASEAN as "an instrument of neo-colonialism and reincarnation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Bajpae, 2017, p. 349). In India's perception ASEAN was established to enable member states to exert economic, political, and cultural pressure in the region. For this reason, India developed suspicions about Southeast Asia's ambitions to control all economic and institutional linkages in the area ---an aspect that compromised their political ties.

Generally, India and Southeast Asia's political relationship before the 'Look East', 'Act East', and other recent policies were characterized by difficulties. While cultural, religious, and economic ties brought the two ---India and Southeast Asian countries together, political relations caused disengagement. India's political relations with Southeast's 'foes' such as Vietnam facilitated the separation.

Similarly, the mutual mistrust between the two ---India and Southeast Asian countries--- was a root cause of their long decades of virtual disengagement. Notably, an effort by India to elevate its

position in the region was viewed as leadership ambitions by its counterpart. Furthermore, Southeast Asia's decision to form a treaty of trade in the region was perceived as an attempt to exert power and control. All these factors shaped India and Southeast Asia's relationship in the historical context.

From 'Act East' Policy to the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific'

Despite its previous fallout with Southeast Asia, India began efforts to re-engage with the region through various foreign policies including the 'Look East' policy that de-phased to 'Act East' policy and eventually led to the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific'.

According to scholars, the 'Look East' policy was an initiative by the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao government to deepen economic and security ties with India's eastern neighbors (Pande, 2017; Ahmed, 2019).

Since nations in East Asia were expanding economic powers, and with its geographical positioning in the region, India could secure supplies for its economy by developing ties in the area. In addition, the policy was aimed at strengthening India's position in the region (Ahmed, 2019). Back then, China was increasingly gaining dominance in the Southeast Asia

which was a potential threat to India. As a way to avert China's dominance, India resolved to cultivate strategic relations with the Southeast Asian countries. The objectives of the 'Look East' policy were to boost India's economy through trade, nurture its security links, and strengthen its position in the Southeast Asian region.

After a while, the "Look East" policy culminated in the "Act East" policy. According to scholars, this change was facilitated by the already established economic ties between India and the Southeast Asian region, and the need for India to play a substantial role in Asia-Pacific region (Ahmed, 2019).

India had cultivated socio-economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia regions. Thus, it was high time for the country to be an active player in major activities of the area. Jaishankar (2019) adds that the 'Act East' policy differed from the 'Look East' policy in multiple ways. Notably, the policy had a broader focus on scope and objectives. For instance, the 'Act East' policy involved four different elements i.e. 1) need to secure the Indian Ocean; 2) deepen strategic partnerships with other balancing powers including Japan, Australia and Russia; 3) integrate with Southeast Asia; and 4) managing differences with China (Jaishankar, 2019). India through its 'Act

East' policy was determined to develop economic and security ties with the Indo-Pacific to elevate its position by being part of the nations that balanced power in the region.

Since the implementation of the 'Act East' policy, India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific has become stronger. This is evident from India's decision to embrace the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (Bajpae, 2017). Notably, the Indo-Pacific has long been considered a region of economic prosperity due to its proximity to the Pacific and the Indian Ocean which are major trade centers. For this reason, the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' was established to facilitate connectivity in the region to promote economic prosperity while strengthening good governance, mutual benefits, and cooperation among other principles.

Since its establishment, India has shown great support for the 'Outlook' which is a sign that the country is willing to expand its economic and political ties to regions in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, India's adoption of the 'Outlook' is a clear indication that the nation no longer perceives ASEAN centrality as an instrument of neo-colonialism but as a guide for promotion of socio-economic,

political, and cultural cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN's Strategic Positioning in the Regional Geo-Politics of Major Powers

ASEAN is situated strategically in the geo-politics of major powers. For instance, on the one hand, ASEAN maintains geographical proximity with China, one of the emerging superpowers, and a country that is rapidly exerting its power in the Southeast Asia region and over its maritime borders.

Similarly, ASEAN is strategically situated near India, a country that is slowly rising to power. Apart from its geographical proximity, ASEAN is also strategically positioned in the geopolitics of other major powers such as the United States. Although the United States is not part of the Southeast Asia region, it shares international ties with ASEAN by being a 'founder behind the scene'. ASEAN's strategic positioning in the regional geopolitics of the major power is an arsenal because the inter-governmental organization can easily balance diplomacy and cooperation among the countries.

