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## India and Southeast Asia A Personal Narrative from Chennai

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# India and Southeast Asia

## A Personal Narrative from Chennai



**Prof V Suryanarayan**

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Let me begin the essay by stating the obvious. India has land boundaries with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar and maritime borders with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. The twists and turns in India's relations with neighbouring countries will have their immediate fallout on contiguous Indian states. If one takes an overview of India's neighbourhood policy since independence, on several occasions, New Delhi, with the objective of strengthening bilateral relations, have sacrificed the interests of the contiguous Indian states.

Let me give two illustrations for this. The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact, 1964, which converted the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka into merchandise to be divided between the two countries in the name of good neighbourly relations, was concluded without taking into consideration the views of the affected people. It was signed despite strong opposition from important political leaders like Kamaraj Nadar, VK Krishna Menon, CN Annadurai and P Ramamurthy. It was also a betrayal of Gandhi-Nehru legacy on Indians Overseas. Second, the conclusion of the India-Sri Lanka Maritime Boundary Agreements of 1974 and 1976, which ceded the island of Kachchatheevu to Sri Lanka and bartered away the traditional fishing rights enjoyed by the Indian fishermen, was preceded by strong opposition from various political parties in Tamil Nadu.

It is my submission that in formulating India's neighbourhood policy the Indian Foreign Office should take into consideration the feelings and sentiments of contiguous Indian States. What is good for New Delhi should also be good for Chennai. In other words, opportunities must be provided for the State of Tamil Nadu to make benign inputs into the making of India's neighbourhood policy. May I underline this point by giving an illustration from India-Myanmar relations and how the attempts by made by former Chief Minister CN Annadurai did not elicit any favourable response from New Delhi.

The Government of Burma in the 1950's introduced the Burmanisation of public services; large number of Indians employed in the railways, water transport, customs, post and telegraph, public works and other departments were retrenched. In the 1960's under the Burmese Socialist Programme, the Government even nationalized retail trade. These measures sounded the death knell of the poorer sections of the Indian Tamil community. To add insult to injury, they were not even permitted to bring back their savings to India. Women were not even permitted to take back their Mangalyasutra. The repatriates also complained about demonetization of currency notes, expropriation of properties, confiscation of valuables and unimaginable humiliations. According to the Policy Note issued by the Government of Tamil Nadu, from June 1963 onwards, 1, 44,353 Burmese repatriates returned to India. What is

*Even a transformed Myanmar is still miles away from durable peace. Notwithstanding numerous ceasefire agreements the government has signed with the ethnic armed insurgencies, peace remains tenuous*

more tragic, even after the lapse of five decades, the compensation due to these people have not been settled.

C.N. Annadurai, who became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, when the DMK was voted to power in the 1967 general elections, was very concerned about the developments in Burma. He was keen to resolve the issue of compensation expeditiously. In a conversation with me, Thomas Abraham, the then Minister Counselor in the Indian Embassy in Rangoon, recalled his meeting with Annadurai in the Chief Minister's residence in Mambalam. The meeting was arranged through the good offices of common friends. After discussing the pros and cons of the matter, Annadurai wrote a letter to the Central Government suggesting that India should enter into a long term agreement with Burma for the import of rice and the compensation due to the repatriates should be adjusted in the proposed deal. It may be recalled that during 1967 India was facing an acute crisis in food grains. On his return to Rangoon, Thomas Abraham also made a similar proposal to the Ministry of External Affairs. It is unfortunate, but true, that these concrete proposals did not elicit any favourable response from New Delhi. (1).

*The island of Pu Breush, located in northwest of Sumatra, is only 92 nautical miles from Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Tirupati. Similarly Phuket in Thailand is only 273 nautical miles away from Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Madurai*

## I SOUTH ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE ARTIFICIAL DIVISION

It is necessary to remind ourselves that the concept of "Area" - South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, West Asia and Central Asia - which gained currency after the Second World War was an offshoot of our intellectual dependence on Western scholarship. In fact, the cold war and the legacies of the colonial rule have done incalculable harm to Indian scholarship and thought processes.

