Article – II

India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia before Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Quach Thi Hue

ABSTRACT

Historically, Southeast Asia has been the place to come for many countries around the world such as China, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, the UK, France, and the US... But unlike those countries, India has come to Southeast Asia by the way of peace, trade, and religion and it is the country with the oldest relationship with this region. India has had flourishing economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries since pre-colonial times. Although interrupted during the colonial era, the struggles for freedom in India and many Southeast Asian countries led to a sharing of common problems. The spread of the two largest religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, from India through Asia and the adoption of these religions in Southeast Asia laid the groundwork for connections between India and the region. Throughout history, changes in the international and regional context as well as within Southeast Asia and India itself, India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia before Prime Minister Narendra Modi (before 2014) has constantly been adjusted to suit the new situation. If New Delhi’s policy towards Southeast Asia was not clearly defined at first, mainly as the reactions towards regional situations rather than towards the policy, then Indian policies have been adjusted with a focus on the Look East Policy.

Keywords: Foreign policy, India, Southeast Asia, Enhanced Look East Policy

India’s relationship with Southeast Asia is a long-standing one, possibly dating back to antiquity and more clearly from the colonial era. Throughout history, India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia before 2014 had been continuously adjusted and could be divided into two phases: (i) Phase 1: Cold War period; (ii) Phase 2: Post-Cold War era.

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1. India’s Foreign Policy towards Southeast Asia during the Cold War

With the geographical proximity, as well as the cultural and religious connection, India’s policy towards Southeast Asia existed before India officially gained national independence (August 1947). In the early modern period, although colonial rule in both India and Southeast Asia cut their ties, India’s struggle for national liberation was a role model and a great encouragement for national liberation struggles of Southeast Asian countries². India’s first policy moves toward Southeast Asia existed before India’s independence. From March 23rd to April 2nd, 1947, Indian leaders held a Conference on Asian Relations in New Delhi with the participation of 25 Asian countries, including Egypt. Countries like Burma and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) appreciated this move toward unity in the region by India. Although most leaders emphasised the integration of Asian nations among anti-colonial movements, there was very less coordination among Asian nations after World War II. However, almost all of India’s efforts to promote solidarity among Asian nations were unsuccessful. The main reason is that some Asian and African countries were not "satisfied" with India’s implementation of the Non-Aligned Policy. In addition, after the colonial period ended, the countries were mainly interested in political rather than economic issues. Countries in Asia and Africa mainly focused on security, neutrality and decolonisation. This prevented India from achieving its goal of ensuring regional solidarity in Asia, Africa and Southeast Asia in general and effectively implementing policies with Southeast Asian countries in particular.

The policy of both cooperation and adaptation, protecting the cause of colonial peoples, aiming toward a unified Asia (1947-1955)

The end of World War II had a direct impact on the world and regional power structures with the rise of major alliances and counter-alliances. In particular, India’s Non-Aligned Movement was an attempt by the fledgling democratic nation to "stand neutral" and separate from the war between the two blocs of Capitalism (led by the US) and Socialism (led by the Soviet Union), which was taking place on a global level. In that international political context, India’s policy towards each country in Southeast Asia was different because it was influenced by the internal political situation of countries, the relations between India and these countries and the relations of these nations with the superpowers/blocks. During this period, India’s policy towards Southeast Asia mainly focused on building partnerships with Indochina countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although, there were ideological differences in the socio-economic structure, India and these countries had similarities because they have experienced the

² Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (1998), 25 years of studying Southeast Asian countries, Publishing House. Social Sciences, p.289
same war against colonialism and great power and had close relations with the Soviet Union.

