

Connectivity with ASEAN, Defence Cooperation and Fight against Terrorism

PK CHAKRAVORTY

Introduction

India is blessed to be in South Asia which today is a dynamic region with a population of 1.67 billion people and economic growth of 7.1 percent over the last decade. However, India's neighbourhood is the least economically integrated region around the world with, intra-regional trade totalling to \$28 billion which is less than 5 percent of the total economic trade. Myanmar is a neighbour of India and is a part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The group comprises Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Vietnam.¹ Strategic security is provided by connectivity. In international politics, the term strategic embodies interest-based priorities which have implications for the country.² India is straining every nerve to improve its connectivity within the country and with its neighbourhood. Extension of this connectivity to ASEAN through Myanmar will pay rich dividends in the strategic and economic fields. To understand the dynamics, it is important to understand the nuances of India's strategic connect with the world.

India's Strategic Connect

The Joint Declaration of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor or the Freedom Corridor, issued at the 52nd annual meeting of the African Development Bank

in May 2017 marks an important step in the promotion of connectivity as an important dimension of India's foreign policy. The Vision Document states that the Indian initiative will concentrate on development and cooperation; infrastructure, digital and institutional connectivity; skill development and people-to-people contact among Africa, South Asia, East and Southeast Asia as also Oceania. All this is in consonance with the changing global environment. There has been a global trend towards fostering greater economic connectivity among states and regions. The strategic importance of connectivity projects has been realised since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the initiation of numerous projects under the name of Silk Road. Some of these projects are as enumerated below:

- The European Union sponsored trade and transport corridor project, Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA) in 1993.
- The Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan project.
- The integrated energy pipelines project of the Southern Corridor.
- The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) sponsored 'Virtual Silk Highway' project to connect European scientific educational networks with Eurasia through the internet.
- The Central Asia Regional Economic-Asian Development Bank (CARE ADB) project on trade and transport networks in trade and transport corridors in Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- The United States sponsored New Silk Road initiative and the project to transform the NATO sponsored Northern Distribution Network system across Europe to reach non-lethal supplies into Afghanistan through permanent corridors across Eurasia.
- It is of interest to note that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the new version of China's earlier Silk Road initiatives in Eurasia.³

India's recent focus is to treat connectivity as a strategy in the regional, inter-regional and global arenas. A few aspects which merit attention are:

- India initiated the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement in 2015.
- India has stretched connectivity to outer space by launching the first South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) satellite in 2017. This project will also benefit Vietnam given that a ground station exists there.
- The recently launched India-Afghanistan air corridor not only provides Afghanistan direct connectivity but has economic and strategic benefits.

- Further, the India-Iran-Afghanistan trade and transport corridor project centred round the Iranian port of Chabahar is a game-changer in the inter regional part of South and Central Asia. India is planning to build a rail route network to connect Chabahar with Zahedan and link it to the Zaranj-Delaram road network which is also constructed by India. Notably, it is believed that Japan is keen to invest in the project.
- The Chennai-Vladivostok corridor would reduce maritime transfer of goods to Russia to 24 days against the current route through Europe taking 40 days.
- Project Mausam, involving 39 countries in the Indian Ocean littoral is being jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts and the Archaeological Survey of India. It aims to revive communications among these countries located in the Indian Ocean. This would help to create shared knowledge of technologies and traditions. This is a rare blend of geo-culture with geo-politics. Undoubtedly, all this provides India a means of projecting itself correctly in its strategic areas of interest. The ASEAN region is extremely important and we would examine the same separately.

India's connectivity to ASEAN through Northeast can transform the economy of the region.

Connectivity with ASEAN

India's connectivity to ASEAN is through the northeastern states which are landlocked and currently connected to the country by the Siliguri corridor. Infrastructure is important for the flow of goods, people or ideas and allow for their exchange over space.⁴ Road infrastructure is a crucial dimension of development. The ASEAN countries are going to be linked by the northeastern states where road communications are disrupted frequently during the monsoons. Roads inspire powerful feelings, holding out the promise of future connectivity. Dr Manmohan Singh, the former Prime Minister had said, "The government viewed infrastructure development in the northeast as a key element in the strategy for developing the region and increasing connectivity in the country."⁵ The Look East Policy which was launched in 1991 was to improve relations with ASEAN, where the Northeastern Region (NER) would be the gateway to these countries.⁶

The Look East Policy has been given an aggressive look by the current government rechristening it as the Act East Policy. In this connection, it is important to link ASEAN connectivity which is a priority sector for both ASEAN and India. India became the third dialogue partner to initiate an ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee India Meeting. The major projects visualised are:

- **The Asian Highway:** The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is under construction that will connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The first section of the road which is of 149.70 km, connects Moreh to Kalewa via Tamu and is almost complete. The second section of the road from Kalewa to Yagyi, a distance of 120.74 km, is being upgraded and would be completed by 2021. The third to seventh sections, Yagyi-Monywa-Mandalay-Meiktila Bypass-Thaton, comprising 701 km have been completed. The eighth section of 134.4 km which extends to Kawakareik is being upgraded. The ninth section of 26 km to Myawaddy has been completed. The last section extends the road to Mae Sot in Thailand and is of 20 km, in the final stages of completion.
- India has also proposed extending the highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. This is likely to generate \$70 billion in incremental Gross Domestic Product (GDP). India has offered \$1 billion for the connectivity projects.