To illustrate this, despite our maritime heritage, few people in India are conscious of the fact that the island of Pu Breush, located in northwest of Sumatra, is only 92 nautical miles from Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Tirupati. Similarly Phuket in Thailand is only 273 nautical miles away from Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Madurai. Since most of the leaders in north India are sea blind, Indonesia and Thailand, in New Delhi's perception, became distant neighbours, because they were part of a different area. The Ministry of External Affairs, every year brings out an annual report. In the report, there are two chapters entitled immediate neighbours and emerging neighbourhood. Thailand and Indonesia falls into the second category. How much more near should Thailand and Indonesia be to India for the Mandarins in South Block to realize that Thailand and Indonesia are our immediate neighbours and not emerging neighbours.

It is high time that we in Asia redefine the concept of "area" taking into consideration both historical and geo-political realities. The concept of ocean as a unifying force and as an instrument of regional co-operation has not been fully grasped. Taking these points into consideration, since the early 1990's, I, along with Prof. KR Singh of Jawaharlal Nehru University, have been advocating the formation of a "Bay of Bengal Community". In a wider sense, the Bay of Bengal should also include the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait, which are only adjuncts of the Bay of Bengal. The underlying idea is not to replace SAARC or ASEAN but to have an additional organization, which will bring together India and its maritime neighbours in its southern and eastern sides. What should make the Bay of Bengal Community an attractive proposition is the fact that unlike South China Sea, where conflicting territorial claims threaten peace and stability, the Bay of Bengal region is relatively an

area of peace and tranquility. What is more, India's two difficult neighbours, Pakistan and China, are not part of the Bay of Bengal Community.

Despite obvious advantages, the idea did not elicit any favourable response from the Indian Foreign Office for a long time. In a conversation with the author, Amb Ranjit Gupta, former Indian Ambassador to Thailand, recalled that when he broached the subject to Amb JN Dixit, then Foreign Secretary, he ridiculed the whole concept as preposterous. Amb Ranjit Gupta did not give up; he was able to win over the Thai Foreign Minister to his side. It is well known that the idea of BIMSTEC was officially suggested by the Thai Foreign Office. It was a good mechanism to combine the "Look West" policy of Thailand with the "Look East" policy of India. New Delhi had to fall in line and in June 1988 BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Co-operation) was born. The membership was expanded in 2004 to include the two land locked states of Nepal and Bhutan. It was also resolved to change the name of the organization to Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation. Several priority sectors were identified, but the progress of BIMSTEC had been very slow.

If BIMSTEC has to attain its lofty objectives, the member states, in letter and spirit, must follow what the Javanese call the principle of Gotong Royong (Mutual Co-operation). Today regional co-operation occupies a very low priority in our foreign policy; it must become central to our foreign policy objectives. And when we finalise our five year plans, a chapter should be included spelling out the details of economic diplomacy and how it will give a fillip to regional co-operation. Then only we will be able to infuse flesh and blood into the concept of regional co-operation (2).

As far as civilizational states like India and China are concerned, no epoch in history is complete in itself; it is both a continuation and a beginning. Former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao underlined this basic reality in his famous speech India and the Asia-Pacific: Forging a New Relationship in October 1994 at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. The closer relationship which India seeks today with Southeast Asian countries, as Prime Minister Narasimha Rao underlined, has to be fashioned on twin foundations - the benign interaction of the past and mutuality of interests that exist at present (3).

In its relations with Southeast Asian countries, India has several plus points. Historically Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have been deeply influenced by Indian political ideas, religion, art and language. The spread of cultural influences, leading to the cultural enrichment of Southeast Asian countries, constitutes a glorious chapter in Indian and Southeast Asian history alike. Indianised kingdoms like Funan, Sri Kshetra, Pagan, Khemer, Sri Vijaya, Sailendra and Majapahit; the familiar Indo-Sanskritic vocabulary in Thai and Bahasa Indonesia; architectural monuments like Angkor Wat, Pagan, Borobudur and Lara Djonggrong; literary masterpieces like Ramkien, Amaramala, Arjuna Vivaha and Bharata Yuddha; the Wajang Kulit based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata themes; the living Indian traditions in the island of Bali - all these bear testimony to the courage and zeal of Indian princes, priests, poets, merchants and artisans and the ingratiating and assimilable qualities of the Southeast Asian peoples.

