CHAPTER-II

INDIA LOOKS “EAST”: IMPERATIVES AND IMAGINATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Geographically, India, as compared to other major powers, is closer to Southeast Asia. In political and security terms, this region is crucial as India’s “extended neighborhood”. India shares a long land and maritime border with Myanmar, which is about 1600 kilometers. Furthermore, the Indian islands of Andaman and Nicobar are more in proximity with Southeast Asia than with the mainland India (Naidu, 1998). The island of Pu Breush, located in the northwest of Sumatra, is only about 92 nautical miles, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Tirupati. Phuket in Thailand is only about 273 nautical miles from the Indira Point, which is less than the distance from Chennai to Madurai (Suryanarayan, 2005). Chennai is 1191 kilometers from Port Blair, Vishakhapatnam 1200 kilometers and Kolkata 1255 kilometers. On the other hand, Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, is only 580 kilometers from Port Blair. The distance between Alur Setar, a tourist place in Malaysia, and Port Blair, is 786 (see Figure 5).

![General Map of Bay of Bengal showing Distances](image)

**Figure 5: General Map of Bay of Bengal showing Distances**

*Source: Nedunchezhiyan, V. P. and Chandrashekaran, A.S. 2005 “Andaman and Nicobar Group of Islands and Strategic Options in Indian Ocean/Bay of Bengal.” In: Nayyar, K.K. (ed.), Maritime India. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.: 89*
As mentioned in chapter one, despite geographical proximity, India and the countries of Southeast Asia have traversed the geopolitical distance between them only during certain phases of history. For most of the Cold War period, both decided not to engage in a face to face relationship, thus, further stretching the geopolitical distance between the two.

Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has emphasized the need for regional solidarity and the exclusion of outside influences. This was broadly in line with India’s foreign policy of non-alignment and independence. Initially, therefore, India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, enjoyed considerable goodwill in Southeast Asia. Thus, the basic inclinations of both were marked by the desire to remain independent and free of external influences. But later, with the onset of the Cold War in Indo-China, India was seen to be inclined towards the Soviet Russia camp, which was viewed with some suspicion by the ASEAN countries. (Look East: Internet Source).

This chapter looks into the key factors and forces (geopolitical, economic, and strategic) behind India’s ‘Look East’ policy in the post-Cold War period. The chapter also examines the reasoning and arguments offered by various schools of thought in India in favour of strengthening India-ASEAN dialogue and cooperation. An attempt is made to critically examine the extent to which the perceptions of India and the member states of ASEAN converge or diverge on various issues of regional and global importance. We also try to find out whether India’s policy of reorientation marks a complete departure from the Cold War foreign policy paradigm. Lastly, the chapter reflects very briefly on the extent to which India’s foreign policy (and diplomacy) has been able to go beyond rhetoric; towards the actual implementation of various bilateral and multilateral agreements.

GEOPOLITICS OF INDIA-ASEAN RELATIONS

Southeast Asia occupied an important place in the Indian foreign policy framework immediately after independence. Nehru was an ardent supporter of the independence of the Southeast Asian countries and organized the Asia Relations Conference in 1947 to discuss the same (Ayoob, 1990). In his address at the conference, entitled ‘Asia Finds Herself Again’, Nehru (1961: 248),
We stand at the end of an era and on the threshold of a new period of history. Standing on this threshold, which divides two epochs of human history and endeavour, we can look back on our long past and look forward to the future that is taking shape before our eyes. Asia, after a long period of quiescence, has suddenly become important again in world affairs. This dynamic Asia, from which great streams of culture flowed in all directions, gradually became static and unchanging. Other peoples and other continents came to the fore and with their new dynamism spread out and took possession of great parts of the world. This mighty continent became just a field for the rival imperialisms of Europe, and Europe became the centre of history and progress in human affairs. A change is coming over the scene now, and Asia is again finding herself. We live in a tremendous age of transition and already the next stage takes shape when Asia takes her rightful place with the other continents.

In the light of the above, it is worth recalling the geopolitical visions of the major architect of independent India’s foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru. As pointed out in chapter one, a geopolitical vision involves and invokes ideas concerning the collective mission or foreign policy of a state.

Nehru fully understood the importance of the geopolitical location of India, and that too in a historical perspective. A visionary par excellence, he could describe in clear words the vision of newly independent India vis-à-vis the two superpowers and the newly independent countries in Asia and beyond. India, according to Nehru’s geopolitical vision, had a prime role to play in a resurgent Asia and world affairs. He writes in *The Discovery of India* (1999), “She (India) will either count for a great deal or not count at all.” Nehru (1961: 22) also remarked in 1949:

India becomes a kind of meeting ground of various trends and forces and a meeting ground between what might roughly be called the East and West ...Look at the map. If you have to consider any question affecting the Middle East, India comes into the picture inevitably, if you have to consider any question concerning Southeast Asia, you cannot do so without India. So also about the Far East. So while the Middle East may not be directly connected with Southeast Asia, both are connected with India. So, even if you think in terms of regional organizations in Asia, you may have to keep in touch with the other regions. And whatever regions you may have in mind, India’s important part cannot be ignored...If there are to be federations... there should be an Eastern Federation... Such an Eastern Federation must inevitably consist of China, India, Burma and Ceylon, and Nepal and Afghanistan should be included. So should Malaya. There is no reason why Siam and Iran should not join, as well as some other.
Nehru wanted India to fully exploit its excellent geopolitical location while working out her regional and global dimensions of its foreign policy. Nehru could envision and anticipate, as early as 1940s, the central role that formal regional cooperation was going to play in global politics. Nehru talked of ‘Eastern Federation’ as one possibility of realizing regional cooperation in Asia (Muni and Raja Mohan, 2004).

However, that was not to happen. India-Southeast relations were pushed to the background during the Cold War. Thanks to the East-West divide created by the Cold War ideological geopolitics, India and the Southeast Asian region did not relate to one another in any meaningful way. The Cold War geographies of mutual suspicion and antagonism were such that made New Delhi view ASEAN as nothing more than a synonym for the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and thus implicated in anti-Soviet containment policies. As Rajiv Sikri, (2008: 13), who retired as Secretary (East) from the Ministry of External Affairs in 2006, puts it, “In the post-colonial era, India and the nations of East and Southeast Asia found themselves on the opposite sides of the Cold War divide. India’s immediate neighbours too blocked the natural development India’s link with East Asia. Pakistan (before 1971), then Bangladesh, did not give adequate transit facilities. Myanmar too was a closed society. India itself was inward looking in its economic orientation and, because of colonial links, the Indian elite tended to look towards the west rather than the much less developed east, for economic and people to people ties.”

Initially, India was invited to join ASEAN as a full member at its inception in 1967. What hindered the way were the land-centric, predominantly western, orientations of the Indian Foreign Policy establishment. In 1980, the Dialogue Partner status too was declined by the Indian political elite. By the time the Indian side showed some interest in forging positive and meaningful relations with ASEAN, the latter’s attitude towards India had changed. According to Ayoob (1990: 10-11):

After ASEAN was set up, the Indian attitude towards the organization, during the first few years of its existence, was somewhat ambivalent though never overtly hostile. This ambivalence was the result of two factors: one, India felt rather peeved at being left out of the grouping despite the strong signals it had sent expressing its interest in participating in the regional body; and, two, the presence of two members of SEATO—the Philippines and Thailand—in ASEAN. This second factor led to certain reservations among Indian policy makers towards ASEAN since it detracted from the non-aligned image of the organization and also because New Delhi felt that Pakistan could influence ASEAN in a way deleterious to interests through its two SEATO allies within that organization.
The resuscitation of good neighbourly relations between India and the countries of Southeast Asia got underway with the end of the Cold War, as pointed out earlier. India began in earnest its quest for new allies and friends as the Cold War alignments started withering away. It was in this milieu that India’s ‘Look East’ policy was launched formally by the then Prime Minister of India, Mr. P. V. Narasimha Rao, known for having introduced a ‘paradigm change’ in India’s economic and foreign policies in 1991 (Malhotra, 2004).

As a matter of fact, the forces and factors behind this reorientation in India’s foreign policy had been steadily unfolding all through the 1980s but became far more pronounced and consequential in the early 1990s. India’s resolve to reorient itself to its ‘east’ in the post-Cold War period can be approached and analyzed from two broad perspectives. Firstly, it can be argued that India’s relations with Southeast Asia go back in antiquity, (as pointed out in chapter one) and therefore it was not entirely a new phenomenon. India was, therefore, quick to realize the significance of the rich past of shared cultures, religions, and commercial ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. Secondly, this reorientation reflected a change in the attitude of the Foreign Policy establishment of India towards the East-West divide. The ‘East’, especially with its enticing commercial potential, caught the attention of New Delhi. India started paying attention to its ‘East’, shifting its focus from the western neighbours. Sikri (2008: 13) remarks that it was the outcome of “the ineluctable logic of globalization made it impossible for India to continue on its autarkic path of development”. After the Soviet Union, which was a major partner of India, collapsed, the former had to search for new moorings for its economic growth and development. India’s political elite was now convinced that the “Asian heartland is part of the future” (Verghees, 2000).

