

## **Looking East – from Kolkata**

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It was a balmy October evening in Kolkata, the year: 2004. Myanmar's 'strong man' Senior General Than Shwe had just finished attending the Governor's banquet at Raj Bhavan. He moved to the main balcony, inquired about easterly direction, and then stood there, gazing towards his country and Southeast Asia. Remembering that he had posed many questions to me earlier that day about old Bengal-Burma ties, I imagined he was contemplating on India's eastern connections - their rich past and richer future.

### **Context**

Last month a sizable group of CEOs, scholars, diplomats and senior officials gathered in Kolkata, at the initiative of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Ministry of External Affairs, to undertake an assessment of India's Look East Policy (LEP). With this stimulating event (where I was a speaker), the year-long celebrations to mark the completion of 20 years of India-Asean relationship were flagged off nicely. Close on the heels came the visit of the Prime Minister of Thailand and the Foreign Minister of Myanmar. All this has set the stage for the 4<sup>th</sup> annual session of 'Delhi Dialogue' later this month when leaders and intellectuals from Asean countries and India will assemble to reflect on major issues facing East Asia today. The climax will be the commemorative India-Asean Summit in Delhi in December.

### **Evolution of LEP**

Sometimes it is suggested that India 'discovered' the East during 1990s. Nothing can be further from truth. Through ancient and medieval periods of its history, traversing the colonial times and following Independence, Indian leaders – political, cultural, others – comprehended the power of multi-faceted ties with the region stretching from Myanmar to Japan. What, however, happened in early 1990s was that New Delhi sharpened its policy focus on the eastern neighbourhood. Asean too, operating in post-Cold war world and concerned by

China's rise, became more responsive about building ties with the rising India. Politico-economic considerations thus helped them to come closer. Strategic calculations in recent years have tended to strengthen mutual equations. From the time of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, the father of modern LEP, all successive governments in India have shown commitment and steadily contributed to it. Clearly it is backed by strong national consensus.

### **And its dimensions**

Scope of LEP needs to be appreciated both in terms of its geographical coverage and sectoral content. A broader interpretation suggests that the policy applies to the entire eastern region called East Asia, encompassing all members of East Asian Summit (EAS). Its membership includes US, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, Asean and others. As evident from the last summit (Bali, November 2011), EAS is a "Leaders-led forum" keenly interested in dialogue on "broad strategy, political, economic issues of common interest and concern" as well as in working to establish the Common Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA). India is fully committed to play its role in further development of EAS.

A narrower but pragmatic interpretation of LEP places stress on the centrality of India-Asean relations. Without a substantive relationship between the two sides, India's role in East Asia could become rather hollow. Hence the partnership with Asean is aptly depicted by the Indian PM as "one of the cornerstones of our foreign policy and the foundation" of our LEP. New Delhi considers the region's integration process as "Asean-centric." Unlike China, India is fully comfortable recognising this, and is willing to move forward at the pace acceptable to Asean.

LEP thus has an extra-Asean dimension through EAS; the Asean dimension through various related institutions, with the annual India-Asean Summit being the apex level body; and the sub-regional dimension that is best reflected in the gradual evolution of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Its next summit, to be hosted by Myanmar in May, would showcase significant progress in forging cooperation in 14 select sectors among its member-states. However, the kernel of cooperation with the

region lies in India's expanding and deepening relations at bilateral level. Undoubtedly all Asean states are important to us, but a few of them are admittedly of exceptional importance. These, in my view, are Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, and among CLMV countries, they are Myanmar and Vietnam. Although a South Asian state, Bangladesh cannot be excluded from the gambit of our LEP. This explains why, especially since 2009, New Delhi has made strenuous and consistent efforts to strengthen relations with the above-mentioned countries.

As regards sectoral coverage, nothing seems to be excluded from the jurisdiction of LEP. Strategic issues, political cooperation, defence and security, economic relations covering trade, investment, technical cooperation and more as well as social development, science and technology, culture and people-to-people relations are managed in relevant flora and with varying degrees of emphasis. Deliberations at last India-Asean Summit covered contours of a rich agenda of cooperation. The eminent persons' panel set up by leaders is engaged in crafting recommendations for taking cooperation to a higher level.

## **Evaluation**

Perusal of official documents creates an impression that all is well with LEP and its execution. Critics, however, argue that the policy is long on talk and weak on delivery. Americans and others have been asking India not just to 'look east' but 'engage east'. Many in Asean capitals believe that India needs to become more active and more engaged. Last year the Indonesian trade minister, speaking in Delhi, regretted that India and Asean got "engaged" only in 2010 after announcing their intention to do so in 2003, but she hoped that marriage would follow soon as well as promising offsprings! Some of Asean spokesmen complain about the slow pace of implementation of joint projects and initiatives, even though often delays occur not just on Indian but also Asean side. Delay in finalizing the agreement on trade in services is a case in point.

A balanced appraisal came from a senior Asian Development Bank official at Kolkata meeting. He praised LEP as visionary stressing that it needed "no revamping", but he added emphatically: "Just implement it!" He underlined that greater connectivity between India and Asean through road, rail and air links,

easier travel and trade as well as setting up of free economic zones and corridors was essential for imparting substance to LEP. Besides, implementation “at the ground level” needs radical improvement.

A major weakness relates to the policy’s internal dimension. Can India really conduct an effective LEP without optimal engagement of its own East i.e. the area comprising not only the North Eastern Region but also West Bengal, Orissa and perhaps Andhra Pradesh? A close linkage between economic cooperation with East Asia and accelerated development of Eastern India is absolutely essential. Only then India can truly emerge as a power to reckon with, helping East Asia as well as herself.

### **A suggestion**

A useful step, in this context, would be to host the next three annual sessions of ‘Delhi Dialogue’ (after rechristening it) in Dispur/Guwahati, Bhubaneswar and eventually Kolkata in 2015 when our immediate neighbour, Myanmar, becomes the Asean Chair. In our mind space, especially from Delhi, Southeast Asia still seems far, but it is quite near from Eastern India.

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