Not much work has been done by Indian scholars on the impact of culture in Indian foreign policy. In fact, as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the fascinating encounter among Indigenous, Indian and Chinese influences deserves deeper study and sharper focus. Equally relevant India has not been able to exploit to the full the advantages that

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we have in the field of higher education. Few years ago, I visited the University of Manipur to hold a PhD viva voce examination. I was surprised to find a Naga student who had come from Myanmar for higher studies. In my naiveté, I asked him, “Was it difficult for you to get a student visa from the Indian Embassy in Rangoon?” The student began to laugh. When I asked him why he was laughing, he said, “I just cross the mountains and come to Imphal. During vacation I cross the mountains and return home”. The Universities in Northeast India are relatively more developed than the educational institutions in the Burmese side. The government of India should immediately liberalise the admission procedures, institute more scholarships and delegate the power of issuing student visa to these Universities so that we could attract more students from the Burmese side.

The delay between assurances and implementation was mentioned to me by Amb AN Ram, who was Indian Ambassador to Thailand when the Look East policy gained momentum. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Thailand and addressed the faculty and students of Thamassat University. Sensitive to the potentials of cultural diplomacy, Narasimha Rao announced that Thai Buddhist pilgrims visiting India would be exempted from paying visa fees. The announcement was heartily welcomed by all sections of Thai people. However, it took many years before bureaucratic hurdles could be overcome and the proposal got implemented. The same delay occurred in the starting of air services between Bangkok and Buddhist places of pilgrimage in India like Varanasi and Bodh Gaya.

### Lessons from Southeast Asian History

Southeast Asia had always been subjected to external influences. But in the early phase of its history, it was the Indian influences that were more dominant. While Southeast Asia traded extensively with China and the Far East, it was from India that much of Southeast Asian religion, philosophy and aesthetics were drawn. As the Malaysian scholar Farish A Noor has written, “The development of Southeast Asian civilization went hand in hand with that of the Indian sub-continent” (4). As the Indian influences began to be felt the local people adapted them “to the lay of the land and the needs of the time”. Indianisation was never “a straightforward and direct process, but rather a selective endeavour where the agency and selectivity of the recipient communities were evident” (5).

In the pre-modern period of Southeast Asian history, there were no boundaries and political frontiers and, therefore, no sense of political loyalty to the state. Moreover, communities like the Malays, Minangs, Javanese, Cantonese, Arabs, Tamils and Eurasian Peranakans have existed long before the advent of colonialists. There were differences in language, culture, arts as well as social customs among these groups, but, at the same time, there was cultural overlapping, cross-cultural fertilization and cultural hybridization. With the advent of the colonial rule, ethnicity got entrenched. As Prof. Charles Hirshmann has pointed out, “More than rubber and tin, the legacy of colonialism in Malaya was the racial ideology” (6). Stereotypes developed and they were perpetuated by political ideologues; as far as Malaya and Singapore were concerned, it was maintained by the British that the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief and the Indian is a drunkard. Yet each, in his special class of work is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised (7)

## II

## HOW TO MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF FOREIGN POLICY?

It is appropriate to pose the question: How do we measure the success of Indian foreign policy? One yardstick is to anticipate the turn of events and adjust the foreign policy accordingly. Given below are two examples, one of great success and the other a colossal failure. In the early years of independence, when the Western countries were viewing the communist world as a monolith, Nehru was deeply sensitive to the changes that were taking place within the communist world. Nehru told President Eisenhower that the United States should not be obsessed with communism as an ideology because it contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Nehru was conscious of the widening Sino-Soviet differences and how they could have benign fallout for India.

