Inside Southeast Asia

Second Annual Conference

Conference Report by
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Inside Southeast Asia
Contemporary Developments in Political, Economic, Strategic and Social Issues

Second Annual Conference

Report Edited by
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About the Southeast Asia Research Programme

The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), established in August 1996, is an independent think tank devoted to research on peace and security from a South Asian perspective. Its aim is to develop a comprehensive and alternative framework for peace and security in the region catering to the changing demands of national, regional and global security.

The Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP) at the Institute of Peace and Conflict studies (IPCS) aims to promote research on Southeast Asia in India, map the existing nature and dynamics of India-Southeast Asia relations, and highlight current political, economic and security developments of mutual concern.

Through a combination of discussions, dialogues and research work, the Programme seeks to achieve its goal of creating avenues for collaboration and fostering understanding between India and ASEAN. More importantly, the Programme emphasises on training the next generation of scholars; besides building capacity within India to focus on Southeast Asia as an academic field of study.

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Southeast Asia: Internal Political Developments
Elections, Internal Conflicts & Political Transition within Southeast Asia

Ambassador Navrekha Sharma
Former Indian Ambassador to Indonesia and the Philippines

One cannot sustain a multilateral relationship without a bilateral aspect. With an increase in trade and investment with the region, and with sustained growth in the economic importance of the region in the last 20 years, the security and stability of Southeast Asia holds much significance. This importance is expected to grow further once the FTA comes into the picture. Southeast Asia was a late beginner in the democratic race, per say.

All states in the region have different approaches to democracy and are fundamentally different. India, regardless of pessimism about democracy, has established itself as a credential democracy. Its military has never shown an interest in leadership. Globalisation has helped India; and the Indian state remains a role model for Southeast Asia even if it is mostly a marker of what not to do. There is a debate about Southeast Asian states being naturally democratic. In this context, the expected role of India to enhance security in the region is to be seen.

INDONESIA IN 2012
Professor Baladas Ghoshal
Distinguished Fellow, IPCS

As one looks at the Indonesian political system since the fallout of Suharto in 1998, it has emerged as a very successful and dynamic democracy. Indonesia has had three elections, which were seen as fair, free and without problems. There were some factors that helped in the smooth development of democracy in Indonesia. They were the development of an anti-corruption body, decentralisation and the adoption of business reforms. However, the government has been unable to graduate from a liquid democracy to a successful democracy.

The reforms that it tried to bring went slow owing to it being a coalition in nature. There are
charges against the Indonesian Sports Minister. The Indonesian President is soft on Islamic groups, while society is largely intolerant towards the Ahmedias and Christians. Though earlier the country followed moderate Islam, it is now gradually moving towards Wahabi Islam and that can prove to be a threat to the State’s security. There are high hopes of change from the 2014 presidential elections. Jakarta’s governor’s elections were a glimpse of how things can be managed without corruption. Achievements are important but, in a democracy, there are delusions too. Due to the collusion between businessmen and political lawmakers, there is a decentralisation of corruption. For many, Suharto was at least a symbol of stability, which is not the case anymore.

THAILAND IN 2012
Panchali Saikia
Former Research Officer, SEARP, IPCS, New Delhi

Tiffs between the yellow shirts and the red shirts have ensured that the aspect of insurgency is not ignored. Insurgency in Thailand has largely affected the three provinces of Pataani, Yala and Narathimat. The insurgent groups usually target monks. Schools have become dysfunctional with schoolteachers being killed in front of students to induce fear. This is done to ensure that religious education, and not Thai education, is promoted. Governance and socio-economic development in the three provinces is poor.

The military in these provinces has special emergency powers. The causes for conflicts are many. One important cause is the feeling amongst Malay Muslims that they do not have the right of expression. There is a feeling of social exclusion and inequality. It all gained momentum with the Islamic act of 1945 that made Thai language compulsory. There is now inequality in terms of access to resources since the government did not pay much attention to education and employment. Cultural differences between Thai and Malay Muslims were not addressed properly; and the Malay Muslims were not recognised as citizens. The aggravation of conflict was due to brutal counterinsurgency tactics followed in the border-town of Tak Bai and the Krue Sak Mosque. The Thai Buddhists took up arms in self-defence.