Modern communication, especially satellites and telecommunication, have shrunk and knit the world. Mountains and deserts are no barriers to aircraft and even modern highways, railways, gas and oil pipelines, optic fibre cables and power transmission lines. The new geopolitics and emerging geoeconomics of Asia must matter. Heartland and periphery have begun to telescope in many ways and with regard to many concerns. Mackinder wrote in more difficult times. The Asian heartland is part of the future (Ibid.: xiv).
However, it is important to note in passing that as Indian elite began to reorient itself more to its ‘East’, the rest of the world was not ignored. Nor was the ‘West’ entirely struck off from the scheme of things by the Indian Foreign Policy establishment.

**Problematicizing the ‘East’ in India’s ‘Look East’ Policy**

At the very outset, when we talk of India’s ‘Look East’ policy, some attention should be paid to the category of ‘East’ and to various nuances that this term has acquired ever since the policy was launched. Where does the ‘East’ begin and where does it end? The geography of the ‘East’ is not to be taken in a sense where it is supposed to objectify a part of earth that exists (and will continue to exist) out ‘there’. As O Tuathail (1994: 531) puts it so aptly,

> Within the geopolitical tradition, geography is projected as natural not historical, passive not dynamic, permanent not transitory, solid not fluid, a stage rather than a drama. Such a map of geopolitics, however, is neither fixed nor faithfully directional. We soon get lost between the lines of these distinctions. What are rhetorically asserted to be identifiable points, discrete domains and clean divisions turn out to be illusive identities, blurred boundaries and slippery semantics. How, for example, are we to delimit a “geographical setting?” Is it the physical environment, and if so, where exactly does this begin and end?

From a critical geopolitical viewpoint, as explained, at some length in chapter one, ‘geography’ is to be taken more as the ‘graphing’ of the earth (Sparke, 2000). During the Cold War, for example, parts of Asia were categorized as South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, Middle East and Far East by the superpowers. The term ‘South Asia’ itself was a product of Cold War mapping of the globe. It was not simply a matter of sheer ‘geographical nonsense’, as some scholars would argue, that South Asia came to be ‘framed’ in a particular manner, excluding three of India’s very important immediate neighbors — China, Afghanistan and Myanmar. On the contrary, it was logical fallout of the Cold War geopolitics of domination and exclusion. All said and done, such a mapping had far reaching consequences not only for the ‘map makers’ —intellectuals and institutions of statecraft in the dominant Western powers—but also for the ‘map takers’ in various parts of Asia. To give yet another example, even though not directly implicated in the Cold War geostrategic containment of the ‘Evil Empire’, India’s
Foreign Policy establishment chose to pay far less attention to China and Myanmar despite the obvious geophysical proximity (Singh, 2000 a).

When the ‘Look East’ policy was initially launched in the early nineties, it was meant to include ASEAN, Japan and the Koreas. However, the core of the policy remained ASEAN, specifically the vibrant economies of ASEAN countries (Saint-Mezard, 2001). A troubled neighbor like Myanmar, which happens to share a 1600 kilometers long boundary with India, and was not a member of ASEAN, did not fit into the emerging paradigm of India’s ‘eastern neighborhood’ and was totally neglected. However, with Myanmar’s integration into ASEAN in 1997, India’s ‘extended neighborhood’ turned into ‘immediate neighborhood’ within a short span of time.

During the United Front government in New Delhi, the then External Affairs Minister, I. K. Gujral (1996: 1526) remarked in Jakarta on 24 July 1996 (on the occasion of the Post Ministerial Conference of ASEAN) that within the paradigm of India’s ‘Look East’ Policy, ASEAN was the core of Asia’s larger regional and global engagement. He said,

We are geographically inseparable, culturally conjoined and now more than ever before, economically and strategically interdependent and complementary... ASEAN is now in many ways the core of India’s larger regional and global engagement—in South East Asia and Indo-China, in East Asia, in the Asia-Pacific and Europe. What Look East really means is that an outward looking India is gathering all forces of dynamism, domestic and regional and is directly focusing on establishing synergies with a fast consolidating neighborhood to its East in the Mother Continent of Asia (Ibid.).

Thus, it was obvious from Mr. Gujral’s speech that the ‘East’, as being referred to by him, consisted largely of ASEAN. If we look at the deeper context, this was the time when India had just been elevated to the Full Dialogue Partner status by ASEAN, and a good deal of emphasis was placed on greater interface between India and ASEAN-wide institutions, arrangements and structures.

During the Plenary Session of Second India-ASEAN Business Summit, the then External Affairs Minister of India, Yashwant Sinha, said in his address that India’s ‘Look East’ policy was not restricted to the countries of the ASEAN, but extended to Northeast
Asia as well which included Japan, China and the Koreas. Mr. Sinha (2003b: Internet Source) remarked,

India's 'Look East' policy has now entered its Phase II. Phase I was focused primarily on the ASEAN countries and on trade and investment linkages. Phase II is characterized by an expanded definition of 'East' extending from Australia to China and East Asia with ASEAN as its core. Phase II marks a shift in focus from exclusively economic issues to economic and security issues including joint efforts to protect sea lanes, coordination on counter terrorism etc.

Thus, moving along the 'blurred boundaries' and 'slippery semantics' (O Tuathail, 1994), the 'East' in India's 'Look East' policy acquired an expanded meaning. With the changing orientations of the Indian Foreign Policy establishment, lately, 'East' has gone beyond the ASEAN geographies, encompassing powers like Japan, China, the Koreas and Australia. The concept of 'extended neighborhood', as popularized by various Indian political leaders, especially I.K. Gujral and Jaswant Singh, has come to stay.

The persistently evolving meaning of 'East' can also be observed in a speech given by India's External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee (2007a: Internet Source) in Korea,

I would like to put forth before you the way India has sought to integrate with Asia in general. To begin with, we focused very much on the ASEAN. Beginning from a sectoral partner, our association with ASEAN evolved into a Full Dialogue Partner and finally to a Summit Partner. We have close relations with all countries in the region and our economic and cultural ties will get stronger by the day as travel, tourism and business reinforce regional interaction. This is but one aspect. The second aspect has been that our own relations with East Asian countries have been growing rapidly, whether it is with ROK or China or Japan.

However, according to Naidu (2005b), in the mental maps of the Ministry of External Affairs, the 'East' in India's 'Look East' policy has come to mean the entire Asia-Pacific region, but the thrust area is still Southeast Asia. The Annual Report of India's Ministry of External Affairs (2004-05), Government of India, mentions that India’s ‘Look East’ policy is extended to the Pacific region in its second phase. In this phase the policy includes, under its aegis, countries like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Republic of Korea and Papua New Guinea.
In brief, this is how different meanings have been attributed to ‘East’ over a period of time. Since a number of actors and institutions have been involved in driving and shaping the knowledge production regarding India-ASEAN relations, it is neither feasible nor desirable to locate India’s ‘Look East’ policy within rigid geographical boundaries or parameters.

INDIA’S ‘LOOK EAST’ POLICY: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The analysis so far shows beyond doubt that India’s ‘Look East’ policy was not a fluke by any chance but a convergence of a variety of external and internal factors. In order to understand this policy, it is crucial in the first place to appreciate the broader context of the post-Cold War geopolitical order, which, it is possible to argue, is still in the process of making.

The Cold War context had been very different, comprising a world of static polarizations divided into two hostile camps, which were rooted in the ideological geopolitics. The geographies of international relations were being written with phraseology like ‘containment’, ‘domino theory’, ‘expansionism’ and ‘enemy’ (Agnew, 2003). However, with the Cold War geographies disintegrating, new orientations became the need of the hour so as to steer through the globe that had started spinning at the end of the Cold War.

The context of the ‘Look East’ policy can be studied at three hierarchical levels—domestic, regional and global. Nevertheless, all three categories are inclusive and overlapping rather than exclusive (Sridharan, 2001). A number of actors have been involved in working out the contours of India-ASEAN relations, including Ministry of External Affairs, Home Ministry, Defence Ministry, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Ministry of Finance, institutions like Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), economic agencies such as the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), and think tanks such as Institute of Strategic analysis (IDSA), Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS). These sites have their own reasonings and visions regarding India-ASEAN relations. This point will be elaborated further in the discussion to follow.
The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, mentioned for the first time the expression ‘Look East’ policy in the 1995-96 issue of its Annual Report. However, the then Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Ambassador A.N. Ram, who was handling the ‘Look East’ policy, has argued that this policy had already been launched in 1992, when Narasimha Rao visited Singapore, the first of any ASEAN countries (Nanda, 2003). After the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Dhaka in April 1993, Narasimha Rao paid a two-day visit to Thailand; the first visit to Thailand after any Indian Prime Minister since Rajiv Gandhi’s trip in 1986. The visit (the very first by Narasimha Rao to an ASEAN country as Prime Minister), attracted a good deal of interest because of Rao government’s moves towards economic and trade liberalization and search for closer relations with ASEAN countries in these terms. Mr. Rao is reported to have said:

While in those days the Cold War was at its peak, and, therefore, the super powers were looked upon with some caution mixed with suspicion, it is gratifying to note that the ASEAN can only speak from a position of strength at the same table with the US, Russia, China and Japan... The stakes in the Asia Pacific region are, indeed, high. They involve rights of passage through crucial waterways, security of navigation from piracy, claims over disputed lands, maritime zones and recourses and hostilities through history that have been defused but not dispelled...India has already taken steps to liberalize its currency regime, open the economy to more inputs and investment, and educate its people on the benefits of exposure to the outside world. The Asia-pacific could be the springboard for our leap into the global marketplace” (cited in Nanda: 2003: 274-275) (emphasis supplied).