In his book, *New Dimensions of Peace*, Amb Chester Bowles has mentioned that Nehru told him in early 1950's that Sino-Soviet entente was unlikely to last long. In September 1959, in a speech in Parliament, Nehru referred to a statement in TASS and how it indicated that the Soviet Union was taking a calm and dispassionate view of the border situation. The TASS statement, as is well known, was the first indication of Sino-Soviet differences being aired in the open. Nehru knew of the heated exchanges that took place between Khrushchev and Chen Yi in Bucharest, he knew of the Chinese anger at the Soviet Union selling MIG planes to India, the withdrawal of Soviet technicians from China and the skirmishes in the Sino-Soviet border in 1960. Nehru dissociated China's expansionist policy from communist ideology. Such a stance enabled India to take advantage of the Sino-Soviet dispute and get considerable support from Soviet Union in the years to come (8).

The failure to correctly fathom the emerging trends was with reference to China. Jawaharlal Nehru never subscribed to the view that China would resort to the use of force to buttress its territorial claims and when the Chinese invasion took place he frankly admitted in Parliament that we were living in an "artificial world of our own creation". Furthermore, on several occasions, New Delhi worked on the assumption that what it wants may come true. In August 1991, there was news of an attempted coup against Gorbachev. The group opposed to Gorbachev claimed that it had captured power. Within three days Yeltsin crushed the coup. Unfortunately in the Indian Embassy's assessment the coup was a success and the matter was reported to New Delhi. What is more tragic is that, the Indian Prime Minister made an announcement welcoming the coup just before it was crushed. Today Unfortunately India's foreign policy has become reactive to international developments (9).

What is more regrettable is the fact that on crucial occasions New Delhi failed to stand by its cherished principles of foreign policy. India's Indo-China policy after 1978 was based on its understanding of the emerging Sino-Vietnamese dispute, the increasing Sino-Soviet rivalry and the unfortunate policy of ostracizing Vietnam by ASEAN, with the backing of the United States and China. Though there were convergence of interests among New Delhi, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta that it was China, not Vietnam, which posed the long term threat to the stability and security of Southeast Asia.

On several occasions, the Indian diplomats adopted a defensive attitude. The decision in the last moment not to participate as a dialogue partner in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur in June 1990 did in no way enhance the prestige and standing of India in Southeast Asia. Rajaratnam, then Foreign Minister of Singapore, made the snide remark whether Narasimha Rao was suffering from "Russian

fever". In fact, if New Delhi had participated in the Kuala Lumpur meeting India would have been ASEAN's first dialogue partner from the Third World.

### III

#### NORTHEAST INDIA: BRIDGEHEAD TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

The significance of Northeast India as a bridgehead between India and Southeast Asia is being increasingly realized by the policy makers in New Delhi. For a long time the security dimension dominated New Delhi's thinking. As a result, Northeast India was viewed as a liability and as a burden. However, in the context of India's Look East policy, there is increasing realization that if infra-structure development takes place, Northeast India could become a point of convergence among the dynamic economies of Southern China, Southeast Asia and India. During Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh's visit to Myanmar in May 2012, memoranda of understanding were signed not only to enhance border development, but also to increase connectivity between the two countries and through Myanmar to Thailand and the Indo-Chinese States.

Northeast India - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura - shares land borders with China, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal. It accounts for 7.6 per cent of the area and 3.6 per cent of India's population. However, it makes up for 40 per cent of India's land borders with neighbouring countries.

The inter-state boundaries of many Asian countries, including Northeast India, are colonial creations. Instead of uniting people who speak the same language, follow the same religion and belong to the same ethnicity, they tend to divide them. Mizos, Nagas, Meiteis are all divided between India and Myanmar. And in times of turmoil, they find sanctuary and support from kinsmen across borders.

After independence, guided mainly by security considerations, New Delhi began to push administrative machinery to the borders. The transition, as BG Verghese has put it, "was not without trauma - civil wars, insurgency, conflicting nationalisms, refugee movements, gun running, smuggling narcotics, AIDS, trafficking in women" (10).