The political turmoil between the red shirts and yellow shirts in Bangkok has had a spill over effect. The role of paramilitary forces is a major issue too. The issue of insurgency has always been overshadowed by national political disputes in Bangkok. Local politics use insurgency as a means to cash on. Abhisit’s government brought out promises to strengthen administrative changes focussed
on the Southern province. Yingluck Shinawatra also made a lot of promises but they were not fulfilled. The major challenges to the government of Thailand include identifying the insurgent groups and bringing them to the negotiating table. The insurgent cells are diffused and disconnected having the involvement of local mafia. Insurgency in Thailand is being diluted with criminal activities like human trafficking, smuggling of small arms, etc. The link of insurgents with terrorist organisations is yet to be identified. The Centre does not pay as much attention to this cause as it should, due to its preoccupation with power politics.

THE PHILIPPINES IN 2012
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The Philippines cannot be discussed without an emphasis on the presently on-going peace process in the region of Mindanao. Mindanao is the easternmost island in the Philippines and is the only region with a Muslim majority. Since the late 1960s, there have been efforts in the form of an armed movement to separate Mindanao from the Philippines due to the feelings of discrimination that exist within the Muslims of the region. They have always felt deprived and believe that their integration into the Philippines has been undemocratic, as their annexation into the state was without a plebiscite.

April 2012 saw an agreement between the government peace panel and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to establish a new autonomous entity by 2016 in Mindanao, which will be called Bangsamoro. In spite of the agreement to establish this entity, there are certain challenges that exist in the way. These include mistrust among local politicians in Manila, ARMM and Sulu towards the MILF, issues about the status of the region (whether it is a sub-state or state), vagueness and uncertainties of the agreement, Disarmament and normalisation of combatants, economic development of the new entity and the dissolution of ARMM. The government and the MILF agreed to the establishment of this new entity by sticking to issues of mutual acceptance, but kept the contentious issues aside.

The MILF, however, has clearly stated that it will give up arms only if its political demands are fulfilled. The relationship between the two-party government and the MILF will be the most crucial factor in determining the success of this agreement. President Benigno Aquino has been quite instrumental in the progress of the peace process and his popularity in Mindanao helped in accelerating this process. The current transit phase will determine future developments of the new region and the success of the peace process itself. A big problem is the divisions and differences that exist between the Muslims in Bangsamoro, and suspicions about the MILF. The future of the state of Philippines will be determined by the way the current peace process is dealt with.

VIETNAM IN 2012
Raja Reddy
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Vietnam is important in terms of its strategic location, military power and resources. The country has been a success story. Economic growth fuelled by political reforms in the last 25 years has made it the most important country in Southeast Asia. In the 11th party Congress, the top
brass expressed their happiness over the progress achieved in the last five years. Vietnam wanted its economic profile to be visible at the international level. New reforms were introduced in the 11th party Congress; though critics maintained there was nothing new.

The choice of leadership in Vietnam displays a balance that has been struck in terms of area-wise representation. Land disputes in Vietnam comprise 70% of all conflicts. Land laws are an issue because of the future of the same. There are agrarian unrests, which have existed since 1955. Corruption exists in Vietnam from top to bottom. Funds have been misused by the elites. People are worried about why the government is not responding to the hegemonic tendencies of the Chinese. Globalisation changed the face of Vietnam and the voices of dissent are increasing now, which has brought about positive changes. China is a big influence on Vietnam and the country would follow everything except allowing political domination.

II

Special Focus: Myanmar
Political, Economic, and Social Issues & the Road Ahead

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia
Director General, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi

Myanmar is a country of exceptional importance for India and the region. The fundamental issues of national identity and legitimacy are at the heart of the problems in Myanmar. The country, however, cannot be seen in isolation. The larger regional context must be considered in any analysis of the political, social and economic situation of Myanmar.