India’s ‘Look East’ policy received a big boost with ASEAN’s decision to make India a Sectoral Dialogue Partner at the fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 1992, and the very next year India was awarded the coveted status. In 1995, India graduated to a Full Dialogue Partner status in the Summit held in Bangkok. Only within a couple of years, India became a member of the political arm of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Summit Partner in 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (see Annexure A). Over the years India has become a part of various dialogue mechanisms of ASEAN. These include platforms like ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) in the form of the ASEAN+10 and ASEAN+1 interactions; ASEAN-India Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM); ASEAN-India joint Coordinating Committee (JCC); ASEAN-India Working Group; and specialized working groups in various areas where ASEAN and India are
cooperating, for example, science and technology, trade and investment, and transport and infrastructure (Joint Statement, 2002: Internet Source). There has been an exchange of a number of official visits between India and ASEAN countries and a number of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements have been signed since the ‘Look East’ policy has been announced (see Annexures B, C and D).

It is useful to keep in mind that the rubric of India’s ‘Look East’ policy was decided by Narasimha Rao himself during his tenure as the Prime Minister of India from 1991 to 1995. The main thrust of the ‘Look East’ policy, in his words, was "to draw, as much as possible, investment and cooperation from the Asia-Pacific countries, in consonance with our common concept and solidarity and my faith in our common destiny” (cited in Acharya, 2005).

INDIA- ASEAN DIALOGUE: CHANGING IMAGES OF ‘SELF’ AND ‘OTHER’ IN THE POST COLD WAR ERA

India’s ‘Look East’ policy is driven by a mix of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic logics. The texuality of India’s ‘Look East’ policy, as written by the Indian intellectuals of statecraft, cannot be detached from the broader global context of the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet empire by 1991. Francis Fukuyama (2006: 107) went on to claim the end of the Cold War as the ‘end of history and ideology’. He remarked,

The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism…What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This is not to say that there will no longer be events to fill the pages of Foreign Affairs’ yearly summaries of international relations, for the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is yet incomplete in the real or material world. But there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material world in the long run (Ibid.).
After the end of the Cold War, Nye (1992: 1079) said, “The world has changed more rapidly in the past two years than at any time since 1945.” The broader canvas of the world affairs by 1992 revealed a pattern where the Soviet Union reached its final collapse and India’s relations with its so-called Cold War ally suddenly lost meaning.

In such a transformed global scenario, the size of American forces got reduced in the Indian Ocean region. The Soviets withdrew their troops from the Cam Rahn Bay and Da Nang in Vietnam and the Americans packed up their military bases from the Subic Bay in the Philippines (Nanda, 2003; Battacharya, 1991). Consequently, it provided an opportunity for the countries like China to fill up the power vacuum. The apprehension regarding the hegemonic designs of China was shared by both India and the ASEAN countries. Both India and China seemed to be contending for the Asian leadership role. China was already implicated in the military offensive in the South China Sea as it controlled the Paracels and the Spratley group of islands (Singh, 2001c). Thus, the end of the Cold War provided an opportunity for both ASEAN and India to focus on promoting a strategic environment in Asia that was free of thorny issues that had complicated relations between the two sides. After the end of the Cold War, the dynamics of Indian foreign policy changed and ideological preferences began giving way to pragmatism.

For more than four decades, India and ASEAN perceptions vis-a-vis each other had remained a hostage to the Cold War cartographies. But with the end of the Cold War, mental maps and geopolitical imaginations of the establishments world over underwent a change. Perceptions are important in so far as they enable a situation to be defined, the international or regional context to be understood and the various options for actions to be explored. Perceptions are determined values, beliefs and cognitions interpreting a decision. Among the variables affecting foreign policy behavior, perceptions form a vital link in the decisional chain (Sridharan, 2001). It is extremely crucial, therefore, to take into account the role of perceptions in India-ASEAN relations. As Tilman (1987: 12) puts it succinctly, “Many nations perceive tigers on their doorsteps, and it is important to find out where they think these tigers come from, why they feel the tigers choose these particular front doors, what they propose to do about them”. Furthermore in order to securitize one’s national interests, a country has to find out who is an enemy, what are their motives, and why are they enemies. This phenomenon involves the creation of perceptions regarding the enemy (Ibid.).
Mr. I. K. Gujral (1996: 1528), the then External Affairs Minister of India, is reported to have remarked insightfully that, “the ASEAN decision to make India a Full Dialogue Partner is based on your farsighted assessment about the political and strategic convergence, acceleration of economic relations and their future potential, and complementarities in areas that were hitherto not evident or remained unexploited. *A key objective of India and ASEAN is to move from derivative to direct relationship so that there are no distortions, no misperceptions, no ignorance and no intermediation*” (emphasis supplied). What is significant to note in this observation is the growing appreciation of the role that images and (mis)perceptions in the past have played in India-ASEAN relations and how central as well as critical this factor could be in the process of a meaningful ‘re-orientation’ of India’s Foreign Policy.

The geopolitical shift in India’s approach towards her eastern neighbors had started taking place towards the late 1970s and the early 1980s. During this time, the US-led war in Indochina had ended, and more importantly the rift between China and Vietnam had begun to surface. Thus began the two-way change in perceptions between India and the ASEAN countries. The Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s had already made ASEAN countries uneasy towards the northern neighbor. The Indian Establishment adopted a condemning stance towards the Soviet Union regarding her invasion of Afghanistan overtly. Moreover, India decided to recognize the Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea in 1981. All this made ASEAN countries look at India in a new light, redeeming her of her Soviet tutelage. Thus, began the Indian reciprocation to the ASEAN’s tilt towards her (Ayoob, 1990).

It was rather a complex interplay of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic forces that was responsible for the realignment of India’s Foreign Policy. The oil crisis of 1970s, and the problems within Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) over pricing policy and production quotas, and the continued depression in oil prices (despite the uncertainties caused by the Iran-Iraq war) sent clear signals to New Delhi that the end of the oil bonanza and, therefore, of the economic boom in the gulf, was near. As Ayoob (Ibid.: 23-24) has pointed out, “this carried major implications for India’s foreign economic policy since it reduced appreciably the attractiveness of the Gulf and the Middle East as markets for India’s surplus manpower and for the country’s technical and industrial expertise. Furthermore, the continuing conflict between Iran and
Iraq, two of India’s most important economic partners in the Gulf, both in terms of oil supply and as markets for Indian technology, expertise, and manufactured products, led to an enormous drain on the resources of both countries and drastically reduced their capacity for mutually profitable economic transactions with India.” Such economic imperatives led India to look for alternative markets for both its surplus manpower and its technical and industrial expertise. In Indian perceptions, engaging Southeast Asia seemed to be far more superior option as compared to relatively poor Africa or geographically far more distant Latin America (Ayoob, 1990).

Also, towards the end of 1980s, there was a general feeling in New Delhi that India’s preoccupation with its western neighborhood had turned out to be rather counterproductive, or even futile. Another reason responsible for India ‘downgrading’ its eastern neighbors on its foreign policy agenda was the Pakistan factor. This factor had been an important one in the Indian scheme of things immediately after the independence so that India could checkmate Pakistan in the Muslim-dominated Middle East. It became a lot more meaningful at a time when Pakistan tried to play the Muslim card to give its existence meaning and strength to compete with India for power (Ibid.).

As pointed out in chapter one, India’s reorientation in the post-Cold War period was a result of global systemic transformations. By early 1990s, the process of regionalization had grown worldwide. ASEAN had emerged as a successful grouping, the European Union integration talks for resumption were going on, and North Atlantic free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) negotiations were on their way. In a newly emerging world order, where the Cold War allies and enemies were in search of new allies and alliances, the Indian Foreign Policy establishment realized the critical importance of forging friendly ties with countries located in Southeast Asia and even beyond (Dubey, 1992).

To quote the Indian External Affairs Minister, Mr. Mukherjee (2007a: Internet Source),

As the international order witnesses this significant structural transformation, we are engaged in our own process of enabling change and in reformulating our external priorities. It began when India launched its “Look East Policy” in the early 1990s. That fundamental new step was not merely the outcome of economics; it was a strategic shift in India’s vision of the world in the 21st century.
The geoeconomic imperative, even though one among several other factors that mattered, turned out to be one of the most important imperatives in India-ASEAN relations, as pointed out in chapter one. On the domestic front, this period saw New Delhi taking on the policy of economic liberalization. The Indian autarkic approach to economic development had been shaken with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the process of ‘forced-draft industrialization, long-range planning, and state regulation of industry were undermined’. The concept of ‘economic diplomacy’ began to make the rounds in early 1990s in the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Ministry of Finance. With the trend of economic diplomacy gaining ground during early 1990s, the Ministry of External Affairs got its way to the economic relations of the country; something it had never done before (Saint-Mezard, 2003: 24; Ganguly, 2003: Internet Source).

In view of the remarkable achievements of Southeast Asian region, it was given the priority status by India under the umbrella of economic diplomacy. East Asia soon became the model for economic reform process for India. Once Southeast Asia was placed at the core of India’s ‘Look East’ policy, certain institutional changes were made by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Narasimha Rao, and his government in the Ministry of External Affairs so as to put life into that policy. Previously, Southeast Asian region used to be under the jurisdiction of an official of a lower rank. However, now the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Muchkund Dubey, was asked to take direct charge of the territorial division dealing with Southeast Asian countries. The Foreign Secretary at the same time was dealing with the Economic Division (Saint-Mezard, 2003).

