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REVIEW

Tango of Neighbors

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ASEAN and India: The Way Forward, edited by Tommy Koh, Hernaikh Singh, and Moe Thuzar (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022), 344 pages, US\$ 88.

The thirtieth anniversary of the dialogue partnership of India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a good time to look at the relationship across-the-board in a comprehensive manner. A new book, *ASEAN and India: The Way Forward*, edited by Tommy Koh, Hernaikh Singh, Moe Thuzar is a timely contribution to the limited contemporary literature on India and ASEAN. The book has forewords by the Indian and Singapore foreign ministers and the secretary general of ASEAN. It touches upon salient facets of the India-ASEAN partnership with a useful method of an Indian and an ASEAN interlocutor writing parallel chapters on the same themes. This provides perspectives on how each views the other on particular issues. It is an easy book to read, though it is not an easy subject. It is not an academic book, yet it highlights major issues.

The book is well divided into four sections. The first brief section

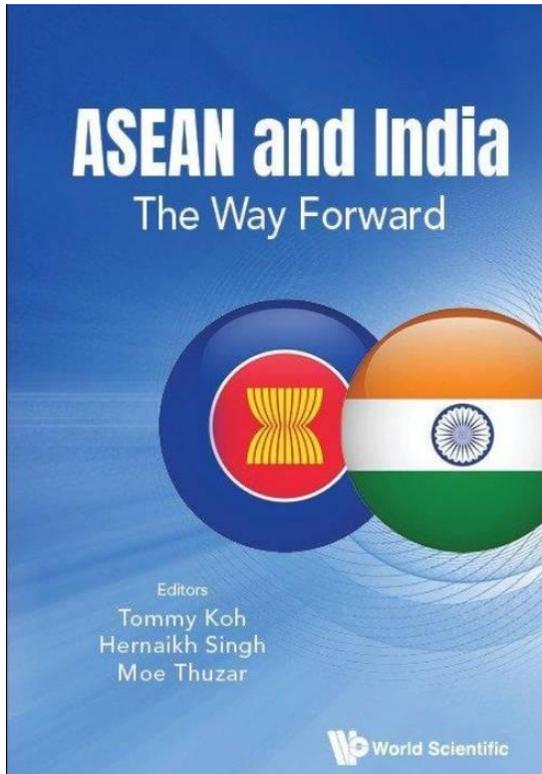
is the history in which Nalina Gopal and Professor S.D. Muni provide interesting insights on the India-ASEAN engagement before they became dialogue partners. The second section deals with areas of convergence, the third goes on to the areas of differences, identified as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China, and the Indo-Pacific, and the fourth section looks to the future in a constructive manner. Finally, the conclusion is written by a former ambassador of Singapore to India and India's current ambassador to Singapore.

The book is an honest effort to present the relationship as it is, warts and all. I found it extremely useful as an observer of ASEAN. Each of the contributors provide their own view and experience which helps to understand the perceptions between India and ASEAN. Like all books, it cannot cover everything but, it traverses immense ground in a cogent and timely manner.

Trade and Investments: Learning from Each Other

The chapters on trade relations come early in the book because these are the essence of the initial India-ASEAN partnership. The disappointment of India's absence from the RCEP is articulated from the ASEAN side. Not enough is said about how India saw ASEAN not standing by it during the negotiations. Manu Bhaskaran points out with figures, many reasons for India to feel disappointed in the manner in which the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN were implemented (p. 21-23). They certainly did not reap the anticipated benefits. The China factor dominates economic relations with ASEAN, and Bhaskaran indicates new technologies and challenges from issues related to climate, the pandemic, and digital expansion which provide avenues where India and Singapore, and India and ASEAN in general could perhaps do more. What is missing from the narrative is why the

success with Singapore is not infectious to other ASEAN countries with whom India largely has to carry on its own bilateral engagement in economic terms as well.



Palit, in his counterpart essay to that of Bhaskaran, brings out how certain ASEAN economies dominate the partnership and why the RCEP did not succeed in attracting India (p. 31). The lack of trust emanating from the way in which the *ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement* (AITIGA) and the agreement on services and investment were implemented is glossed over when that is the essence of the problem on why the economic relationship does not grow. Palit concludes that within ASEAN, it is Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and to an extent Thailand, with whom India can hope to have a larger relationship based on new contours. Interestingly, neither of

the two chapters really talks about supply chains and how India and ASEAN need to integrate into wider regional and global supply chains. How these did not develop, despite Indian investment in some countries, is another matter for study.