ASEAN's strategic positioning in the regional geopolitics of major powers enables the organization to meet its primary objectives. For instance, scholars observe that while ASEAN has limited military

power, it relies on its strategic position among major powers to restore peace and punish conflicting countries. Notably, it is argued that ASEAN uses political means to balance power in the region by sending signals to member states and international community's regarding illegal or unjust behavior of target states (Koga, 2018).

In turn, ASEAN receives international support from the external powers which impose material punishment upon the target state (Koga, 2018). For instance, given that ASEAN maintains foreign relations with the United States, it can quickly gain political, military or financial support to counter unjust or unruly behavior in target states. Hence, it may be argued that ASEAN relies heavily on the political stability of major powers in the region to fulfill its role as a balancing power.

Apart from relying on its great external powers, ASEAN strategic position also enables the organization to balance power in the region. For instance, since ASEAN is geographically located between India and China, it can effectively exert its normative constraints through the diffusion of its rules in Southeast Asia.

Koga also emphasizes that ASEAN centrality in the region allows the organization to "... tame the regional great powers politically, shape their behavior,

and ensure regional stability" (2018, p. 50). In particular, ASEAN constructs norms and enforces standards of behavior across its member states. Given its geographical proximity to these great powers, such as China, ASEAN can instill these norms in the region.

Geo-Strategy of Indo-Pacific: Emergence of a New Era

After ASEAN, Indo-Pacific has recently become a highly debated concept across East, Southeast Asia, and the United States. In a report issued by the United States, the new era of Indo-Pacific provides the opportunity for nations to safeguard sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity (Cossa & Glosserman, 2019).

Koga (2020) also emphasizes that the concept aims at shaping regional order in the Indo-Pacific. Evidently, this new era is a drastic shift from initial alliances formed by countries in the Southeast Asia, whose primary objective was to strengthen economic ties. Instead, the Indo-Pacific is viewed as a strategy for nations to not only foster trade links but also combat territorial threats and geopolitical problems by forming alliances with their neighbors.

The concept of Indo-Pacific has been received differently among various countries. Some nations, such as China, prefer 'Asia-Pacific' to the new concept of

'Indo-Pacific'. In addition, Indo-Pacific strategies differ among the Indo-Pacific Four nations that have shown great interest in the idea (Choong, 2019). For instance, scholars observe that the ASEAN approach towards Indo-Pacific constitute elements of connectivity and infrastructure and rejects some principles of Free and Open Indo-Pacific, FOIP (Choong, 2019).

In particular, ASEAN and Indonesia are more focused on ensuring that seamless connectivity, in the form of infrastructures and institutions, is achieved in the long run. In addition, connectivity through people, in terms of collaboration, is a key objective of the ASEAN Indo-Pacific strategy. Contrarily, the United States approach constitutes all the elements of the FOIP, including the exclusion of China and the loss of ASEAN centrality (Choong, 2019). Thus, with the ongoing conflict between China and the United States, it appears that the latter is more focused on ensuring that China's rising power is controlled.

Japan is also among nations that have taken a different approach in the geo-strategy of Indo-Pacific. While the concept was initially aimed at shaping regional order in the Indo-Pacific, Japan's focus mainly lies on increasing its defense capabilities. In particular, the country is prominently committed to enhancing national defense through its internal

capabilities and alliances with other major powers, such as the United States (Koga, 2020).

Hence, this move is aimed at safeguarding the country's boundaries against territorial attacks. Similarly, Japan's commitment to strengthen its military defense is viewed as a strategy to counter the shifts in the regional balance of power (Koga, 2020). Overall, Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy encompasses two approaches of the regional order and national defense, with the latter being the most imperative.

Similarly, India is also showing great interest in the new concept of 'Indo-Pacific'. However, unlike other nations that have adopted the concept, India considers Indo-Pacific as the region "from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas" (Rajagopalan, 2020, p. 78). Therefore, India's priority in the region is to establish strategic economic linkage with not only East and Southeast Asia but also the area in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and the Pacific to strengthen its position in the region.

While officials argue that India's decision to adopt the 'Indo-Pacific' concept is based on economic interest, this stance has been contended by many scholars. India's 'Indo-Pacific' is a geo-strategy to

avert China's rising power in the region. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has raised concerns to India. Notably, India relies heavily on the South Sea for trade links and is concerned about China's assertiveness on its freedom to navigate the area (Rajagopalan, 2020). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific is perceived as a strategy by India to balance power with China and prevent any adversities that may arise from its rampant dominance in the region.