The Finance Ministry’s calculations revealed that the Gulf crises had cost India $2.5 billion by early 1990s. Faced with two options — either to look for some additional multilateral loans or to resort to an entirely new financial and economic course— the then Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, and the then Finance Minister, Mr. Manmohan Singh, settled for the latter. Consequently, the government had to undertake the structural adjustment programme and get integrated with the worldwide phenomenon of economic liberalization. Under this programme, some of the highest tariffs were slashed, domestic regulations on industry were reduced, subsidies to agriculture were relaxed, and the public sector was made to shrink (Ganguly, 2003: Internet Source). Remarks Saint-Mezard (2003: 24),

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Notwithstanding its inferiority complex, the Indian elite came to the conclusion that the so-called East Asian economic miracle could be a model for its own development policies. New Delhi also sought to enlarge ties with these high performing economies, in the hope of getting integrated into the process of economic regionalization in East Asia. India was indeed eager to associate itself with what was, by then, the most dynamic region of the world. Thus it appears that economic considerations were the prime incentive in the Look East.

New Delhi started feeling that in order to get integrated with the growing process of liberalization almost all through the world, India had to get involved first with the trends in regionalization going on in its east (Ibid.). Regarding ASEAN as a ‘Trojan Horse’ of the United States, India had earlier taken the one-sided approach of emphasizing only the politico-strategic aspect of India-ASEAN equation. However, India was now quick to realize that she had long been neglecting its ties, with one of the fastest growing regions of the world, at its own cost. The phenomenal reform process adopted by the East Asian economies inspired the Rao government to regard them as their role model. Mr. Rao remarked on 23 June 1992, in a speech delivered Tokyo, “Indeed, it is the success of Japan, the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs) and ASEAN that have in a way contributed to the dynamic revision in plans and policies for foreign investments in India, and the rest of South Asian region in recent years” (cited in Saint-Mezard, 2003: 52).

The private sector of India also started becoming much involved in India’s ‘Look East’ policy. The increasing significance of India’s economic diplomacy and the growing cooperation between the government and the private sector was well understood by the then President of the Confederation of Indian Industry, Mr. Mahindra (2003: Internet Source). During the second India-ASEAN Summit in 2003, he is said to have remarked,

Industrial output is touching a new high, the services sector is growing rapidly, competitiveness is becoming a reality and integration with the global economy is seen as an acceptable reality. Today, Indian industry works more closely than ever before with the Government of India in driving the process of liberalization and economic reforms. At the centre, in the States, there is a consensus on economic reforms and there is a shared agenda for Indian industry to reach out to the world (Ibid.).
The Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Man Mohan Singh’s remarks after returning from the third India-ASEAN Summit held in Vientiane, in November 2004, also underlined the significance of a transformed geopolitical context within which India had now decided to pursue a new geoeconomic vision (Singh, 2004a: Internet Source),

The end of the Cold War and dissipation of bloc rivalries opened up new possibilities for regional economic co-operation. This created the space for our turning eastwards to engage with ASEAN, which even then had the potential to become a catalyst of economic integration in our region. Since that time ASEAN has enlarged and grown stronger. Our own economic growth has been steady and sustained. The potential for beneficial co-operation was seen by both sides at this time and has become increasingly apparent (emphasis supplied).

Yet another factor to have facilitated the launch of India’s ‘Look East’ policy was the excess of capital and exportable goods and technology within ASEAN countries. The latter was on a lookout for new markets to further its growth prospects. Many ASEAN countries had set the agenda of achieving great economic targets by 2020. This vision needed to be translated through a pragmatic foreign policy in regard to potential partners. China and India were on top of the list. ASEAN found it of great interest to launch a ‘Look West’ policy of its own, primarily focusing on India (see India-ASEAN: Look East, Look West 2004; Mattoo, 2003; Ram, 2000; Annual Report, Ministry of External Affairs, 1994-95).

SOUTHEAST ASIA AS A CONTESTED SPACE AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Rao (2007) has argued that India’s ‘Look East’ policy is an attempt to get into the Asia-Pacific region finally through ASEAN. According to him, India engaged ASEAN for both economic and geostrategic reasons. Rao further argues that India has derived much advantage out of this engagement. India has extended her engagement to countries like Japan, South Korea, China and Australia and it could be made possible only because of India’s involvement with ASEAN. India’s engagement with individual countries has been far more successful than at the multilateral level like ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference and the Pacific Islands Forum (Ibid.).
Another significant geopolitical development which facilitated the change in India-ASEAN relations is the China factor. China has always been a crucial factor in shaping India-Southeast Asia ties. The drift between India and China became evident at the Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian countries held in April 1955. At the conference, Zhou en-lai, the Chinese Premier, stole the show, which had been a joint venture of various Asian and African countries. To add on, the Indonesian President, Sukarno, who happened to be a close friend of Nehru, took sides with Zhou to give impetus to Indonesian ties with communist countries. Sukarno perhaps forgot to acknowledge that it was India that had played the key role in this Afro-Asian movement. The course this conference took was not appreciated by Nehru and he decided to stay at a distance from its long-standing neighbors. Suddenly, the close physical geographies lost meaning and geopolitical distance between the two gained precedence. ASEAN’s offer for engagement with India proved to be futile when India did not respond in a positive light. India’s offer for a dialogue partnership with ASEAN in 1976 was seen by some as an effort for undermining Chinese influence in the region. ASEAN countries could not view Indian perceptions towards the region independent of Soviet influence (Singh, 2001c).

China, being an economic giant, poses a challenge as well as opportunity to the Southeast Asian countries. Thus, what these countries consider economically advantageous to them at present is the policy of ‘congagement’ (containment and engagement) towards China. Also, keeping in mind the increasing American presence in this region, a constructive diplomacy to engage China is considered more relevant. Politically, these countries do not have any serious conflict or clashes with China apart from the long-standing Spratley and Paracel island disputes in the South China Sea. More so, China is a part of many ASEAN fora like ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN+3, and Dialogue Partner. Chinese diaspora is another factor playing an important role in the Southeast Asian societies and states. After mid-1990s, the relations between the two are constantly improving, thanks to the changed attitude of goodwill and friendliness on China’s part. China has started showing respect for the ‘ASEAN way’ by joining various ASEAN fora and withdrawing from the self-assigned ‘responsibility’ of taking care of the Chinese in this region (Roy, 2001: Internet Source).

Another significant geopolitical development that India considered seriously after the end of the Cold War was China’s ventures into Burma including making
available cheap Chinese weapons to Burma, revitalizing the traditional South Silk Route that linked China through overland with South Asia and West Asia, and intruding in the Burmese markets through an extensive economic intelligence reporting system. This seen by many strategic analysts as a wake up call for India. The statement by a Burmese diplomat that Burma is controlled by China proved to be quite provocative for the Indian side (Stobdan, 1993). India understood that to counterbalance China, it was necessary that India makes its own economic inroads into Burma. To establish peace and tranquility in the whole of Asia, India thought of joining hands with China and Burma (see Raja Mohan, 2006a; Stobdan, 2005, 1993; Selth, 1996). China as a significant factor in India-ASEAN relations will be examined in detail in chapter five.

‘LOOK EAST’ POLICY: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SAARC?

Yet another factor that appears to have compelled India to look towards her East, according to some scholars (see Sabur, 2003; McPherson, 2002; India and ASEAN, 2002: Internet Source; Dubey, 1991), is the apparent failure of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for over a long period of time. SAARC came into existence in December 1985 with the central objective of initiating the process of regional cooperation amidst mistrust and conflicts. The hope that regional cooperation in South Asia would generate dynamism of its own, in the process of which, mutual confidence could be built and disputes could be resolved stands belied. The ongoing tensions between the two major players of the sub-continent, India and Pakistan, have virtually crippled the organization and various attempts to initiate and sustain regional dialogues and consultations have proved more or less futile over the years (Ibid.).

On the other hand, ASEAN seemed to beckon as a successful cooperative endeavor overcoming centrifugal forces of all kinds and at various levels. Regional groupings in different parts of the world had engaged in regional cooperation to face the new challenges in the post Cold War (Sabur, 2003; Dubey, 1991). ASEAN countries were also already busy consolidating their position by engaging themselves in higher levels of cooperation. Thus, there was a realization that SAARC would remain irrelevant to the day-to-day problems of the region unless and until its parameters were broadened to include areas such as trade, manufactures, services, money and finance. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) had been formed in 1989, which included ASEAN, newly developed countries of Far East and the Pacific and the developed countries such
as the United States and Canada. Mr. Muchkund Dubey (1991: 1207-1208) is said to have remarked in 1991, “Countries in other regions have formed new regional economic groupings and consolidated the existing ones in order to meet the challenge posed by developments outside their regions. We, the South Asians, are the only ones who stand defenceless against these changes taking place in the world, including possible breakdown of the world trading system.”

**INDIA’S POLICY OF NON-ALIGNMENT IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT**

Nanda (2003) argues that ‘non-alignment’ was yet another reason that went into the making and molding India’s ‘Look East’ policy. India’s policy of non-alignment was primarily based on moral and political contents and made good geopolitical sense to many in a global system dominated by super powers. However, the same could not be applied to India’s relations within the regional system in Asia, especially with neighbouring countries like China and Pakistan. Non-alignment made sense in a newly independent country’s foreign policy vis-a-vis super powers. One could argue that the Korean War, or for that matter the Indochina conflicts, were instigated and exploited by the super power rivalry. But the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the tensions between the two countries before and after that war, the Indo-Pak rivalry, the tensions in the Sino-Vietnamese relations, and the tensions in Indonesia-Philippine relations in the 1950s and 1960s were propelled by forces and factors operating within these countries and not by the super powers. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India seemed to recognize the fact that if she wanted to secure a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, the support of the countries of the Asian region was indispensable. A great deal of concentration on the Southeast Asia and East Asian regions was a logical culmination of such a realization (Ibid.).