In the post-independence period, India wished to form and develop good relations with all countries in the region. During this period, the most important strategic objective of India’s policy towards Asia in general and Southeast Asian countries, in particular, was the struggle for peace among the peoples. India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru emphasised that "Asia is getting a second chance to reposition itself after the end of World War II". At this time, India was considered the natural leader in Asia as India was the first country to gain independence from colonisation in this region. However, Prime Minister Nehru did not want to portray India as a power to replace British colonialism but as a power aiming to build a unified Asia. Following that approach, in March 1946, Nehru went to Malaya and Burma and proposed the Asian Relations Conference hosted by India. Nehru strongly supported Indonesia's nationalist revolution. Nehru regarded Asia as an emerging region for world affairs in the future. Exactly one year later, the Asian Relations Conference was held in Delhi, during which Nehru declared that “This conference will stand out as a turning point separating Asia’s past from its future”. Representatives from more than 20 countries participated in the Asia Relations Conference, and even colonial Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaya and Burma also attended the conference. The conference condemned the invasion of the Dutch colonialists, demanding the immediate return of independence to Indonesia, and condemned the Western alliance that supported and aided the Dutch invasion of Indonesia. Under Prime Minister Nehru, Southeast Asia has always been the focus of India's initiative on Pan-Asian solidarity and joint development in Asia. However, a bordering war with China in 1962 forced the South Asian nations to shift the focus from regional solidarity to strengthening the armed forces.

It can be said that the Asian Relations Conference and the Bandung Conference were India’s initial efforts to establish relations with Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular. At this point, the interests of India and Southeast Asian nations were

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4 Archana Pandya and David M. Malone, "India’s Asia Policy: A Late Look East", ISAS (Institute of South Asian Studies) Special Report, No. 2, 25 August, 2010, p.18
6 Malaya is the old name of Malaysia, which was restructured as Federation of Malaya in 1948 and gained independence in 1957. In 1963, Malaya changed its name to Malaysia.
converging toward a post-colonial developed Asia. In particular, the policy focus that India aimed at during this period was to gain independence from colonialism and to be Non-Aligned. Mr Nehru believed that Asia in general and Southeast Asia, in particular, should be separated from the confrontation between the two blocs of Capitalism and Socialism. This vision of Nehru was supported by Asian Nationalists such as Sukarno and Aung San.

In the late 50s of the twentieth century, the United States began to strongly engage in Southeast Asia, causing the situation in Indochina to change drastically. In 1954, a conference was held in Geneva, forcing India to change its foreign policy towards Indochina. This marked a new phase in the relation between the two sides. India was appointed as the Chairman of the International Control Commission (ICC) and was tasked with maintaining a state of peace, neutrality and independence in these countries. By this time, India had succeeded in building close ties with both Laos and Vietnam. Although still pursuing the policy of non-alignment, the "neutral" nature of India was no longer "original" due to its closer relationship with the former Soviet Union, the war between India and China and the involvement of the US in Indochina, the increasingly close relationship between Cambodia and China, and the tensely strained relation between India and Cambodia. During this period, India played a pivotal role in establishing the "front of the Asian countries against colonial imperialism", forming a "new emerging force" at the United Nations forum. Particularly, the foreign policy emphasising on protecting the cause of colonial peoples had active results in protecting peace in Southeast Asian countries. In order to contribute to ensuring the interests of the young countries that had just gained independence from the colonialists and to maintain solidarity among these countries, in April 1955, Indonesia, Burma, and India initiated the Bandung Conference, whose participants are Asian and African countries.

The Conference Bandung was organised with the aim of formulating policies and solutions to the problems of these countries, with a focus on world peace, security of Asia-Africa countries, peaceful coexistence, and the liberation of the Asian-African peoples from colonial rule and racial segregation. In particular, the "5 principles of peaceful coexistence" were developed into the "10 Bandung principles". The conference was an expression of the new balance of forces in the world and demonstrated India's

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role in ensuring a voice for the newly independent nations, including Southeast Asian nations.

**Non-Aligned Policy through Diplomatic Declarations (Diplomacy by Proclamation) from the 1960s to the 1990s**

Entering the 1960s of the twentieth century, India's policy towards Asia was affected by many factors, such as the disagreement between the Soviet Union and China took place sharply; China - India relations changed from friendship to confrontation and hostility; The Democratic Party came to power in the US and advocated strengthening relations with India; The US strongly countered the nationalist movements in Vietnam and Indochina; the birth of ASEAN, the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement.

During this period, India tried to build relations with Southeast Asia through many policies based on different ideals such as anti-racism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, etc. A foreign policy of "Declaration Diplomacy" towards Southeast Asia was adopted by India. Despite continuing to maintain the Non-Aligned policy, India “polarised” its policy and relations with Southeast Asian countries. Specifically, while India's cooperative relations with Vietnam and Laos continued to be maintained, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore – the pro-Western countries - were not "content" with India’s increasingly closer relationship with the Soviet Union. Particularly, the birth of ASEAN (August 8, 1967) made India have some important adjustments to its policy towards Southeast Asian countries.