What strikes Northeast India is the connectivity it shares with neighbouring countries. And exploitation of these connectivities could constitute strong building blocks of regional co-operation. It took a long time for New Delhi to realize this simple truth. After much hesitation, an agreement was signed in 1994 to permit border trade; the Moreh-Tamu point in Manipur was operationalised in April 1995. A second trade point was opened in Champai-Rhi in Mizoram in 2004. Another trading point, through Nagaland, will come into force soon. According to Government statistics, in 2011, the border trade was worth \$ 12.8 million. This figure does not convey the truth as unofficial trade goes on in a big way. At an International Seminar in Kohima, Ambassador Ranjit Gupta mentioned that annual border trade is worth \$750 million (11).

Unfortunately there is a big hiatus between Indian intentions and realities. Former Foreign Secretary Amb. Shyam Saran has given two illustrations as to how the Government of India has failed to exploit the opportunities to its advantage. After the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997, India had a good opportunity to build relations with Myanmar in the field of gas exploration. To quote Shyam Saran, "This was a window of

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opportunity for energy starved India. Despite persistent efforts with our Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and the public sector giants, ONGC, Indian Oil and GAIL, these opportunities were ignored and we have now joined the ranks of rejected suitors". The second relates to the hydro-electric projects in the Chindwin river, near the Myanmar-Nagaland border. The entire generated power could be transferred to India. General Than Shwe was very keen that India should undertake the project. To quote Shyam Saran again, "It was an uphill task getting our own government to think strategically and pursue the project expeditiously". Flimsy reasons were put forward like Northeast India was "surplus in power". He concludes, "It appears that after much dilly-dallying the Thamanthi project is finally poised to take off. I certainly hope so" (12). The lesson is clear. If we do not avail of the opportunities provided for bilateral and regional co-operation, India's image is likely to nosedive.

If Northeast India is to become an economic hub and break out of its land locked isolation and fruitfully engage in dynamic interaction with its eastern and northern neighbours, it is essential that it should become an area of peace and stability. This presupposes peace and reconciliation among various ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and the government. This requires an imaginative approach and the ushering in of a political system where multiple identities can co-exist harmoniously. The same holds true of Myanmar. If Myanmar is going to be at war with itself, Indian attempts to forge links with Southeast Asia through Myanmar will be a non-starter. The prerequisite for cordial relations is for Myanmar to return to democracy. During her recent visit to India, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi declared, "I was saddened to feel that we had drawn away from India, or rather India has drawn away from us, during our very difficult days, but I always had faith in the lasting friendship between our two peoples". She laid emphasis on "friendship between peoples", not friendship between Governments, because, she added, "Governments come and go, and that is what democracy is all about" (13).

### India and Democratic Upsurge in Southeast Asia

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's stirring Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial address has brought into sharp focus the question as to what should be New Delhi's policy towards democratic struggles taking place in Southeast Asian countries. The initiatives taken by Government of India few years ago to mend fences with the military regime in Myanmar had been subjected to severe criticism both within and outside the country. It will be a tragic day if India, like China and some ASEAN countries, adopts a foreign policy of cynicism and opportunism and seen as the upholder of the Pol Potist regime in Cambodia, Mahinda Rajapakse regime in Sri Lanka and the military regime in Myanmar. Pro-democracy movements have occasionally suffered reverses in different parts of the world. But the logic of history and the justness of the cause will surely bring about a turn for the better. Did not the dictatorial regimes in the Philippines and Indonesia crumble before the combined might of people? India should not be caught with pants down, a fate which befell ASEAN governments, when the detested regimes of Marcos and Suharto were thrown into the dustbin of history. As Aung San Suu Kyi pointed out in the Joyce Memorial lecture few years ago, "The dream of a society ruled by loving kindness, reason and justice is a dream as old as civilized man. Does it have to be an impossible dream? Karl Popper, explaining his abiding optimism in so troubled a world as ours, said that darkness had always been there, but the light was new. Because it is new, it has to be tended with care and diligence" (14).

Aung San Suu Kyi, to quote Vaclav Havel, "is an outstanding example of the power of the powerless" (15). She is Myanmar's woman of destiny and is the hope and

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inspiration of her people. Given our nationalist heritage, more so Gandhi-Nehru legacy, our principled opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa and our initiative in getting the detested Rambuka regime in Fiji thrown out of the Commonwealth, the people of India owe it to themselves that they back the democratic struggles taking place in different parts of the world. The Doctor in Albert Camus's book, *The Plague*, has the following advice: "All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it is up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences" (16).