**FACTORIZING CULTURE IN GEOECONOMICS**

Diaspora is a very crucial ‘site’ of knowledge production in India’s ‘Look East’ policy. According to C. Raja Mohan (2003b) the Indian diaspora is the biggest instrument of ‘soft power’ for the Indian establishment. For Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to get done what one wants by attracting others rather than through power or money. Soft power is based on culture and political ideas and ideals (Ibid.). The then External Affairs Minister of India, Yashwant Sinha (2003c: Internet Source) had once remarked that India
has always been a significant ‘soft’ power all over the world and will remain so in future.
He once said in a speech, “Non Resident Indians and People of Indian Origin are extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live” (2003c: Internet Source).

While talking about the importance of the Indian diaspora, Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Singh (2006b: Internet Source), remarked on the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas,

To my mind, the most important aspect of re-connecting with the world is for us to reach out to People of Indian Origin. The NRIs and the PIOs are the most important elements of our globalisation. There is a fundamental difference between the globalisation of India and many other developing countries. For us, globalisation is a natural means of linking up with the international community of Indians. As I said last year, if there is one phenomenon in the world over which the sun truly never sets, it is the phenomenon of the global community of people of Indian origin.

Doubtlessly, Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is another important factor influencing India-ASEAN relations, described by some as a “neglected dimension of India’s Look East policy” (Suryanarayan, 2005). As argued earlier, Indians have been migrating to Southeast Asia since times immemorial. It can be said that they were among the first globalizers (Devare, 2006).

After India’s independence, a small number of Indians living in Southeast Asia returned to India, despite the fact that the Indian government would not encourage them to do so. Government of India was of the view that people of Indian origin should stay in their respective countries of adoption. As V. Suryanarayan (2005: 14) rightly points out, “it would be simplistic and naïve to assume that the problems these people face and what the future holds for them are identical. Their problems are intertwined with the nature of their migration, their social and economic status, the size of their community, educational attainments and the majority-minority syndrome in the countries in which they have settled.” However, at the same time there are a number of ethnic Indians who have proved themselves to be men of letters. For instance, the President of Singapore, S.R. Nathan, and a number of ministers of Singapore are of Indian origin. In Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia also there are many leading businessmen, academicians, ministers, doctors, lawyers and diplomats who are of Indian origin (Ibid.).
The efforts made by the Indian government to upgrade Indian Diaspora on its list of foreign policy priorities might also be seen as a response to the emerging contours and compulsions of international geopolitical economy. It may be argued that the economic strategies of transnational groups represent a new source and force to reckon with in international finance and commerce. It needs to be explored further as to how, among specific groups, a sense of collectivism on a world-wide scale provides a key to their success in the new global economy. The potential influence of this kind of Diaspora depends on its characteristics: size; education/skills; income; the activities in which it is engaged (skilled versus non-skilled labor; tradable sector versus non-tradable; hierarchy in the product cycle life–new industries versus mature industries (Chaturvedi, 2004). 

With officially estimated 20 million Indians living abroad as residents and citizens of other countries, the Indian Diaspora has come into its own. A High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora (to be cited hereafter as the HLC) was appointed by India’s Ministry of External Affairs in September 2000, with the approval of the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, heading the Bhartiya Janata Party (to be cited hereafter as BJP) led coalition government, to recommend a broad and flexible policy framework after reviewing the status, needs and role of People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).

Formed under the Chairmanship of Dr. L. M. Singhvi, Member of Parliament and former High Commissioner of India to United Kingdom, the HLC submitted its report to the Prime Minister in January 2002. This was the first time the Government of India decided to undertake the task of recognizing the presence of 20 million strong Indian Diaspora and to formulate new policies for building enduring linkages between India and the Indian Diaspora (Report of the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, Government of India, 29 December 2001). According to the HLC (Ibid.: v),

The Indian Diaspora spans the globe and stretches across all the oceans and continents. It is so widespread that the sun never sets on the Indian Diaspora. The population of the Indian Diaspora is estimated to be about 20 million. They live in different countries, speak different languages and are engaged in different vocations. What gives them their common identity are their Indian origin, their consciousness of their cultural heritage and their deep attachment to India.
According to the HLC, “the Indian Diaspora is unique as it surpasses all others in its extraordinary diversity and global spread” (Ibid.: vi). The term ‘Diaspora’ is defined by the Committee as follows:

The term Diaspora is of Greek Origin. It referred originally, to a dispersion or scattering of the Jews beyond Israel, mainly in the 8th to the 6th centuries B.C. It is now commonly used in a generic sense for communities of migrants living or scattered permanently in other countries, aware of its origins and identity and maintaining varying degrees of linkages with the mother country. It is in this sense that the Committee uses the term Diaspora to refer to Indians who migrated to different parts of the world and have generally maintained their Indian identity. (Ibid.: viii) (emphasis supplied)

In the official understanding of the HLC the term ‘Indian Diaspora’ includes in its ambit both Non Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian origins (PIOs). NRIs are Indian citizens, holding Indian passports and residing abroad for an indefinite period, whether for employment, or for carrying on any business or vocation or for any other propose. On the other hand, the term PIO is applied to a foreign citizen of Indian origin or descent. There is an underlying assumption throughout the report that, “since India achieved independence, overseas Indians have been returning to seek their roots and explore new avenues and sectors for mutually beneficial interaction, from investment, to transfer of skills and technology to outright philanthropy and charitable works” (Ibid. xi). There is at the same time an acknowledgement of the fact that barring some high profile names in the Information technology and entertainment sectors abroad, the Diaspora has been largely left out of the public sight and awareness. The Committee, one is told, is convinced that the reserves of good will among its Diaspora are deeply entrenched and waiting to be tapped if the right policy framework and initiatives are taken by India. To quote the HLC,

The Indian Diaspora has transformed the economies and has come to occupy a pride of place in the life of these countries. Its members are found as entrepreneurs, workers, traders, teachers, researchers, inventors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers and administrators. The success of the Indian Diaspora can be attributed to its traditional ethos, its cultural values and heritage, its educational aptitude and qualifications, and its capacity to harmonize and adapt. By playing a leading role in the global technological revolution, it has transformed India’s image abroad. While it continues to flourish in different countries and in different walks of life, it continues to be rooted in ancient cultural heritage; at the same time, it is uplifted by India’s prosperity and progress. (Ibid.: vi).
In the discourse of Indian Diaspora, another region of tremendous significance is Southeast Asia. This is also reflected to a significant extent, in our view, in India’s ‘Look East’ policy. Table 1 shows the number of NRIs and PIOs residing in various ASEAN countries.

Table 1: Number of NRIs and PIOs in the Countries of ASEAN.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>NRIs</th>
<th>PIOs</th>
<th>Stateless</th>
<th>Percentage of the Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>333,000</td>
<td>7000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>11,340,000</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>200,000,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>5,100,000</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>22,890,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>46,500,000</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>76,000,000</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3,160,000</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>2,17,000</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
<td>9.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>62,000,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>78,000,000</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To quote the HLC,

The most unique feature of India’s cultural interaction with Southeast Asia, which precedes the dawn of the Christian era, is that it has been entirely peaceful. Its imprint is visible even today in language and literature, religion and philosophy, art and architecture, of the whole of Indo-China, Myanmar and Southeast Asia. Large scale Indian emigration however took place only in the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of colonialism through the indenture or Kangani system, and also by ‘free’ emigration of traders, clerks, bureaucrats and professionals. Thousands of Indians were mobilized to fight in the Indian National Army (INA) in Malay and to contribute to the cause of Indian independence. (Ibid.: xxii).
The HLC is a good example to show that instead of the earlier ‘hub and spoke relationship’ between India and her Diaspora, India has begun to move towards a network design of ‘web relationship’ which, it is believed by its political elite, could prove to be a catalyst in advancing multidimensional partnerships globally.

The HLC brings out in its report that the primary motive for migration of Indians to Southeast Asia and rest of the world was economic. But at the same time, the ‘geo-economic interest led to intense geo-cultural interactions too’. “The case of India reveals how religion-informed cultural rhetoric permeates the global investment mantra,” remarks Chaturvedi (2004). The setting up of the HLC on Indian Diaspora offers a good example of how a particular kind of geographical knowledge about human mobility and population flows is being ‘officially’ produced. The knowledge so produced is not an innocent, objective and valued-at-face presentation of bare facts; rather it is implicated in the broader nationalist discourse. Indian migration across the globe has also provided the right wing Hindu nationalist parties in India with the opportunities for securing sympathy, supporters and funds from this Diaspora. The recommendation of the High Level Committee to celebrate 9 January as the ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Divas’ every year, both in India and abroad, is a good example of how culture acquires a triumph card value (in the hands of the intellectuals of statecraft) even in the game of geo-economic interests (Ibid.).