Apart from balancing power, India's adoption of 'Indo-Pacific' is viewed as a foreign policy for military strategic planning. For a while now, ASEAN member countries and some Indian officials have expressed their concern about Chinese naval forays into the Indian Ocean (Rajagopalan, 2020). Thus, India's decision to adopt the 'Indo-Pacific concept' is perceived as an attempt to enhance its military capability by collaborating with countries in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and the Pacific to counter China's possible military-political and economic actions in the region.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the 'Indo-Pacific concept' provides an opportunity for regional cooperation among states, its institutionalization is subject to multiple

problems. Firstly, the concept has an ineffective ideational leadership. In particular, the majority of scholars advocating for the initiative are policy analysts and political scientists; thus, their focal point deviates from economic cooperation and regionalism (He & Feng, 2020). As a concept intended to shape regional order through trade, security, and international relations, Indo-Pacific may not fulfill such objectives if scholars that do not consider economic regionalism as a core element define the aspect. Besides, treaties that have been successfully institutionalized before, such as Asia-Pacific, were facilitated by economists (He & Feng, 2020). Hence, the current shift in ideational leadership from economists to policy analysts creates a challenge in the institutionalization of the 'Indo-Pacific concept'.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific faces the challenge of weak ideational leadership from the epistemic community. So far, all nations that have shown interest in the policy either lack a common interest or have a different opinion about the scope of the concept (He & Feng, 2020).

Up to date, it remains unclear on the specific region covered by the Indo-Pacific. For instance, Australia and the United States consider Indo-Pacific as the original

Asia-Pacific region and India (He & Feng, 2020). Based on this perspective, the two countries' interests appear to be limited to the two areas. Similarly, Japan regards Indo-Pacific as the area that lies between Asia and Africa, across the Pacific and Indian Ocean (He & Fang, 2020).

On the other hand, India considers the area from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean through Indo-Pacific straits, southeast China and Philippines seas as part of Indo-Pacific (He & Fang, 2020). Undoubtedly, India's perspective of the concept is broader compared to the rest of the Quad countries. Overall, this variation in the geographic demarcation of the Indo-Pacific poses a challenge to the institutionalization of regional cooperation since only two Quad nations share a common perception of the concept.

Weak executive leadership also poses a challenge in the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific. Since the concept was first debated in the foreign policy discourse, it has received less support from major powers, making its institution quite challenging. Patterns of countries that have previously advocated for and led in the institutionalization of the policy are a clear indication of the weak executive leadership.

For instance, during the early stages, the concept was first led by Japan (He & Fang, 2020). After a while, Japan

received support from three other countries, including the United States, Australia, and India to form the 'Quad Four'. However, Australia withdrew from the Quad, compromising the strength of the executive leadership (He & Fang, 2020). This withdrawal affected the institutionalization of the concept since sufficient leadership was lacking to tackle operational obstacles in regional cooperation. Thus, for the Indo-Pacific to be institutionalized effectively, executive leadership of the foreign policy must be restored.

China's rising power in the Asian region also poses a significant challenge to the institutionalization of Indo-Pacific. Arguably, China's adoption of the policy is crucial for the success of regional cooperation for various reasons. Firstly, the South China Sea is a strategic location for global shipping trade and an area of interest for Indo-Pacific countries due to its economic value (He & Fang, 2020).

However, China is reluctant to embrace upon the Indo-Pacific because it believes that the strategy of the policy is to avert its rising power from a geopolitical perspective. Therefore, amidst China's assertiveness in the Southeast Sea and reluctance to embrace the foreign policy, it may be difficult for the 'Quad four countries' to fully benefit from the regional cooperation because maritime border

conflicts will continuously disrupt the economic integration.

China's reluctance to adopt Indo-Pacific is also a challenge to the institutionalization of the concept from an executive leadership perspective. Notably, China's rising power and control over the South China Sea have contributed towards the withdrawal of major powers from the executive leadership of Indo-Pacific.

For instance, scholars argue that Australia withdrew from 'Quad 1.0' to cultivate its relations with China (He & Fang, 2020). For years, Australia and China have maintained strong trade relations. Studies show that trade between the two countries rose from 1 percent to approximately 25 percent between 1972 and 2011 (Culas & Timsina, 2019).