#### IV

#### STATELESS PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN MALAYSIA AND MYANMAR

*The status of the people of Indian origin in Myanmar and Malaysia, who despite several years of residence, still remain stateless, should receive the immediate attention of the Government of India.*

Southeast Asia is a fascinating laboratory for a comparative study of the Overseas Chinese and the Overseas Indians. China's bilateral relations and to a lesser extent, India's relations with Southeast Asian countries are rendered complex by the presence of Chinese and Indian minorities. The ethnic tensions in the region are mainly due to conflicts between the Chinese and the indigenous peoples and the role of the Indians is peripheral. The Chinese own disproportionate share of the wealth in these countries and that has made them extremely vulnerable in times of conflict. On the other hand, the position of Indians is extremely pitiable. In Malaysia they own only 1.5 per cent of the national wealth. In Singapore while the expatriate Indians lead an affluent life, the average income of a Singapore citizen of Indian origin is less than the national average. And in Myanmar, the Indian community remains impoverished and marginalized.

The status of the people of Indian origin in Myanmar and Malaysia, who despite several years of residence, still remain stateless, should receive the immediate attention of the Government of India. Stateless people are those who are neither citizens of India nor the citizens of the countries in which they reside. According to Singhvi Committee Report on Indian Diaspora, there are 400, 000 people of Indian origin in Myanmar who are stateless; in Malaysia they number 50,000 (17).

I had discussions with several diplomats based in Rangoon as to why the issue of stateless people never figured in the bilateral discussions between the two countries. Some of them informed me that after establishing good relations with the military junta, they wanted to take up the question of stateless people and arrive at an amicable solution. Attempts made by Ambassador TP Sreenivasan to kindle interest in the subject turned out to be a futile exercise. In his *Memoirs, Words, Words, Words: Adventures in Indian Diplomacy*, Sreenivasan has described the consequences of New Delhi's "hands off" policy with regard to the Indian community in Myanmar. Though the Ne Win Government expelled the Indian petty traders, the authorities wanted the Indian farmers to stay back to provide continuity in rice cultivation. When Sreenivasan visited them, he found the farmers had become "totally impoverished". Their quality of life was "extremely poor". Ironically they did not have even "rice to eat" as the procurement authorities "lifted their produce wholly". "They had to consume low quality rice, which the State did not want to procure for export". (18)

The Singhvi Committee Report's conclusions regarding the Indian community in Myanmar are worth quoting. The Indians are "fairly impoverished", the more prosperous elements having left following waves of nationalization and other measures which hurt their livelihood. The educational scene is pathetic. At one time, the faculty and alumni of the University of Rangoon comprised mainly of Indians. Today, "there are hardly any Indian students in the universities" which has resulted in the virtual

extinction of a professional class. The main reason was that “between 1964 and 1988, Indians were denied admission to the Universities and professional courses” (19).

The number of 50,000 stateless people of Indian origin in Malaysia is, according to perceptive observers of the Malaysian scene, an under-estimate. The number will be around 100,000. The Federation of Malaya Constitution which was enacted in 1957 provided for Jus Soli i.e. citizenship by birth. The affected people, except for a miniscule illegal immigrants, are third or fourth generation Malaysians. But due to ignorance or apathy of the plantation management they did not register the births and hence are unable to produce birth certificates. And if you are not a citizen of Malaysia you are not entitled for free education, medical benefits and employment. The leaders of HINDRAF have taken up the cause of the stateless people.

It is interesting to note that there are large numbers of illegal immigrants from Indonesia, but since they belong to the Malay race and speak the same language they easily get assimilated with the indigenous people. In an earlier period, after May 13, 1969, when Malaysia faced mounting unemployment and the Government introduced the system of work permits, the issue was resolved amicably because of the excellent personal equation between Indira Gandhi and Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. The Indian community also faces other grave problems. The Hindu temples are getting demolished, creating a feeling of panic among the Malaysian Indian community. People of Tamil origin have not been able to get the benefits of higher education and they are becoming victims of alcoholism, crimes and drug trafficking. What is still more saddening is the fact that the Malaysian Indian Congress, which represents the Indian community in the government, has miserably failed to protect and promote the interests of the Indian community. New Delhi should not adopt a “hands off policy” towards these unfortunate people; it must open a dialogue with the Malaysian government to ensure that the stateless people of Indian origin are conferred citizenship.