This point can become more clear in the speech by Dr. Najma Heptulla (2003: Internet Source), the then Deputy Chairperson, Rajya Sabha, at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. She remarked,

Diaspora can be the vital bridge between their respective countries and India. They can renew the traditional linkages for the political and commercial benefits of both the countries. Culture and commerce not belligerence, have traditionally been our mode of interaction with rest of the world. Our Diaspora has taken our cultural influences to distant lands and has kept them alive. The magnificent temples of Cambodia, Indonesia and South East Asia denote the close cultural affinity India had with the region.

Thus the secular-nationalist-geopolitical-economy and the hindutva strand of the ‘Look East’ policy intersect at the point of national economic interests rather than running in parallel directions (Chaturvedi, 2004).
An important step in the direction of channelizing the potential of Indian Diaspora abroad is the establishment of the Ministry Non-Resident Indians’ Affairs in May 2004. It was renamed as Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in September 2004 (Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs: Internet Source).

**Hindutva Discourse in India-ASEAN Relations**

The cultural dimension of India’s ‘Look East’ policy in general and India-ASEAN relations could be usefully approached and analyzed in the light of Jaffrelot’s interesting argument that culture is sometimes manipulated by the Foreign Policy establishments to achieve precise geo-economic or geopolitical objectives. “The existence of common traditions is thus invoked to establish economic links more easily or to enter into regional organizations” (Jaffrelot, 2003: 61).

Nehru (1999) was, undoubtedly, quick to recognize the significance of the Southeast Asian region and developed some kind of alignment towards this region. He writes in *The Discovery of India* that Southeast Asia ‘is sometimes referred to as Greater India’ (see Figure 6). He remarked,

> During the past quarter of a century a great deal of light has been thrown on the history of this widespread area in south-east Asia, which is sometimes referred to as Greater India...from the first century of the Christian era onwards wave after wave of Indian colonists spread east and south-east reaching Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Siam, Cambodia, and Indo-china. Some of them managed to reach Formosa, the Philippine Islands and Celebes. Even as far as Madagascar the current language is Indonesian with a mixture of Sanskrit words...The names that were given to these settlements were old Indian names. Thus, Cambodia, as it is known now, was called Kamboja, which was a well-known town in ancient India, in Gandhara or the Kabul valley (Ibid.: 202).

However, it was during the BJP government in power at the centre that cultural-religious dimension came to be deployed quite forcefully by New Delhi with regard to India’s ‘Look East’ policy. The Hindutva rhetoric placed a lot of emphasis on the common religious and cultural symbolism in India-ASEAN countries.
Timothy Luke (1999: Internet Source) brings out the significance of metaphors and similes being used by the dominant geopolitical discourse to give more substantial meaning to foreign policy. The skillful deployment of such metaphors analogies by the elitist discourse of India-ASEAN relations, particularly by the Sangh Parivar, is indeed noteworthy. Occasional references are made to the ‘cultural commonality’ between India and Southeast Asia, in order to give a deeper meaning to India’s relations with ASEAN.

Their ‘as ifs’ and ‘not unlikes’ can prove to be critical moments of mental metamorphosis, which transform human action and cognition simply by suggesting what seems dissimilar might be alike, causing those who once acted differently and reasoned oppositely to come together. Megametaphors are great, extended, mighty or powerful metaphorics that operate as ready-made, easy-to-use, knock-off modes of reasoning. Great extended forms of mighty alikeness or great difference are the narrative nuclei that sustain politics, enabling those who would rule to define friend and foe, same and other, here and there in the ontologues of their statecraft (Ibid.).

In 1996, the election manifesto of the BJP announced loud and clear that one of the main objectives of India’s foreign policy was the ‘promotion of Asian solidarity’. In the same...
way, an Indian academic working in Indonesia is reported to have said that India understands Southeast Asia because it is ‘like’ India and the ‘culture of the region is nothing but an extension of the culture of India’. Such close cultural affinity, he argued, can help develop better relations between the two (Dasgupta, 1996).

A pro-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) analyst, Kumar (1997), writes in the Organizer, the Hindu nationalist weekly, that Malaysia has a large number of temples and that makes it look like ‘another Hindustan’. To quote Narayanan, another pro-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) author,

Talking of culture, Sri Lanka and many Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have much more commonality with our culture than Pakistan—they even revere Ramayana and Mahabharata as their national epics and have a respectful attitude to our Hindu and Buddhist heritage. So, a cultural Akhand Bharat should ideally include these and not Pakistan and Bangladesh (Narayanan, 2006: 32 emphasis supplied).

What is important to observe in the mental maps of the Hindu nationalists is that Indonesia and Malaysia, despite being Islamic countries, are projected as on the same cultural plane as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are presented as the ‘Other’.

With the BJP, hegemonising the Hindutva discourse, and according a great deal of importance to the age-old civilisational links between India and ASEAN, cultural diplomacy became an important part of foreign policy. The long-forgotten histories were given a new meaning, and the geopolitics of ‘remembering’ was carefully deployed in the pursuit of India’s economic-commercial interest. The context of congealing economic relations with the ASEAN countries was made to overlap the cultural-religious context, and the Hindutva discourse did not hesitate to bring “Akhand ASEAN” on an equal discursive plane with “Akhand India”. This cultural-religious discourse speaks of increasing interaction with the ASEAN countries as, we are told, ‘there are multiple Ramayanas extant among them’ (The Times of India, 12 April 2002).

The fact that India is the birth place of Lord Buddha, has also been emphasized by the Hindu nationalist discourse on India’s engagement with Southeast Asia (Baru, 2000). According to Roy (2004), Buddhism and Hinduism spread over Southeast Asia over a period of thousand years. Ankorvat in Cambodia is the biggest Hindu temple and
a very fine work of architecture. There are many other Hindu temples and *stupas* and pagodas which were built by Indians in Indonesia. He further argues that traditional music, dance and drama in Southeast Asia are based on the *Ramayana* and other legendary literature of India. Lord Rama is worshipped in most of Southeast Asian countries and in Indonesia, a Muslim-dominated country, *Ramayana* is celebrated as ballet (Ghose, 2006). Sanskrit names are very common in Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia (Raje, 2006; Roy, 2004). Bhumibai Atulyateja of Thailand, Norodom Sihanuk (Narotam Sinha Nayak) of Cambodia, Samitra, Sukarna, Soedarshana Sita, Parameswari, Vasuki are the Sanskrit names in Indonesia. Most striking is the name Sukarnaputri Megawati, the ex-President of Indonesia, also holds a Sanskrit name (Roy, 2004).

It is not surprising that cultural diplomacy became an important aspect of the second phase of India’s ‘Look East’ policy, which began 2000 onwards, Mr. Vajpayee (2002b) is said to have remarked in April 2002,

> Apart from economic cooperation, there is much more that the two can work for together...We have crucial stakes in protecting our common commercial sea lanes, combating piracy, choking off narco-trade and curbing gunrunning. We need to tackle this jointly in a determined manner, through regular exchange of experiences, information and intelligence. *Moving on to a wider Southeast Asian canvas, India's close civilisational links with the region go back over a millennium. Historically, we have been linked by culture and commerce.* India, China and regional maritime centers like Singapore played leading roles in the flourishing trade of Asia - shaping the historical development of this region. The cross-fertilization of human experiences and the spiritual interaction between India and East Asia has left an indelible mark on the regional art, architecture, language and culture (emphasis supplied).

The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) is an important institution involved in shaping India-ASEAN relations. It offers fellowships to students from ASEAN countries, and an ASEAN-India Fund has been established to support lecture series from eminent persons in India and vice versa (Jha, 2004: Internet Source). Ghoshal (2007: Internet Source) argues that the soft power of culture can help promote relations between India and Southeast Asia. Promotion of tourism can also be used for promoting Indian cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. It must be argued here that it is not only the Hindu religion that is a part of culture in Southeast Asia.
Of late, Bihar has shown much interest in the ‘Look East’ policy. This becomes clear from various steps taken by Bihar Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, including sending his state tourism minister, Nand Kishore Yadav, and Secretary, Tourism Department, Anjani Kumar Singh, to Tokyo to attend a conference on Indian tourism. They carried 100 copies of a book on Buddhist circuit in Japanese with photographs of Lord Buddha, Vaishali and Vishwa Santi Stupa (The Tribune, 2007d).

Another example of India’s pursuit of Cultural Diplomacy with countries in the East is the project on the revival of the age old Nalanda University in Bihar. Nitish Kumar’s government in Bihar has decided to revive the long-destroyed Nalanda University, a university of international repute between the 5th and 12th centuries. The decision to revive the Nalanda University was taken in November 2006 after a series of meetings of East Asian, Southeast Asian countries and India (Srivastava, 2007; Raja Mohan and Yadav, 2006). For the countries of East and Southeast Asia, Nalanda is a place of religious significance. The project for reviving the university is in progress. The university would be located at a distance of about 16 kilometers from the ruins of the Nalanda University. It would start functioning in 2009. A unique aspect of this university is that it would be jointly owned by various countries—India and countries of East and Southeast Asia (Srivastava, 2007).

As a collaborative effort between one of the most backward regions of the world, Bihar, and world’s one of the most developed region, East Asia, this project has also been described by some as an opportunity grabbed by Bihar to cash upon the cultural-religious card and gather economic benefits in turn (Raja Mohan and Yadav, 2006). The university is expected to have an astronomy centre, an observatory, a convention centre, and a complete campus with all its needs. The courses to be taught would be philosophy, archaeology, heritology, anthropology, languages, collection and study of ancient manuscripts, scriptures and oriental philosophies with emphasis on Buddhism (Das, 2007: Internet Source).