There is a need to focus on the past, not just the last 2-3 years. The key lies in its larger history, to
which one must keep referring to, to understand the social background of the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods that continue to influence Myanmar’s polity, economy and society today.

POLITICAL PROCESSES AND RECONCILIATION IN MYANMAR

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Before looking at current developments, it is important to briefly look at postcolonial developments that took place in Myanmar. The country’s postcolonial developments can be divided into four phases; civilian rule, BSPP-dominated rule predominated by the army, direct military rule by the Junta, and disciplined democracy. 2008 can be looked at as the benchmark year for ‘recent political developments’, as the new constitution was adopted then. For the first time in 20 years, elections were held in 2010. President Thein Sein’s first official visit was to China, marking the fact that the country is aware of the fact that its big neighbours will have to be delicately balanced. There are a number of internal crises and contradictions that have prevailed in Myanmar, right since the days of independence.

These include the Buddhist Monks and Sanghas, who are an important political force in the nation and a fertile breeding ground for pro-democracy movements. The Students’ movement has been quite politically active in Myanmar right from the pre-independence days and quite often, has faced military crackdowns too. The NLD, currently under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, constituted a number of pro-democracy activists who have been active from the 1960s and 70s. There has been a generational transition in the military. Many amongst the retired military are now in politics, while the new guard in the military itself is affected by the culture of liberalisation and globalisation. The relationship between the ‘Hardliners’ and the ‘Reformists’ plays an important role in any case of regime change. This has been the case in Myanmar too. How Aung San Suu Kyi will balance the role of the military is also important as both require each other for their political needs. While the former is required by the military to woo in investors to Myan-
The role of ethnic nationalities is also critical. Until and unless some reconciliation happens on that front, there cannot be any political reconciliation either. The government's role in managing external interests in Myanmar with the internal politics of the country is also very important. Although change has taken place in Myanmar, the road is still not very smooth. Major challenges that the government will need to address in the coming years include concerns regarding international isolation, economic reforms, political restructuring, ethnic reconciliation and related peace processes, a concise human rights agenda, balancing the growing battleground for foreign investment and capitalist penetration and environmental hazards and threats to bio-diversity.

**ETHNIC CRISIS: THE ROHINGYA CONFLICT**
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The Muslims of Myanmar's west coast identify themselves as the Rohingya. The Rohingya see themselves as native settlers of Myanmar. They trace their origins back to the 7th century, when Arab travellers came to South and East Asia. From 2009 onwards, the Rohingya within Myanmar have demanded their rights to livelihood, secure homes and other basic humanitarian rights, as well as the repealing of the 1982 Citizenship Act.

The Rohingya feel isolated and ostracised by the international community too, whose support has not been as forthcoming as in the cases of other similar struggles of ethnic and national identities. The recent Rohingya violence is not a new phenomenon. It is a symptom of a long history of horrible discriminatory treatment. The military junta has, over the years, handled the situation badly and little effort has been made to integrate them or to resolve the matter in a sustainable fashion. This is also problematic due to the emphasis of the junta on Buddhism as the 'true religion' of the Myanmarese people. The current Thein Sein government, despite being lauded for political and economic reforms has come under criticism for continuing the same discriminatory policies.

Even many pro democracy activists have refused to recognise the Rohingya as a part of the social fabric of Myanmar. The question is, will the recent violence force the Thein Sein government to
deal with the Rohingya issue head-on? The international interest that the recent events have elicited, including that of the US will no doubt enforce some changes in the government’s policy towards the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi, despite being widely known for her human rights activism, has also been silent on the issue of the citizenship of the Rohingya. The state, under President Thein Sein has changed its stance over the issue, but whether the new measures will remain sustainable is yet to be seen. The purpose of this change could also be to engage more with the outside world, to build confidence on Myanmar’s democratic reformation, rather than an ideological shift in the people’s perception of the Rohingya issue. Aung San Suu Kyi’s silence on the issue further problematises this.