During the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century, despite pursuing the Non-Aligned Movement, India always stood by the side of the national liberation struggle of colonised nations against colonialism and imperialism. Especially during this period, India actively condemned the war of aggression of the US imperialists in Vietnam, and resolutely supported the resistance war against the US of Vietnamese people and Indochina. In 1980, after the Congress Party came to power, India recognised and established diplomatic relations with the Government of the People’s Republic of Cambodia. India continues to maintain relations with other countries in Southeast Asia.

The changes at the regional and world level in the 1980s led to adjustments in India's foreign policy; of which, India’s foreign policy priorities towards Southeast Asian

12 Sudhir Devare, India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2006, p.71
13 Consists of 5 member countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand
countries focused on security and economic issues, so besides South Asia, Southeast Asia has become an important gateway in economic integration goals and political role in the Asia-Pacific region. This contributes to renewing and revitalising India's traditional combinations with Southeast Asian countries.15

The policy of increasing cooperation with ASEAN was also promoted by India during this period. Although India has made diplomatic and economic efforts to join ASEAN since 1987, these countries expressed their reservations due to India's support of the Heng Samrin regime16. Additionally, India also "maintained the distance" with ASEAN during this time. The reasons for this way of approaching ASEAN stem from: First, India regards ASEAN as a plan of America to serve Cold War strategic goals because the initial appearance of ASEAN in India's view is like a "new face" of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO). The second is the opposition to India's non-alignment policy and the pro-American attitudes of the Philippines and Thailand. Third, Malaysia only maintained bilateral and political relations with India instead of maintaining multilateral relations with India through ASEAN. Fourth, the tense relationship between India and China negatively impacted the Chinese community living in Singapore. Fifth, Indonesia - the most influential country in ASEAN at the moment - had apprehension related to India. In addition, ASEAN countries were also indifferent to India due to differences in relations with the two poles. Specifically, India and ASEAN differed on the issue of marking the US presence in the region; India objected because of the suspicion that the US would eventually use Southeast Asia to serve its interests, on the other hand, ASEAN members wanted the US to intervene to "suppress" China17. ASEAN's close relations with the US and Japan made India worry. As a result, the differences in policies and strategies caused gaps in ASEAN and India’s relations. Sixth, India did not consider ASEAN a top priority in terms of security at this period of time. However, the end of the Cold War marked the adjustment in India’s foreign strategy toward Southeast Asia, opening a new period in India’s relations with Southeast Asia, especially with regard to India-ASEAN ties.

2. India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era

The end of the Cold War led to new directions in the foreign policy of India and Southeast Asian countries; specifically the end of the Cold War, the trend of globalisation, India’s economic liberalisation and reform policies, the rise of ASEAN,

15 Gordon, Sandy: India’s Rise to Power in the Twentieth Century and Beyond, St. Martin Press, New York, 1995, p.121
16 Grare, Frederic, “India and the ASEAN Regional Forum”, in Grare, Frederic and Matoo, Amitabh (eds.): India and ASEAN: The Politics of India’s Look East Policy, op.cit., p. 125
India's maritime security issues, China, and strategic interests in Southeast Asia\textsuperscript{18}. Especially, the internal political and economic context made India aim more toward its Southeast Asian neighbours. Politically, the constant change of the ruling party in the Indian government made India's foreign policy unmaintainable and lack a long-term strategic perspective\textsuperscript{19}. Economically, the rising inflation, governmental subsidies, high-interest rates, and a simultaneous decline in remittances in the second half of the 1980s weakened India's economy. India's budget during this period also had a strong fluctuation in the spending structure. These forced India to open up to the world economy as well as adjust its foreign policy to focus on economic issues instead of political and ideological factors\textsuperscript{20} as previously. In addition, the emergence of ASEAN as an influential regional institution made ASEAN an important part of India's foreign policy. Although there were still obstacles, many ASEAN countries have positively responded to India's actions, especially to the economic investment opportunities that India offered. The China factor also began to put a heavy weight on some ASEAN regions, especially after the closure of the US bases in the Philippines in 1992 and the emergence of the dispute on The East Sea.