The revival of Nalanda University is a tool of soft power for creating better relations between India and Southeast Asia. Nalanda is a good example of culture being used as a catalyst for fulfilling the politico-strategic purposes. Nalanda University project has roped in countries like Japan, China, Singapore and South Korea. Geopolitically,
these countries might conflict with India, but for the Nalanda project, these countries have come closer (Shekhar, 2007: Internet Source).

A unique exhibition, entitled, ‘The Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia’, was held in Singapore on 22 November 2007 during the third East Asia Summit. The aim of this exhibition was the promotion of the proposed Nalanda University in India as an institution of higher learning. The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsein Loong, said that the revival of this university would make it the ‘icon of Asian renaissance’ (Suryanarayana, 2007).

GEOSTRATEGIC VISUALIZATIONS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN AND INDIA’S LOOK EAST POLICY

The annual reports of the Ministry of Defence, over the past eight years or so, reveal that India’s strategic sphere of security and vital national interests is not confined to only Pakistan but extends from ‘the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits and the Central Asian Republics to the Equator’ (Singh, 2002). With the Cold War coming to an end, there was a growing realization among the Indian political elite and the strategic community that the Indian Ocean demands and deserves much greater attention. Nevertheless, it was made clear that the greater development and deployment of the Indian Navy did not aim at either self-glorification or for aggrandizement but for establishing peace in the Indian Ocean Region (Rasgotra, 1991).

Given the fact that different institutional sites are engaged in knowledge production regarding India-ASEAN relations, the Indian Ministry of Defence too has its own geographical vision and reasoning about the geostrategic relevance of Southeast Asia in the overall security paradigm of India. The sites that matter in this regard are the Ministry of Defence and think tanks like the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA), the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the National Maritime Institute.

The Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence (1999-2000: 7), Government of India, points out that Southeast Asia is a very important region for India’s strategic interests. The report brings out that India shares excellent relations with Southeast Asia and these relations could help the two sides to promote their common strategic interests through cooperation and collaboration (Ibid.). According to the Annual Report of the
Ministry of Defence (2004-05), the Indian Ocean Region has come to occupy a significant position in the Indian security paradigm, especially with regard to Southeast Asia. Increasing energy demands and environmental issues in the Indian Ocean Region provide ample reasons for enhancing India’s military-strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region (Ibid.). The official website of the Indian Armed Forces points out, India is a maritime nation strategically straddling the Indian Ocean with or substantive seaborne trade. The country’s economic well being is thus very closely linked to our ability to keep our sea-lanes free and open at all times. Besides, India has other maritime interests as well. Our island territories situated on our Western and Eastern seabords are at considerable distances away from the mainland. To ensure their sustained development, umbilical linkages with the mainland and maritime security protection are essential pre-requisites of our maritime security (Indian Armed Forces: Internet Source).

According to G.V.C. Naidu (2005a), an expert on India-ASEAN Relations, and a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi, ‘Look East’ policy was as much geostrategy-driven as it was geoeconomics-driven. It was the increasing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia that triggered the Indian establishment to launch the policy. A number of geostrategic advances made by India, in the wake of the Cold War, made ASEAN countries wary of her intentions. India had acquired the second aircraft carrier from the UK, a nuclear-powered submarine on lease, TU-142 MR long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, modern Kilo-class conventional submarines from the former Soviet Union, and was aiming at expanding naval facilities at the Andamans in the Bay of Bengal. These activities were seen with suspicion by ASEAN countries (Naidu, 2004 a). According to Naidu, they started perceiving India as a major challenge, if not threat, in the region and adopted the policy of engaging India. A key challenge before the Indian diplomacy was to change the ASEAN perceptions of India as a power trying to fill the vacuum created by the end of the Cold War (Naidu, 2005a).

The speech delivered by Mr. Jaswant Singh, the then External Affairs Minister of India, in Singapore, in June 2000, sums up the rationale behind India’s ‘Look East’ policy in general and India-ASEAN relations in particular. He said,
India and ASEAN face a complex, post-Cold War environment... We search for definitions and certainties in a period that is itself struggling to find answers. The influencing factors will be the reform process in Russia; concomitant political and economic changes in China; Japan’s rediscovery of a more assertive political role; ongoing tussle between unilateralism and cooperative multilateralism in the US. India’s participation in the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) reflects India’s increasing engagement, both in politico-security and economic spheres contributing to the building of greater trust, confidence and stability in the region (cited in Mattoo, 2001:105).

Mr. Singh further observed that India’s participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is more ‘comprehensive in its coverage, territorially and materially’. After India became a member of ARF, her involvement in the political, security and strategic issue, besides the economic engagement, became more pronounced. During the Asian crisis, China had tried its level best to act as a friendly neighbor to the ASEAN countries. This geopolitical ‘congagement’ of China with these countries was viewed with much interest and concern by the Indian foreign Policy establishment (Mattoo, 2001).

We would be dealing with the issue of maritime security in India-ASEAN relations in detail in chapter five of this thesis. It should suffice to point out in passing here that both India and Southeast Asian countries are confronted today with wide-ranging deterritorialized threats including illegal immigration, smuggling, drug-trafficking, terrorism, gun running and piracy. Moreover, the Indian Ocean region offers a wide variety of resources – for example, oil, natural gas, manganese and fish—to both and further underlines the importance of cooperation. In view of the fact that India’s geo-strategic environment is predominantly maritime in character, the geoeconomic interests of India remain closely tied to her overall maritime security. The need to secure the vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in this region is another important factor in the calculus of India’s maritime security. Developed East Asian countries and Japan too are critically dependent on the interrupted flow of strategic resources through these SLOCs. The important trade routes of this region have attracted, from time to time, many extra-regional naval forces in the Indian Ocean Region, thus making conflict of interests in this maritime sphere a distinct possibility (Sakhuja, 2004).

The revival and renewal of communication links between the strategic communities of India and ASEAN have resulted in tangible results, leading to the
establishment of a number of defence related understandings and agreements. In addition to initiating periodic high-level visits by senior military personnel, India started joint naval exercises with Indonesia and Malaysia in 1991 near the Andamans. The most crucial among the strategic links that India has established in the recent past are with Malaysia and Singapore (Naidu, 1998). This dimension will be studied in much more detail in chapter five of this thesis.

The Indian Navy revised its Maritime Doctrine in April 2004, during the Commanders’ Conference at the Eastern Naval Command headquarters in Visakhapatnam. The doctrine, which earlier had focused only on coastal protection transformed itself into an aggressively competitive strategy with the mission of ‘developing a credible minimum nuclear deterrence (MND), pursuing littoral warfare and dominating the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)’. The doctrine made it clear that the Indian Navy aims at power projection through "reach, multiplied by sustainability" across its "legitimate areas of interest" stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits (Indian Maritime Doctrine, 2004). According to Commodore Uday Bhaskar, "This (patrolling the IOR) is a subtle hint to (nuclear rival) China from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states that India is a credible ally and long-term partner" (cited in Bedi, 2004: Internet Source).

IMAGINING NORTHEAST AS A ‘GATEWAY’ TO ASEAN?

Of late, yet another factor that has stimulated India to reorient itself to its ‘East’ is the desire to turn its much disturbed and economically speaking a low-profile region into the so-called ‘Gateway to ASEAN’. Mr. Man Mohan Singh (2004b: Internet Source), while inaugurating the First Indo-ASEAN Car Rally in November 2004, said that, “The development of the north-east and its integration with the larger regional processes was one of the determining factors of India's engagement with regional groupings like ASEAN and BIMST-EC...We want our north eastern states to be in the forefront of these interactions and reap the benefits of enhanced peace and prosperity.” He further observed that geographical contiguity enables countries to build up a community based upon “good will and enterprise” (Ibid.).
The geographical imagination of India’s North-East as a ‘Gateway’ (see Figure 7) to ASEAN by New Delhi is based on the visualization that the north-eastern states would be linked to Southeast Asia through road and rail links via Myanmar. It is part of a larger project to build Eurasian land and rail corridors that could connect Singapore to Istanbul and Europe via both India and China. The Trans-Continental Highway and Railway Project could lead to the ultimate link up of China, Russia and Central Asia, bringing immense benefits to all the countries. It is hoped that by developing connectivity of the Northeast with the ASEAN, India would be in much stronger position to pursue its economic and strategic interests with Southeast Asia and the rest of the world (Murthy, 2003).

The Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited is working on optical fibre project to establish telecommunication network between India’s northeast and Southeast Asia. Some cross development projects related to roads, railways, telecommunications, information technology, science and technology and power are also going on with Myanmar. These projects have been launched for enhancing connectivity between northeast India and Myanmar. Kaladan multi-modal transit transport facility is an important initiative in this direction. It is supposed to connect eastern ports of India with...
Sittwe port of Myanmar, and then through riverine transport and by road to Mizoram (Mukherjee, 2007b: Internet Source).

In a seminar held in October 2007, the chairman of India’s Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, announced more investment for the development of infrastructure in India’s northeast so that better relations are formed with Southeast Asia. He also declared that the union government has allotted Rs. 12,973 for northeast in the 11th Five Year Plan (The Tribune, 2007 a).

