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India and ASEAN: Partners at Summit (review)

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Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs, Volume 31, Number 1, April 2009, pp. 181-183 (Review)

Published by ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute



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***India and ASEAN: Partners at Summit.* Edited by P.V. Rao. New Delhi: KW Publishers Book, 2008. Hardcover: 438pp.**

India and ASEAN: Partners at Summit assesses the evolution of the relationship between India and ASEAN. Although the partnership between India and ASEAN only began to warm about a decade ago, it has been moving at quite a rapid pace since. India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, cooperating closely with the grouping in the areas of trade, investment, tourism and science and technology. In 1995, ASEAN, realising the growing importance of this South Asian giant, invited India to become a full dialogue partner during the Fifth ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum a year later. Since 2002, India and ASEAN have participated in summit-level meetings on an annual basis, which, as the first chapter highlights, are seen as essential and vital pillars for a qualitatively enhanced engagement, which each side seeks from the other (p. 90).

The main theme of the book is based on the successful implementation of India's "Look East" policy and how it has shaped the country's relations with ASEAN. This policy, initiated a decade and a half ago, marked a strategic shift in the Indian perspective towards Southeast Asian countries and beyond. The authors argue that the success of India's "Look East" policy, as evidenced by intensifying political dialogue, expanding trade and steadily growing people-to-people contacts between the two regions, is because India has responded to national and regional realities (p. 140). In the mid-1990s India commenced the economic reform process, which, as a result, provided an opportunity for significantly enlarging its economic engagement with the world. At the same time, ASEAN countries — recovering from the financial crisis — were searching for new partners to strengthen their economies and moving towards economic integration as a cushion against future economic shocks. The emergence of India as a regional power, both in the economic and political sense, has served to fulfil ASEAN's need to expand linkages with their neighbours. With special bonds of kinship and age-old cultural connections, ASEAN and India have found in their mutual interest a path to pursue the goal of a deeper relationship.

The book comprises four main sections: the steps to their first annual summit in 2002; security perspectives; the so-called "China factor"; and bilateral relations between individual ASEAN states and India. The structure of the book is logical. First, the early

rapprochement between ASEAN and India was engendered by New Delhi's attempts to assuage Southeast Asian anxieties about India's growing maritime power. Suspicions, however, were not confined to the ASEAN side. India was aware of being exploited by ASEAN as a counterweight to the increasing strategic and economic clout of China. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee once said that India might go in for an aggressive strategy to match Chinese competition in Southeast Asia (p. 175). Therefore, an extensive study of the strategic relations between ASEAN and India is imperative. And because of the quintessential role of China in the bilateral interactions between India and ASEAN, a chapter is devoted to the discussion of China's place in this triangular relationship. While the Indian view of China's strategic interests in Southeast Asia has remained sceptical, the Chinese view of India and its engagement with the region is no less contentious, although there is room for cooperation between the two powers — especially in the economic realm — with the countries in this region.

The book also presents cases of bilateral relations between India and selected ASEAN members, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Myanmar, analysing them from the perspective of political, economic and cultural considerations. The analysis on Myanmar and how it has been treated as the object of desire for both India and China is methodical as it provides one of the best examples of how the two powers have been exercising their leverage to gain a firmer footing in ASEAN politics.

However, this study on India and ASEAN neglects several aspects of the relationship. The editor, P.V. Rao, emphasises in the preface that the book does not claim to examine all the aspects of India-ASEAN relations. Nevertheless, the book would have been more comprehensive if it had included a more detailed discussion of the economic nexus. Indeed, economic interests have been one of the key factors behind the deepening of bilateral relations, and particularly for India, the foundation of its "Look East" policy. [It is difficult to single out "economic" as the key consideration for India. "Look East" was equally strategic in nature.] In addition, the discussion on the historical and cultural linkages between the people of ASEAN and India and the role of the Indian diasporas in the region is scant in this volume. The cultural ties are, in reality, a dominant feature of India-ASEAN relations.

Another shortcoming is that the selection of bilateral studies is somewhat restricted. The book could have explored further India's relations with Thailand, one of the two countries with which New

Delhi has inked a free trade agreement, and with Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world that happens to be situated in the Straits of Malacca, an area of vital strategic importance to New Delhi. The study also overlooks the importance of connecting India's effort at bilateralism and multilateralism, particularly at the time the country is striving to cultivate ties with individual members of ASEAN and with ASEAN as an organization. However, the strong point of this publication is its extensive coverage and insightful analysis of certain aspects of relations between India and ASEAN. More importantly, the project reflects the need from both sides, India and ASEAN, to realise and fulfil their potential as meaningful partners in this shifting political environment and more economically competitive setting.