Quimba builds on this theme and shows the potential that the Philippines has in its economic engagement with India and why this has not really taken off (p. 36-38). How this may be achieved is understood from the examples he provides of the Indian companies that have invested in the Philippines. The reverse flow from the Philippines to India is not mentioned. The success of information technology and services between India and the Philippines is largely due to the Indian companies that create supply chains of their own. This is a good model but is not a partnership model because it is still between Indian companies alone with location in the Philippines. There is a requirement of ASEAN partnering Indian companies to take advantage of these new opportunities.

Rahul Sen, while discussing ASEAN-India investment relations, looks carefully at the developments since the agreement on investment and services came into effect and shows, through interesting figures, how investment has increased since then. He points out through figures, the sectors which draw interest on both sides. According to him, there are good sectoral opportunities emerging in digital technologies, start-ups, blue economy, healthcare, and the like, that can capitalize on the growth prospects which emerged since 2015 and have greater value in a post COVID world (p. 48-51).

K.S. Thakral provides an assessment of how Singapore built its business relations with India. He recalls how his father and two other people of Indian origin from Singapore went to India and returned with ideas which the Singapore government and businesses fully supported (p. 58). It led to a leap in the India-Singapore partnership, which



remains the dominant one in India-ASEAN relations. This is what other ASEAN countries could emulate, particularly since there are sizeable Indian communities within them who lead the ASEAN-India Business Council, but have not yet materialized.

What is needed is a whole of country approach, with many ministries and private sector working together, taking a leaf from the Singapore-India engagement. Thakral points out that Indian business often sees ASEAN business as a younger brother and says that there are many good examples in ASEAN, which India should be willing to learn from (p. 59). On the governmental side, he praises the improvements in India's ease of doing business but there are still hiccups since the implementation of rules across India is not uniform.

Naushad Forbes in a counterpart essay mentions many areas in which India and ASEAN could cooperate, including agriculture and food security, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), digital economy, renewable energy, and institutional connectivity. He emphasizes crossborder investments to take advantage of opportunities created by the India-ASEAN FTA (p. 70). He articulates the need for India and ASEAN to foster seamless trade and investments which would fulfil the shared prosperity and progress.

Differences Over Regional Security

Political and security relations between India and ASEAN as an institution are considered weak. Sinderpal Singh in an interesting chapter views the contrast between the ASEAN way and the Indo-Pacific way, and basically makes China the fulcrum of how India and ASEAN are engaging. He acknowledges that India's relationship with China has changed without saying that it is due to China's belligerence. He also does not cover China's aggression in the South China Sea. He posits India's policy of dealing with ASEAN with the realization that

ASEAN is not able to manage China under its existing mechanisms (p. 77). ASEAN believes that managing China's rise only by balancing strategies will lead to military confrontation. This view ignores how China has militarily taken over islands and waters of several ASEAN countries which do not find a mention in his otherwise well chalked out chapter. If India and ASEAN cannot agree on how to deal with China, it does not mean they cannot have a successful political and security relationship. I have been calling this the ASEAN Plus approach which India now seems to successfully undertake with several ASEAN countries without sticking to the ASEAN way. There is a life for India and ASEAN beyond China.

T.C.A. Raghavan in his counterpart essay points out these issues between India and ASEAN, explaining that these have to be recognized and a relationship built through such acceptance. According to him, India's Act East Policy is firm as is its commitment to ASEAN centrality (p. 82-84). China is a reality but it is the post COVID world which opens the way for new strategic mindsets. India and ASEAN have adequate space to build social and economic infrastructure which will help the large populations on both sides, and there is no contradiction in doing this and having their separate China policies.

Among the refreshing chapters in the book is on India-ASEAN connectivity from the Myanmar viewpoint by Myo Thant. He provides several details on how efforts for road and rail connectivity between India, Myanmar, and Thailand were made and what benefits can ensue. He believes that a road-based land bridge would be a good catalyst for trade and investment between India and ASEAN (p. 93). It would help in the creation of new supply chains, particularly in the post-pandemic phase. He admits regional connectivity is time consuming, expensive, and often requires the resolution of domestic issues. A lack of



agreement on basic issues often mars the connectivity from being achieved.