The central government of India is involving India’s northeast in India’s ‘Look East’ policy. In a seminar held on India’s ‘Look East’ policy in June 2007, Pranab Mukherjee remarked that the Public Diplomacy Division of India’s Ministry of External Affairs has been involved in interactive sessions regarding the policy with the civil society including NGOs, academia and business groups and media (Mukherjee, 2007b: Internet Source). The prospects of Northeast as a gateway to ASEAN shall be discussed in greater detail in the chapter to follow.

CONCLUSIONS: FROM ‘LOOK EAST’ TO ‘ACT EAST’?

We have made an attempt to argue and illustrate in this chapter that, broadly speaking, there are two overarching perspectives on India’s ‘Look East’ policy. First is the secular-nationalist-political-economy perspective offered by intellectuals like Jawaharlal Nehru, PV Narasimha Rao, Inder Kumar Gujral and Yashwant Sinha, and pursued by institutions like Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ministry of Finance, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). The second perspective belongs to the broader religion-cultural-Hinduva discourse, with BJP as the major proponent and promoter of the discourse. The geopolitical rhetoric of various leaders of the BJP in reference to the ‘Look East’ policy is full of cultural symbols, expressions, myths, images, and metaphors. ‘Places of memory’ are given a prominent role.
Our key intention in this chapter was to examine various imperatives as well as imaginations (geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic) behind India’s ‘Look East’ policy. The chapter noted the role played by (mis)perceptions and images, especially during the Cold War period, in India-ASEAN relations. After the end of the Cold War, India-ASEAN relations steadily graduated from India becoming a dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992 to India being awarded the status of a summit partner in 2002. The high point of friendly relations between the two was the invitation extended to India to the first ever East Asia Summit in December 2005.

There are two schools of thought regarding the success of India’s ‘Look East’ policy. One school of thought believes that India’s ‘Look East’ policy has seen the light of day and is evolving in a comprehensive manner. Scholars like GVC Naidu (2005a; 2004a: Internet Source; 2003a), Sridharan (2005) and Ghoshal (2007) belong to this category. To quote Naidu (2003a: 188), “it is one of the most comprehensive and successful policies that India has formulated in the recent past”. India, we are told, has managed to develop a multi-pronged relationship, has given meaning to successful defence diplomacy, and now India is comfortable to participate in regional strategic and economic multilateralism. This school of thought is hopeful that India’s involvement in and interaction with Southeast Asia will increase further in the coming years, which will result in an enhanced Indian involvement in the Asia Pacific.

New institutions have been set up that help in carrying out the foreign policy of India in the changed times. The Ministry of Overseas Indians Affairs, as mentioned earlier, was set up recently to look into the issues of the Indian Diaspora. The ministry believes that new kinds of partnerships and linkages are needed to involve the Indian Diaspora. The newly founded ministry, considering the changing contours of India’s foreign policy, is looking for new institutional partnerships. It has developed partnerships with the leading organizations of overseas Indians. Also, the ministry is of the view that Indian states should be treated as stakeholders and partners in India’s engagement with its Diaspora. Any initiatives by the overseas Indians whether individually or collectively must be anchored in one of the states of India (Fernandes, 2006: Internet Source).

On the other hand, there are scholars and observers who are of the view that despite increase in the number of India-ASEAN agreements India ‘Look East’ rhetoric
is yet to be translated into what the former Indian Ambassador to Malaysia, P. S. Sahai (2003) calls ‘Act East’ policy. They would also point out that the ‘Look East’ or ‘Revisit East’ discourse has remained quite elitist so far and it is the formal geopolitical reasoning of the Ministry of External Affairs that continues to drive and dictate India’s Look East policy. The major players that have been allowed to take the centre stage in India-ASEAN relations are largely situated in the South Block (the Economic Division of the Ministry of External Affairs) and the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). While the popular geopolitics (in the form of Indian movies, people-to-people contacts and tourism) in Southeast Asia, is gradually becoming more influential in shaping India-ASEAN relations, a lot more needs to be done in this regard.

No doubt the Ministry of External Affairs started giving much more space to ASEAN countries in its Annual Reports, and vice-a-versa, since 1994; it has been described by some analysts as nothing more than some inconsequential paperwork. Even though a Secretary for the East Division was appointed in the Ministry of External Affairs immediately after the launch of the ‘Look East’ policy, the much needed transformation of the institutional set-ups and structures is yet to happen. According to A.N. Ram (2003), a distinguished Indian diplomat, who had played a key role in drafting India’s ‘Look East’ policy, India’s bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries have not yet evolved into a meaningful partnership in which both sides have a vital stake. After the Southeast Asian financial crisis, ASEAN trade and investments in India have stagnated. ASEAN also appears somewhat disillusioned with ‘India’s daunting procedures, requirements and an unresponsive bureaucracy’ (Ram, 2000).

Ram (2005) would argue that India and ASEAN have a lot of common interests and complementarities and should work together to fulfill them. He says that for more visible results, India and ASEAN should cooperate more and more in the fields of telecommunications, hardware, electronics, marine and aqua-culture, HRD, science and technology, tourism and hospitality, civil aviation and shipping. Ram argues that geoeconomics and geopolitics should go hand in hand vis-à-vis- the ‘Look East’ policy. He remarks, “Good commerce and economics is never bad for politics” (Ibid.: 10). Whereas Chakraborti (2005) would argue that till now India has put most of its emphasis on its relations with the developed countries of ASEAN and the lesser developed countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Brunei have been comparatively neglected. India’s economic relations with these countries, particularly economic, should be improved in order to give more push to India’s ‘Look East’ policy.
The multi-layered administration and the business practices followed in India seem to have created a major hurdle in the way of India-ASEAN relations. Lately, the Prime Minister of Singapore, during his visit to India is said to have described the Indian bureaucracy as being too complicated and therefore “a stumbling block to investment” (*The Times of India*, 2005a). There also appears to be a problem with the decision making structure in the Ministry of External Affairs, in the South Block, with regard to a newly ‘discovered’ Southeast Asia. For example, there are three different levels at which India-ASEAN relations are being approached and analyzed within the External Affairs Ministry of India. Whereas the Economic Division deals with Dialogue Partnership issues, the ASEAN Regional Forum related activities are under the Disarmament Division and other bilateral aspects are the responsibility of the South Division. Consequently, it becomes a very difficult task for these divisions to take decisions on the basis of mutual dialogue and consensus and implement them in a time bound manner. In the absence of any formal mechanism, except the central cabinet, the coordination among various ministries and departments —External Affairs, Commerce and Industry, Defence, HRD—leaves much to be desired (Naidu, 2003b).

Another major issue that is said to have undermined the efficacy of India’s economic involvement in the region is the delay in agreements over the Free Trade Area (FTA) between India and ASEAN. India is seen more as looking for investments in Southeast Asia rather than as a confident trading partner (Suryanarayan, 2007b). Also India’s domestic political process and problems continue to be observed keenly by the member states of ASEAN. It appears to some that by the 1990s, ASEAN states had become a little used to political instability in various parts of the sub-continent and its consequences for economic reforms. Some kind of skepticism (even after 10 years of opening up of its economy) about India’s ability to rise above the rhetoric and push the reform process forward perhaps remains. Despite impressive progress made by India in information and communication technologies and software—development, her institutional inadequacy and policy discontinuities are a constant concern in the ASEAN (Sridharan, 2001).

Is India’s ‘Look East’ policy, as of now, restricted only to the power elites? The Foreign Policy establishment is unquestionably the most important ‘site’ that has been instrumental in ‘citing’ India’s ‘Look East’ policy. In addition, there are think tanks like the Institute of Defense and Strategic Analysis (IDSA), corporate entities like confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce.
and Industry (FICCI) and leading media figures like Suryanarayan and Baruah who continue to play an important role in the geopolitical ‘writing’ of this policy. “Governments, geopolitical intellectuals, and foreign policy elites continue to use various geopolitical codes and scripts to assist the public in interpreting foreign policy actions and to promote specific agendas that could in turn mobilize public opinion to influence those actions. The codes are passed on to the public through ‘geopolitical scripts’ and public performances that impart a regularized way of viewing a situation or region (Ó Tuathail, 2002). Do the fears and preferences of ordinary people or larger audiences act as constraints on the foreign policy actions of the state? Can it be argued that since the level of institutionalization and implementation of India’s Look East policy remains somewhat inadequate, the ordinary people are yet to play a meaningful role in the scripting of the ‘Look East’ policy?

His Excellency, Yong (2004: Internet Source), the Secretary-General of ASEAN, is said to have remarked during one of his visits to New Delhi that what could help develop long-term relationship between India and ASEAN is the ‘swift implementation’ of the agreements, Memoranda of Understanding and treaties, so that the whole discourse is given meaning while it is read by a larger audience. The areas of trade, information and technology, science and tourism are major potential areas that call for bringing the ‘Look East’ policy on the plane of reality. He further said,

While ASEAN and India are busy engaging themselves to build a long lasting and durable partnership, both sides need to be vigilant or mindful of drawbacks that could momentarily cause irritation in the relations. Greater dialogue, interactions and channels of communications are needed to ensure we are constantly developing our mutual understanding to avoid any misapprehension. It is important to ensure decisions are swiftly implemented so that we could progress speedily in the many areas of cooperation. The momentum to enhance cooperation should not be held back by clouded lens and red tape (emphasis supplied). The challenges and opportunities are aplenty for the partnership that ASEAN and India are forging (Ibid.).

It is in the light of the above mentioned that we now turn to the next chapter to examine the challenges and opportunities that India and ASEAN face in the realm of geoeconomics and economic diplomacy.