Apart from this, the Border Roads Organisation is developing two small stretches in Rhi which are located appropriately for connecting Champhai in Mizoram with Rhi. Thus, Rhi would be connected to Tiddim and Falam which would be linked to Mandalay. Accordingly, Mizoram would also get linked to the Asian highway. Further, direct air connectivity would be organised between India and the ASEAN countries. Commercial maritime activity would be stepped up, improving the economic activity. All this also enhances India's strategic reach and enables defence cooperation.

Defence Cooperation

Connectivity enhances mobility and India's ability to interoperate with the ASEAN armed forces. The 20th anniversary of the ASEAN-India dialogue relationship held in New Delhi, in December 2012, elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership.⁷ This would be all encompassing and include political, security, economic, socio-cultural and development cooperation. It is pertinent to understand defence diplomacy which is an important term in the strategic literature of the world. Historically, the roles of the soldier and the diplomat were substantively different. The soldier took on when diplomacy failed. Once the soldiers completed their mission, the diplomats came in, to resolve issues. With the end of World War II, defence capability gained prominence, and with that, became a part of a nation's diplomacy. Today, smart power has gained prominence and India and the ASEAN have both realised the same. It is pertinent

to note that for long, ASEAN'S defence cooperation was largely the purview of one or two states in the traditional area of military cooperation. This aspect of sectoral cooperation within ASEAN increasingly came to be referred to as defence diplomacy. It comprised essentially the following:

- Contacts between senior military and civilian officials dealing with defence.
- Defence attachés playing their traditional role in various countries.
- Agreements pertaining to defence cooperation which were bilateral.
- Training of personnel.
- Ship visits, and visits by Army and Air Force personnel between member countries.
- Limited exchange of military intelligence.
- Provision of military equipment to other countries.
- Assistance by military forces in disaster relief to another country.
- Patrolling by the Navy and Air Force of common areas such as Straits of Malacca and Gulf of Thailand, bilaterally and multilaterally.
- Training exercises which were bilateral or multilateral. ASEAN member states were involved in military exercises with the United States, China, Britain, Australia and China.

India is an important defence partner for ASEAN due to its vast warfare experience.

As an organisation, ASEAN was an economic grouping, with minimum emphasis on security. Gradually, it started including security issues which commenced with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and now ADMM+ 8. By 2011, ASEAN had evolved a defence concept and focussed on:⁸

- Collaboration in the defence industry to manufacture defence equipment.
- Capability development in the field of Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) to deal with natural disasters effectively.
- To find a pragmatic solution to the problems in the South China Sea. This remains a difficult area primarily due to Chinese intransigence.

As regards defence cooperation with India, in the initial stages, the cooperation was only bilateral and primarily involved Indonesia and Vietnam. With the introduction of the Act East Policy, India came to be viewed as a useful

and important defence partner. The ASEAN member states were involved in various India initiated military exercises:

- Exercise Milan, which is a biennial gathering of friendly naval forces at Port Blair.
- Exercise Malabar, which is a multilateral exercise, held annually.
- Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Apart from this, there has been bilateral training with Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The agreement with Indonesia in 2001 has seen joint cooperation with all the three Services. With the ASEAN countries becoming strategic partners, defence cooperation has further intensified bilaterally and multilaterally. Vietnam has a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with India. India firmly supports the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea and believes in freedom of navigation on the high seas.

Fight Against Terrorism

During various ASEAN Summits, Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought the backing of ASEAN nations for the adoption of a global convention on terrorism mooted by India to step up the fight against global terror. Research suggests that, on an average, 32,600 people die every year due to terrorism incidents. The Terrorism Index, with the terror rating of any country, can be analysed by the Global Terrorism Index. The top five countries with their terror ratings are Iraq—10.00, Afghanistan—9.44, Nigeria—9.01, Syria—8.6 and Pakistan—8.44. The next is Yemen, followed by Somalia and India with a rating of 7.53; the other ASEAN countries are the Philippines in the 12th position with 7.13, Thailand in the 16th position with 6.61, Myanmar in the 37th position with 4.95, and Indonesia in the 42nd position with 4.55.⁹ Malaysia, though not in the first 50 countries, also has a terrorist problem. From these ratings, it can be observed that terrorism levels in India are high, whereas only five countries of ASEAN out of the 10 are affected by terrorism.