From these statistics, it is evident that the two countries are in a mutually beneficial trade treaty. Hypothetically, Australia's involvement in executive leadership of the Indo-Pacific would raise concerns about its attempt to aid a policy that allegedly constraints China's rise which would ruin its trade relations. Therefore, the fact that China continues to rise in power, enjoys trade relations with major powers, and exhibits a reluctance to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept creates a dilemma among major executive leaders

and compromises institutionalization of the policy.

Regardless of the challenges facing institutionalization of Indo-Pacific, multiple opportunities at the member states' disposal are available. 'Major Powers' have shown great interest in the strategy and are more likely to boost institutionalization of the policy.

For instance, for the past few years, the United States has exhibited a high momentum to promote 'Quad 2.0' and 'FOIP' (He & Fang, 2020). Notably, President Donald Trump has progressively emphasized the need to revive the initial idea of the Quad by forming 'Quad 2.0'. The United States is a major power that has the military and economic capability required for the international system (He & Fang, 2020). Hence, its current momentum regarding the matter is an opportunity for other states to utilize in the institutionalization of economic and regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The economic and regional integration between India and Southeast Asia has developed in different phases. In India, regional ties began with the 'Look East' policy which culminated in the 'Act East' policy, ASEAN, and the current Indo-Pacific concept. All these policies have

presented different opportunities and mutual benefits in the region.

The 'Act East' policy, for instance, enabled India to deepen strategic partnerships with other Major Powers in the East and Southeast Asia. In addition, the systems have had geopolitical and geostrategic importance in the region. For instance, ASEAN strategic position among major powers has enabled the intergovernmental organization to avert rising power in the region and to diffuse its normative constraints to Southeast Asia. Furthermore, ASEAN strategic position has enabled the organization to gain support from Major Powers, despite its limited military capabilities.

Nonetheless, some of the currently established concepts in foreign policy discourse continue to face significant challenges in the institutionalization process. For instance, the Indo-Pacific remains a highly debated concept due to its varying strategies across the Quad countries. In particular, varying opinions regarding regional boundaries of the Indo-Pacific are evident. In addition, inadequate and weak ideational and executive leadership pose a significant challenge for the effective institutionalization of Indo-Pacific. If these challenges are not overcome soon, no prospect of regional

cooperation in the Indo-Pacific would be possible.

Recommendations

Overall, a successful institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific concept requires a strategic approach that involves incremental steps. Firstly, the Quad countries should build trust and confidence among Middle and Major Powers (Vignesh, 2015). From a political perspective, some nations, such as China, are reluctant to embrace the concept due to mistrust. In particular, the country is concerned that Indo-Pacific, especially, FOIP, is a strategy to constrain its rising powers. Given the geostrategic relevance of China in the economic success of the region, policymakers should ensure that trust is rebuilt to enhance the country's participation in the international system.

Secondly, the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific requires a clearly defined framework that is free of conflicting interests. So far, the Quad countries have failed to establish a clear geographical boundary of the Indo-Pacific. Notably, the United States and Australia are the only nations that share a common perspective about the concept.

In addition, the interest of some countries in the Indo-Pacific appears to be broader than that of its partners. Besides, the existing loosely defined framework

consists of conflicting interests. For instance, some nations such as Japan are interested in enhancing defense rather than regional order (Koga, 2020). Similarly, the United States' FOIP is seemingly a strategy to contain China's rising power in Southeast Asia. The fact that all nations which show interest in the concept have varying motives is a constraint that can only be overcome by developing a clear and unbiased architecture.

Ultimately, the successful implementation of the concept of Indo-Pacific relies on the peace and stability of the region. Thus, harmony is a prerequisite that cannot be overlooked. If the emerging security issues in the Indo-Pacific region are not handled effectively, it may be challenging to establish regional cooperation. Hence, it is recommended that existing ASEAN principles are used complementarily with the concept of Indo-Pacific. Notably, diplomatic talks should be established to solve the current trade conflict between the United States and China. Besides, regional alliances should be used to combat any adversities that may arise from China's rising power and naval activities. If the ASEAN principle of consensus and diplomatic talks are utilized, it will be easier to maintain peace for the successful institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific regional cooperation.

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