**Southeast Asia – a pillar of India’s Look East Policy**

The launch of the Look East policy in 1992 was India's response to new post-Cold War challenges. Despite its longstanding and historical ties, India's policy towards Southeast Asia is only truly apparent through its Look East Policy\textsuperscript{21}. The Look East Policy aims to promote economic integration with East Asian countries and towards the formation of strategic partnerships in other fields such as security and military\textsuperscript{22}. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated, “The security dialogue between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is extremely important…. Our area is


\textsuperscript{19} The period 1967-1993 was called the "Congress system of opposition", when the dominance of the Congress Party in Indian politics came under strong attack/competition from political parties at the national level, levels of regions/states of India. The Congress Party worked hard to maintain a dominant position in Indian politics under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi but was still defeated by the Janata Party with a coalition of many other parties opposed to the Congress party. However, the coalition led by the Janata Party split and the Congress Party returned to power in 1980, then defeated again in the 1989 general election by the National Front. a coalition of opposition parties, in which the Janata Dal Party holds the leadership role. See Nguyen Thi Oanh. (2020). Basic features of the political party system of the Republic of India. Journal of Indian and Asian Studies, Issue 5/2020, P. 46-56, ISSN: 0866-7314.


\textsuperscript{22} Vo Xuan Vinh, "Some Basic Contents of India’s Look East Policy", Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, No. 10-2009, p. 56.
next to an important strategic sea route that needs to be protected”23. According to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the Look East Policy is not only a foreign economic policy but a change in India's strategic vision, in which India considers East Asia, especially the countries in Southeast Asia, a top concern in its foreign policy. India’s Foreign Minister Gujral (1989-1990) affirmed, "We regard a full dialogue partnership with ASEAN as a testament to the destiny of our 'Look East' policy”24. During the first period (1991 - 2002), India concentrated on developing cooperative relations with Southeast Asian countries, considering these countries the focus of its policy. In the second phase (2002 - 2012), India expanded its Look East Policy to the whole of East Asia, in which it continued to focus on relations with countries in Southeast Asia, considering this a bridge to open up the policy across East Asia and even Asia – Pacific.

From the goal of economic interests, security and energy security, the Look East policy is a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach aimed at establishing strategic combinations with separate countries, developing closer political links with ASEAN and strong economic ties with Southeast Asia, helping India to establish a foothold in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Within the framework of the Look East Policy, India’s policy towards Southeast Asia is reflected in the following contents:

(i) Regarding India’s policy objectives toward Southeast Asia

Overall, India's policy towards Southeast Asia is aimed at: first, institutionalising linkages with ASEAN and its member states (Dialogue Partners, ASEAN+ Summits and membership of the ARF); second, strengthening bilateral relations with ASEAN member states; third, creating a foothold and affirming the position so that Southeast Asia does not become the only "backyard" or "zone of influence" of a major country outside the region, especially China. And fourth, through the Look East Policy, Southeast Asia is an important gateway to help India become one of the great powers in the Asia-Pacific25.

To achieve this goal, India employs the following approaches: First, emphasise the role of ASEAN as a regional cooperation mechanism; that is, India chooses to focus on ASEAN when approaching Southeast Asia. Second, sub-regional cooperation is carried out through the promotion of multilateralism. Accordingly, in order to link the Northeast India sub-regions with mainland Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC (Bangladesh - India - Myanmar - Sri Lanka - Thailand Economic Cooperation) and the Mekong - Ganges Cooperation are two main mechanisms used by India. Third, economic

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23 Address by former Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Institute of Diplomatic and Foreign Relations, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, May 16, 2001.
25 Ngo Xuan Binh (editor, 2019), Adjusting India’s foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Publishing House. Social science.
diplomacy and defence diplomacy are used to promote the convergence of interests and strategies.