It is important to understand the terrorist groups operating in these countries. In Thailand, the south Thailand insurgency is an ongoing conflict. The Pattani Islamic Movement has been demanding autonomy for three southern provinces of Thailand. There are sporadic attacks by the various groups, leading to a few casualties. The Thailand government is trying to find a solution to the problem. Like Thailand, the Philippines is under a serious terrorist threat. There are several terrorist groups operating in the Philippines and these groups continue to plan attacks with Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and small arms. The groups operating include the New People's Army (NPA), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG),

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and other associated groups. There are elements within these groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which continue to pose security threats. A splinter group of the MILF, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), has undertaken attacks on the Philippine security forces. It is interesting to note that some groups have pledged allegiance to Daesh [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)]. They are spread all over the country to include Mindanao and Manila and commercial shipping. The security forces are doing their utmost but the situation remains tense.

Indonesia is the country with the largest Islamic population in the world. The terrorist movement gained momentum after President Suharto was forced to quit office in 1998 and there were no more restrictions on radical Islamic groups being formed. However, the Islamic parties fared poorly in the elections in 1999. The radical organisations in the spotlight are the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, Front Pembela Islam, Jemaah Islamiyah and Laskar Jihad. These organisations share the aim for the implementation of *Shariah* law, are anti-Western, and their members do not refrain from using violence. The Jemaah Islamiyah has undertaken some of the most vicious attacks in the last 17 years which include the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005 as also the hotel bombings in Jakarta in 2003 and 2009. In 2010, the Indonesian forces had reasonable success in combating these groups in the jungles of Aceh.

An important aspect of Indonesian terrorism is its supply of terrorists to the ISIS. More than 500 people have joined the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, while 100 are believed to have returned to Indonesia after having fought alongside Daesh. These returnees form a risk as they may try to recruit new members by offering attractive terms. It is heartening to note that the security forces had reasonable success in February and March 2017 when they shot terrorist suspects in Bandung (West Java) and Jakarta. It is pertinent to note that despite these measures, radicalisation is likely to continue in Indonesia.

It is over a year that the National League for Democracy celebrated its first year in power recently and the government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been struggling to bring the various groups in the country to terms with each other. In the northern state of Kachin, the Tatamdaw (Myanmar Army) is still fighting with the Kachin rebels. The positive development is that, currently, the Kachins are not asking for a separate state, but for greater autonomy. The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement has not been signed by the 40 armed groups, leaving the entire country in a state of No War No Peace. Day-by-day,

the civilian government relies more on the Tatamdaw for a degree of internal stability. In terms of terrorism, there is anti-Muslim terrorist activity by the Buddhists in Sittwe, Taungoo, Rakhine state and Mandalay. The Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine have tried to flee due to the ethnic violence. Apart from these issues, the Indian terrorist groups of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) have their hideouts in Myanmar but, lately, dialogue has opened which will possibly improve the current situation.

Malaysia's main challenge in combating terrorism is preventing the locals being drawn to the ISIS. While there are no terrorist activities in Malaysia, its citizens have been involved in terrorist activities in Mindanao in the Philippines and also in Indonesia. The ISIS is trying to establish a local Caliphate in southern Philippines and the citizens of Malaysia are getting lured to this trap.

India definitely faces a higher degree of terrorism than members of ASEAN and it would be gainful for both to cooperate in this field. As one would observe, terrorism takes a different shape in each country. To counter terrorism, the most important aspect is to share intelligence. Intelligence sharing would enable India and ASEAN to coordinate their operations and decimate the terrorists. The second aspect pertains to financial support of the terrorist groups. India and ASEAN can jointly share data regarding the funding and take steps to curtail the finances to terrorist organisations. The next issue pertains to training in counter-terrorist operations. India has training institutions which can train the personnel of the member states on this critical subject.

India has a common border with Myanmar and terrorist groups in the northeastern region have held bases in Myanmar. Cooperation with Myanmar has enabled India to deal effectively with these terrorists, thereby improving the situation in the northeastern borders. The Indian Army and Myanmar's Tatamdaw have exhibited a very high degree of cooperation in tackling terrorism.

Conclusion

India is striving hard for better connectivity with ASEAN. Further, ASEAN and India are strategic partners. There is a need to synergise efforts in the fields of tackling terrorism, and defence cooperation, with joint training, information sharing and capacity building to bring peace to the region.

Maj Gen **PK Chakravorty** (Retd) is a Senior Fellow, CLAWS.

Notes

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