## V

### CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

China has made tremendous strides in winning friends and influencing people in Southeast Asia. From being viewed as a country which promoted communist insurrections and a country which exerted political and economic pulls on the ethnic Chinese, today China is being viewed as a benign super power. The main contributory factor for this transformation had been astute Chinese diplomacy. When China began its policy of liberalization, it was convinced that if the main objective of economic progress is to be accomplished, a peaceful environment was essential.

Therefore, it lent its support to the process of détente and was keen to avoid frictions in bilateral and regional relations. However, the brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement in June 1989 is an illustration that China's ruling elite will be prepared to go to any extent in order to cling on to power. While there was understandable concern and criticism in the United States, the Southeast Asian countries were less inclined to allow the Tian An Men incident to disrupt their relations with China. In a world of shrinking geographical boundaries and widening intellectual horizon, how can China insulate itself from the winds of democracy sweeping across the world?

When the Southeast Asian countries were engulfed in a serious economic crisis in the late 1980's and the international financial institutions and developed countries like the

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United States, Japan and Singapore were not forthcoming in extending economic assistance, China played its cards cleverly. There was general fear that China may devalue its currency to boost up its exports to Southeast Asian countries. Not only China resisted this temptation, it entered into long term trade agreements with Southeast Asian countries to stabilize its economies. A friend in need is a friend indeed; the Southeast Asians realized this truth. Simultaneously China downgraded its differences with Southeast Asian countries and relegated its territorial disputes in the South China Sea to the background. China gradually emerged as the major trading partner of all Southeast Asian countries.

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The Southeast Asian countries hope that the United States would retain its credible military presence in the region and there will be no major frictions between Washington and Beijing, which will upset the strategic equilibrium. But will this trend continue for a long time? China is convinced that the United States is a disengaging power and in that situation it will be able to fill up the vacuum. At the same time, it is conscious of the fact that the United States is building up a broad united front of countries against China, bringing together Australia, Japan, ASEAN and India together in a broad security framework. In order to counteract this move, China is endeavouring to build bridges with India's neighbours – Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

With China emerging as a major power, Beijing has started to emphasise certain “core issues”, where it will not be willing to compromise its stance. The newly appointed General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping has been defining his mission as the “great revival of the Chinese nation”. As Nayan Chanda has pointed out, to the world outside, “the goal of national revival looks like an irredentist mission that challenges the resolve of its neighbours” (20). From Southeast Asian perspective, the stepping up of the territorial claims in the South China Sea and East Asia Sea has emerged as important sources of discord. To illustrate, China has severely criticized India for assisting Vietnam in oil exploration in the South China Sea. China does not want India to enter into a region which China considers as a “disputed territory”. This criticism is an obvious illustration of China's double standards. As is well known, Azad Kashmir (Pakistani occupied Kashmir) is a disputed territory, but China has entered into several agreements with the Government of Pakistan and is involved in the implementation of several ongoing projects.

It may be recalled that in the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, China's Foreign Minister in a fit of anger declared that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact”. This defiant statement followed the concern expressed by the United States and several countries about the worsening situation in the South China Sea. This raised the reality of the asymmetry of power between China and Southeast Asian countries (21).

## VI

### EMERGING SITUATION: A RESPONSE FROM INDIA

If India has to play a positive role in Southeast Asia, which will enable the countries of the region to retain its independence, it must not shirk its responsibility. It should be pointed out that impressed by the growth and professionalism of the Indian Navy, countries like Vietnam are very keen to forge and promote defence relations with India. According to Admiral Arun Kumar Singh, Retired Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command, Vietnam, in 2011, offered India a naval base in the South China Sea (22). The Government of India is yet to respond. As Admiral Arun

Kumar Singh has argued “such a facility is essential if the Indian Navy is to protect Indian sea-borne trade and ONGC oil exploration in South China Sea (23).