(ii) Promote institutional connectivity through strengthening bilateral and multilateral political relations

In terms of multilateralism, to implement this policy, India considers ASEAN the focal point to rebuild its relationship with Southeast Asia because India’s main goal is to become a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. Through active diplomatic efforts, in 1992, India became a partial dialogue member of ASEAN and became a full dialogue member of this organisation in 1995. In 1996, India joined the ARF and attended the fourth senior officials meeting in 1997. This reflects the maturing relationship between the two sides and the adjustment of India’s policy and strategy with Southeast Asia. By 2002, India became a party of the ASEAN + 1 cooperation mechanism; in 2003, India signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Thus, in terms of institutions, India is eligible to participate in the East Asia Summit. In December 2005, in Malaysia, India was one of the official members to attend the East Asia Summit - an important cooperation mechanism in Asia.

In particular, India always upholds the role and centrality of ASEAN in the region. At the 5th ASEAN-India Summit (2007), Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed that “the convening of the East Asia Summit is a historic development. We acknowledge that the contributions of ASIAN as well as inviting India to participate from the beginning valuable as the motivation of this positive development” at the 9th IISS Asian Security Summit (June 2010), India’s National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon emphasised: “ASEAN must be the foundation of ADMM+8 in addressing the future security of the region”. In the ASEAN-India Vision Statement on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations (1992-2012), in addition to the two sides affirmed to elevate the ties to a strategic partnership, “India reaffirmed to continue supporting ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional architecture, including the EAS, ARF, ADMM+ and other regional processes”.

On the bilateral side, since 1992 successive Prime Ministers of India have regularly visited Southeast Asian countries. Narasimha Rao visited Indonesia in 1992, and

27 The communiqué was issued at the end of the Fifth ASEAN Summit, December 1995.
29 Indian Prime Minister's address at the 5th India-ASEAN Summit, January 14, 2007, Cebu, Philippines
30 Address by NSA (National Security Advisor of India) at the 9th IISS Asia Security Summit, Singapore, June 05, 2010.
31 Vision Statement ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, New Delhi, December 20, 2012.
Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam in 1993. Prime Minister India also visited Singapore in 1994 and Malaysia in 1995. These visits created many opportunities to interact with policymakers from Southeast Asian countries. India participated for the first time at the ASEAN Logistics Ministers’ Meeting (PMC) in Jakarta in July 1996 and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with a focus on discussing political and security concerns of the Asia-Pacific region.\(^3^2\)

(iii) Economic integration through the institutionalisation of bilateral and multilateral trade and investment activities

The announcement of the Look East Policy is a step toward India's geoeconomic integration into the Asia-Pacific region in the post-Cold War era through the gateway of Southeast Asia. According to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, "Look East Policy is a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's position in the developing global economy". Indian Foreign Minister J.N. Dixit also once said: “The engagement in the economies of important industrialised countries in the West, Japan and ASEAN countries gives India opportunities to access the investment and technology exchange”\(^3^3\). “We [India] believe that we will have great and growing economic interests in ASEAN”.

To facilitate economic and trade activities, India and Southeast Asian countries have institutionalised several economic cooperation mechanisms. Several cooperation mechanisms have been put in place to promote bilateral and multilateral economic relations between the two sides. The Joint Trade Committees between India and ASEAN countries have been upgraded to the ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee. As a result of India’s becoming a Dialogue Partner, the ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee and the ASEAN-India Working Group on Trade and Investment were established. The ASEAN-India Fund was established to promote trade, tourism, science and technology and other economic activities. In particular, the two sides held a High-Level Leadership Conference for the first time in 1998. In 2000, India, along with Thailand and Myanmar, established the Ganges and Mekong River Cooperation Organisation. In 2003, India, Thailand, and Myanmar held a "Conference to connect traffic between the three countries" and proposed to build a cross-border route between India-Thailand-Myanmar. Also in 2003, India and ASEAN held the Leaders’ Summit and the India-ASEAN Trade Summit and established an annual cooperation mechanism. Together with China, India signed the "Framework Agreement on Comprehensive


Economic Cooperation between India and ASEAN." To institutionalise economic activities, during the first meeting among the economic ministers of India and ASEAN in Brunei in September 2002, the Indian Minister of Trade and Industry expressed his wish to conclude a formal agreement with ASEAN as a Regional Trade and Investment Agreement (RTIA) or a Free Trade Area (FTA) in the coming years.