The accompanying essay on connectivity by Prabir De is more comprehensive and analyzes all aspects of India-ASEAN connectivity over the last thirty years. He presents the details of the trilateral highway, the Kaladan project, and the Mekong India Economic Corridor. He points out that even the motor vehicles agreement for the trilateral highway is difficult to achieve (p. 96). He talks about railways, maritime, aviation, digital and energy connectivity, and has an interesting table to show performance. There is no shortage of plans but the lack of a will to implement them is perceptible.

Signposts of Culture and People

The two chapters on cultural ties are excellent signposts of possibilities. Their depth of understanding of India-ASEAN cultural linkages and their projections of how to use them for intensified exchanges are indeed superbly brought out. Sophana Srichampa and Rajeev Chaturvedy deserve credit for their lucid chapters. They point out that while the old links exist, new efforts in an interconnected world have to deal with challenges of modernization (p. 114). There is a desire in these chapters to seek collective, consultative, and inclusive approaches for a coordinated approach to enhance cultural ties.

To build on the legacy Chaturvedy points out that there is, “A miasma of suspicion and anxiety”(p. 111). This impacts exchanges, particularly due to limitations of mutual understanding. This is true not only of culture but of other aspects of Indo-ASEAN relations. It is not always acknowledged, hence not dealt with.

This theme continues in the section on people-to-people ties. The chapter by Tan Ming Hui and Nazia Hussain emphasizes the newer aspects of tourism and education as well as the collaboration between

think tanks. In 2019, 5.3 million Indian tourists visited ASEAN countries, whereas India received merely 930,000 (p.123), an imbalance which the Buddhist circuits and other Indian sites have not redressed. The benefit of increased Indian tourism has gone to seventeen ASEAN airlines that had access to India as Indian Airlines have been uncoordinated in their approach to the region.

India's offer of one thousand fellowships for ASEAN students to study at the Indian Institute of Technology is seen as a game changer. Its utilization will tell us the true story. Shankari Sundaraman in a candid chapter seeks people-to-people contact beyond governments. According to her, Indian withdrawal from the RCEP, and the delivery deficit of some of the projects undertaken, is seen by ASEAN as weaknesses in Indian attention to ASEAN (p. 131). She calls for optimizing existing mechanisms and increasing popular ties through more direct flights and a better utilization of existing mechanisms. Better economic relations and student exchanges will contribute to this area.

Areas of Divergence

In its third section, the book focuses on areas of differences where India and ASEAN look at things differently, such as their response to the RCEP, the attitude towards China, and the Indo-Pacific concept. The two chapters on the RCEP by Sulaimah Mahmood and Sudhir Devare are apt. They provide the view from ASEAN and India quite meticulously. ASEAN seems unhappy that India withdrew from the RCEP when so many new opportunities were opening up after years of negotiations. Sulaimah Mahmood points out the problems India faced and the lack of redressal of its concerns in the RCEP negotiations (p. 143-144). He hints that ASEAN countries did not stand with India when India had to negotiate its problems with China, which is its largest

trading partner and with whom it also has the largest trade deficit. China has done nothing to correct the imbalance. The phenomenon of China dominating the RCEP to India's detriment is not entirely understood by ASEAN. Lack of an appreciation of how India feels about the partners that the RCEP was bringing together was perhaps one of the negotiating failures of the RCEP process. Australia, too, was difficult to deal with. Subsequent events gave Australia a strategic sense of dealing with India, and in 2022 India and Australia concluded an economic agreement with immense speed, overcoming the hurdles which were in their way during the RCEP negotiations. Therefore, to deal with India required a strategic appreciation which perhaps ASEAN did not cohesively provide in the discussions. This is often a problem when ASEAN deals with India thinking about China.

The chapters on perceptions of China are splendidly written and analyzed. The chapters show how ASEAN governments adjusted to, if not mollycoddled, China despite problems continuing in the South China Sea over a decade. There is no acknowledgement that China accomplished its conquest in the SCS, while stringing ASEAN along on the Code of Conduct. ASEAN-China talks about the Code of Conduct without the attendant consequences has reflected in surveys showing that China does not rank high among ASEAN people as a dependable friend and partner, whereas in practice, it is the largest economic partner with a strong strategic sway and people to people connectivity with, for instance, two hundred Sister City relationships with ASEAN cities (p. 158).

Such intensity with India has not been developed and is clearly lacking. There is no comparison between the ASEAN-China relationship and ASEAN-India relations. Shiv Shankar Menon, in his chapter, explains how India and China have evolved over history and how currently they remain separate, seeking their own way. ASEAN is more

accepting of Chinese positions and ingress (p. 160). This is the clear difference between India and ASEAN over China. However, neither of the chapters mentions that India and ASEAN need to work beyond the ghost of China being invoked and look at areas where they can work together in the region without drawing upon their relative perceptions of China, which creates problems.