The question naturally arises as to - how will Southeast Asian countries respond in case of a likely rift between India and China or China and the United States? It may be recalled that during the Sino-Indian Conflict, 1962, Federation of Malaya, Thailand, South Vietnam and the Philippines extended their whole hearted support to India. Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia were neutral in the dispute. The only country which supported China was North Vietnam, the reason being Hanoi’s dependence on Beijing for economic and military support at that time.

Two illustrations are given below which will give a clue to the changing perception of Southeast Asian countries towards India and China. In his recently published memoirs, SR Nathan, former President of Singapore, describes an incident during Lee Kuan Yew’s visit to China in 1976. The highlight of the visit was Lee Kuan Yew’s meeting with the Chinese Prime Minister Hua Gofeng. During the discussion Hua presented Lee Kuan Yew with a book, saying, “This is the correct account of the war between India and China. I hope you will find it useful”. Lee Kuan Yew looked at the book, looked at the front cover, looked at the back, and said, “Mr. Prime Minister, this is your version of the war. There is another version, the Indian version. And, in any case, I am from Southeast Asia. It has nothing to do with us”. He handed the book back. For me this was an important moment, a clear confirmation that Lee Kuan Yew, although ethnically Chinese, was his own man, in no way subordinate to China or the Chinese communists. We, in Singapore, had a separate, multi-racial identity. What we made clear is that we should not be taken for granted. The Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua was rather agitated, but kept his cool; his wife did not, and walked out of the room in a huff” (24). Another important incident took place when George Yeo, the Singapore Foreign Minister, went to China in September 2010. The Chinese authorities arranged a meeting between their nominee of Panchan Lama and George Yeo. It may be recalled that George Yeo visited Tibet during his earlier visit and was in full praise for China’s efforts to bring about massive economic transformation. What does the meeting between George Yeo and Panchan Lama signal? Does it mean that in the post Dalai lama phase Singapore will support China’s nominee as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people” B. Raman, India’s leading strategic specialist, has posed the question as follows: “The action of the Singapore Foreign Minister in providing legitimacy to the actions of the Chinese Communist Party in interfering with the religious affairs of the Tibetan Buddhists and tampering with their traditions cannot be missed” (25).

How does Malaysia, which extended spontaneous support to India in October-November 1962 and started the “Save Democracy Fund”, perceive China today? In his recently published Memoirs, A Doctor in the House: The Memoirs of Tun Mahathir Mohammad, Dr. Mahathir, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, has expressed his views of China candidly. To quote: “I stuck up good relations with the Chinese leaders, in particular with Ziang Zemin. Malaysia’s goodwill and support are well known to most informed Chinese citizens. China has now become the world’s factory, churning out all kinds of manufactured goods which are very quickly achieving world standards. Their per capita income is below that of Malaysia, but their population makes China a huge market. Malaysia is China’s largest trading partner in Southeast Asia and our trade volume continues to grow. I hope our China friendly policy will continue. We must not fall into the American trap of regarding China as a potential enemy, you can be sure that country will regard you as its current enemy”. (26).

*During the Sino-Indian Conflict, 1962, Federation of Malaya, Thailand, South Vietnam and the Philippines extended their whole hearted support to India. Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia were neutral in the dispute. The only country which supported China was North Vietnam.*

Until very recently, when the Indian academics used to point out that China is the only Asian country which had used force to buttress its territorial claims – against India in 1962, against Soviet Union in 1968, against Vietnam in 1974 and 1979 and the Philippines in 1986 – the argument used to be received with understanding and sympathy.

I do not know whether Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar and Cambodia will respond in the same way today. ASEAN is sharply divided on China's long term intentions and capabilities. While Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines share Indian perception, other countries are ambivalent. India must step up its diplomacy in Southeast Asia and enter into dialogue with governments and think tanks. We must follow a calibrated policy towards China and continue the dialogue to broaden the areas of convergence and minimize the areas of dissonance. At the same time, we must be vigilant, for eternal vigilance is not only the safeguard of democracy, it is the only guarantee for our survival.

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