During the early years of the 21st century, the total two-way turnover increased from 2.3 billion USD to 7 billion USD. From the countries with almost no or no investment from Southeast Asia in the 1990s, Malaysia and Singapore became the 10th and 11th largest countries in terms of FDI into India by 2002. Thailand was at 18th place and Indonesia and the Philippines at 33rd and 35th place respectively. In total, these five countries accounted for almost 5% of total investment in India. India's trade growth with Southeast Asia was the fastest of any other region between 1991 and 1997. While ASEAN's exports maintained momentum, imports declined significantly as a result of the financial crisis in 1997-98. Exports increased from about $1.4 billion in 1993 to more than $6.2 billion in 2000. On the other hand, ASEAN's imports increased from $1.4 billion to $4.4 billion in 1997 but fell sharply to $71 billion in 1998, and then grew to about $3 billion in 2000. Especially, by the end of 1996, 152 out of the total of 200 joint ventures of India abroad in ASEAN countries had an investment capital of over 88.5 million USD. From 1993 to 2003, bilateral trade growth between India and ASEAN reached an average rate of 11.2% from 2.9 billion USD in 1993 to 12.1 billion USD in 2003. At the 3rd India-ASEAN Summit in 2004, the two sides signed the "Partnership for Peace, Progress and Co-Prosperity". In the same year, India became a member of the East Asia Summit. In 2009, the two sides signed the Trade in Goods Agreement (AIFTA). In the first quarter of 2011, the two-way trade turnover between India and ASEAN reached 57 billion USD, increasing 8 times over the past 10 years. India's share of exports to ASEAN increased from 7.49% in 1996 to 10.86% in 2010. ASEAN accounted for 10% of India's total trade. It can be said that ASEAN and India are important investment partners of each other. Between 2004 and 2010, India's investment in the ASEAN region increased from 2.805.372 million from 1991 to May 2002, of which the five ASEAN countries were Rs 1,41,703 million. http://indmin.nic.in/vsindmin/publicat/default.htm

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34 Grare, Frederic, “India and the ASEAN Regional Forum”, in Grare, Frederic and Matoo, Amitabh (eds.): India and ASEAN: The Politics of India’s Look East Policy, p.125
35 India’s Interests in FTA with ASEAN. Hindus. September 16, 2002.
37 Based on data published by the Ministry of Industry of India SIA Bulletin. Out of the total foreign direct investment capital was Rs 2,805,372 million from 1991 to May 2002, of which the five ASEAN countries were Rs 1,41,703 million. http://indmin.nic.in/vsindmin/publicat/default.htm
38 Data taken from the website of the ASEAN Secretariat.
39 Dinh Van Ha: India - ASEAN relations after the cold war (1991-2010), Master thesis 2012, Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities.
40 http://www.aseansec.org/5738.htm
reached $21.8 billion, accounting for 25% of India’s total overseas investment. The two sides have signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

(iv) Promoting multilateralism

Another important aspect of India’s Look East policy towards Southeast Asian nations is the aim toward multilateralism through regional cooperation institutions. India also launched many new multilateral initiatives involving Southeast Asian countries. The most prominent and effective are the Mekong-Ganges Cooperation (MGC) in 2020; Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997 and Ganga-Mekong Swarnabhumi (India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) in 2000.

*Mekong - Ganges Cooperation – MGC* is a multilateral initiative including India and 5 ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) to cooperate in the fields of tourism, culture, education, transportation and communication, of which transport connection is one of the important pillars. This initiative was launched in 2000 in Vientiane, Laos. Within the framework of the MGC, six countries are also developing transport networks including the East-West Corridor project and the Trans-Asia Expressway. The four pillars of MGC are tourism, culture, education, transportation and communication. It is concretised through such activities as the cooperation with small and medium enterprises, the conservation of rice germplasm, the establishment of a Health Working Group, the establishment of a Joint Data Archive Center (CARC) at Nalanda University, and finally the India - Cambodia Laos Myanmar Vietnam Rapid Impact Projects. One of the so-called Asia Expressway Projects under MGC is expected to connect Singapore with New Delhi via Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Bangkok (Thailand), Vientiane (Laos) Chiang Mai (Thailand), Yangon and Mandalay, Kalemyo (Myanmar), Tamu, Dhaka and Calcutta (India). India has begun the construction of a road connecting Tamu (Manipur) to Kalemyo, an important intersection in central Myanmar. This will contribute to promoting border trade between India’s northeastern region and neighbouring countries of Myanmar and the Mekong River region. The MGC is not only an expression of cultural and commercial links among member countries for centuries.