India's stiffening of its China policy following border clashes in 2020 is contrasted with a decade of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. ASEAN reaction to this idea is further developed by Hoang Thi Ha in an interesting chapter on how India and ASEAN view the Indo-Pacific. India pursues an Indo-Pacific policy and the Quad in a manner to keep ASEAN assuaged and not cause them anxiety. This was evident in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Shangri La Dialogue speech in 2018, and in the summit declarations of Quad 2.0 in 2022. It is India which keeps the Quad at a functional level and supports ASEAN centrality, otherwise the Quad would have gone towards a military dimension. This is inadequately acknowledged in this book. Hoang says that the trust deficit that India has in ASEAN, as shown by a survey by the Yusof Ishak Institute, is due to Indian withdrawal from the RCEP. This is an important takeaway that ASEAN sees India's withdrawal from the RCEP as impacting the overall ASEAN cooperation with India (p. 174, 178-179). On the other hand, ASEAN does not seem to believe that the inadequate implementation of the AITIGA by ASEAN, as perceived by India, is contributing to the reciprocal lack of trust.

ASEAN countries should Study Singapore's Approach to India

The counterpart chapters by Jayant Menon and Arpita Mukherjee on digital and e-commerce collaboration are among the best in the book. They not only highlight what India and various ASEAN countries,

particularly Singapore, are doing in this sector, but also cite the bridges that have been built with individual ASEAN countries, again, particularly with Singapore (p. 213–215). These chapters also bring out how the approach of certain ASEAN countries is akin to India's, but not of all. There is indeed much scope for India and ASEAN with their large markets and technical skills to do more in these areas. The India–ASEAN agreements on investment and services are enablers which are often overlooked. An important point made by the two writers is that digital technology will accentuate differences among ASEAN countries and the development gap will widen. Therefore, it is not possible for India to collaborate with ASEAN as a whole, except for policymaking; for real business in digital technologies India and a few select capable ASEAN countries will need to push forward. This model, where India and ASEAN together work out policies and then allow the respective business environments and businesses to create a momentum, is not only for digital cooperation but for other sectors as well.

These chapters are part of the looking-to-the-future section, which is delightful to read because they cover so many aspects where India and ASEAN could actually do things together. Smart Cities, climate change and green recovery, air connectivity, and human security are among the collaborative aspects mentioned in the book. All these chapters bring forth the developments within ASEAN and in India on these themes, many of which are a part of the current India–ASEAN action plan. However, the chapters do not delve into what holds back cooperation in these areas. It is an instructive read to go through these chapters and understand how far some ASEAN countries and India have progressed in developing such ideas, which have the potential for closer ASEAN–India cooperation, provided they are grasped.

The book is dominated by the Singapore point of view since most contributors have a Singapore connection. All ASEAN countries

are not represented among the contributors. Most Indian contributors too have a Singapore connection. Singapore, as the current coordinator for India within ASEAN, is among the most efficient, with clear views. It is only from Singapore that such a book could be expected. Perhaps it is time that each of the other ASEAN countries articulate similar perspectives.

While the centrality of ASEAN is a constant in India's view, there is differentiation, as Dr. S. Jaishankar says in his foreword, on how India relates to each ASEAN country. It is time indeed after thirty years for India and ASEAN to engage institutionally with greater intensity, but with differentiated relationships that India has with each ASEAN member. The book provides enough substantive material to give ideas for moving in this direction, particularly with Singapore.

Note on the Reviewer

Gurjit Singh retired as the Indian ambassador to Germany. A 1980 batch officer of the Indian Foreign Service, he has served as ambassador to Indonesia, ASEAN, Timor-Leste, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. He is an Honorary Professor of International Relations Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Indore. He holds a Bachelors' degree in politics from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, and a post-graduate degree from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Ambassador Singh has authored five books, *The Abalone Factor* on India-Japan business relations; *The Injera and the Paratha* on India and Ethiopia; *Masala Bumbu* and a comic book, *Travels through Time*, both on the India-Indonesia relationship; and *Opportunity Beckons: Adding Momentum to the Indo-German Partnership*. *The Harambee Factor*, on India and Africa development cooperation, was released recently. He is the Consulting Editor of *Rising Asia Journal* and a member of the Rising Asia Foundation's advisory board.