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42 Ranjit Gupta, *India’s Look East Policy, Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta, Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007, p.36*


but also a cooperation mechanism that contributes to enabling people living in the two basins of the Mekong River and the Ganges River to connect more closely to develop, promote integration and prosperity together. Thus, the MGC became a mainstay of India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia during this time.

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC): BIMSTEC is also one of the important contents of India’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. Historically, the communities and countries around the Bay of Bengal have interacted and established diverse relations. Along with many other initiatives after the end of the Cold War, a new sub-regional grouping was established on June 6th, 1997 in Bangkok called the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Regional Technical and Economic Cooperation. (BIST-EC) including Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The main areas of cooperation identified include cooperation in trade, investment, industry, transportation, infrastructure, science and technology, human resource development, energy, fisheries, agriculture, natural resources and tourism. In 1997, Myanmar became a member of this institution.

In July 2004, at the first BIST-EC Summit, BIST-EC was officially renamed BIMSTEC46; in which the focus of BIMSTEC is: expanding BIMSTEC cooperation to the fields of culture, education, public health, biodiversity protection and traditional knowledge, rural development, medium and small enterprises, construction, environment, information and communication technology, biotechnology, climate change research and natural disasters. India and its member countries also established a BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, an Annual Action Plan on Tourism, and established the BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce…. This can be seen as another attempt by India to connect with the hub of ASEAN through Myanmar and Thailand.

(v) Promoting strategic interactions through defence diplomacy

Within the framework of the Look East Policy, military cooperation between India and ASEAN countries is also promoted. India has signed defence agreements with countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. India has initiated naval diplomacy with South and Southeast Asian states. The Indian Navy conducted the Milan naval exercise with the navies of Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Sri Lanka in 1995 in the Bay of Bengal. Since 1991, India has been conducting naval exercises with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the Indian Ocean and with Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines in the following years through the 'Milan'47 naval exercise and “Joint Communiqué on

Anti-Terrorism Cooperation with ASEAN” .... In 2000, India sent warships, tankers and submarines to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam to jointly conduct bilateral exercises as a sign of India's goodwill to strengthen and increase strengthen its presence in this region\textsuperscript{48}.

With these steps, India has built strategic trust based on similar interests with Southeast Asian countries. In addition, India also emphasised cooperation in maritime security, especially in the East Sea. At the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), India affirmed: The security of sea lanes is important to the Asia Pacific region...we are cooperating with other countries in the region to enhance security for the maritime industry in the region. A collective approach to maritime security will benefit the entire region\textsuperscript{49}. In addition, in the ASEAN-India Vision Statement on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of dialogue relations (1992-2012), the two sides agreed to promote cooperation at sea including through participation in the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) to address common challenges on maritime issues such as piracy, search and rescue, environment, maritime security, maritime connectivity, freedom of navigation, fisheries and other areas of cooperation\textsuperscript{50}. Thus, from the expansion of its economic focus, India began to adjust its strategic policy to the areas of strategy and security.

In short, India had a great interest in Southeast Asia from a very early age. At different historical times, the international, Southeast Asia and India situations have different fluctuations, so India’s policy towards Southeast Asia is always adjusted pertaining goals and content to suit the specific situation. This adjustment is primarily rooted in India's national interest, and then is the result of the combined effects of factors at the international and regional system levels. During the Cold War period, if New Delhi's policy towards Southeast Asia was not clearly defined, mainly as a response to regional situations rather than a policy response through following the policy of non-alignment, following the "middle way", by the post-Cold War period, India's policy towards the region had a clear adjustment with the focus on the Look East Policy. However, India's policy prior to 2014 was mainly "observation" rather than "action". This led to strategic adjustments from the Look East policy to the Act East policy in the later period of the Indian Government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the expanding Southeast Asian neighbourhood.

\textsuperscript{48} Nguyen Tang Nghi, Huynh Ho Dai Nghia: India's Look East Policy in the Early Years of the 21st Century-Place and Role in the East Sea, Journal of Indian and Asian Studies, pp. 32-41.
\textsuperscript{50} Vision Statement ASEAN – India Commemorative Summit, New Delhi 20/12/2012.
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