III
Regional Cooperation and Cohesion in Southeast Asia
Analysis of Recent Developments in ASEAN

Professor Manmohini Kaul
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Given the recent developments in the ASEAN’s meetings, questions are being raised about its cohesion. Cambodia is under pressure from China and its statement as ASEAN Chair, of there being a consensus on non-internationalisation of seas, was very controversial. Within the ASEAN, there is much debate over the code of conduct on handling the South China Sea issue.

The ASEAN adopted the declaration on Human Rights during the 21st ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in November 2012. Several challenges to the ASEAN arise in terms of meeting its 2015 deadline of forming an ASEAN community; considering issues regarding its centrality in managing its own affairs, its stance on the South China Sea and differences amongst its member states.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES, NATIONAL INTERESTS AND REGIONAL IMPERATIVES
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There are several regional imperatives for the ASEAN, which include community building both at the Southeast Asia and at the Indo-Pacific levels. The ASEAN wants the best of both worlds - from its traditional western partners to its newer regional partners. Members of the ASEAN desire peace and stability in the region and want to develop rules of engagement in the Indo-Pacific. From the year 2005, the ASEAN has been experiencing an era of indirect balancing and is trying to engage in multilateralism. Since 2010, one observes a shift towards greater power assertions and references being made to the use of force. The rhetoric of national interest and military has increasingly gained momentum; and disputes have witnessed escalations that hint at the usage of force.

The US and China have also been seen as exercising greater influence in the region. There is disunity within the ASEAN such that we see two divisions - one of system wreckers such as the US, the Philippines and Cambodia and the other, of system managers like Indonesia. While there is also continued understanding of the ASEAN way, many members do not seem to appear ready for the 2015 deadline towards the ASEAN community since issues of territoriality and national
interest gain prominence.

As a response to recent developments, ASEAN is adopting quiet diplomacy with the rhetoric of cooperation. It has acknowledged China’s influence in Cambodia. Overall, the ASEAN seems vulnerable. In the context of present developments, we may ask if the ASEAN is reaching the limit of regional integration. Given the preponderance of power projections, is the ASEAN being too ambitious about its goal of building the ASEAN community when it is presently allowing its dialogue partners to set the agenda?

CAMBODIA AND ASEAN: INTERNAL COHESION AND IMMEDIATE FUTURE
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Divisions within the ASEAN are not a new phenomenon; there have been several evidences during the third Indo-China war, with respect to the ASEAN’s approach towards Vietnam. However, presently, the manner in which the ASEAN addresses these divisions is in question itself. The ASEAN’s recent stance in Phnom Penh is much different from those it has taken in the past, particularly during the third Indo-China war. For the first time, private deliberations within the ASEAN were made public. Academically, we should question the effectiveness of the ASEAN way. There is an apparent breakdown in consensus within the ASEAN.

The ASEAN chair is generally manipulative, and given the situation now, such manipulations will be relevant. The norms on which the ASEAN was built on are changing; its founding pillars of consultations and consensus need to be questioned given the present scenario. The ASEAN now needs to be pushed from behind rather than lead from the front.

IV
External Interests in Southeast Asia
The Role of the US, China, Japan, Australia, and India

EXTERNAL INTERESTS AND REGIMES
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For centuries, India and China have coexisted in Southeast Asia. Historically, the Strait of Malacca has been at the epicentre of the China-ASEAN relationship and when drawn liberally in the twenty-first century, it still remains the epicentre. There is a huge amount of continuity and change. Southeast Asia has drawn liberally from Indian Statecraft; for example, the concepts of Mandala and Nagara have been constantly used in Southeast Asian diplomacy. Southeast Asia has been influenced from across the world and has absorbed these inspirations well. In this regard, the role of the US is pertinent. The US never left this region; it merely reduced its forces.

Today, new bases have come up in the region. However, we only notice an active role of the US post 2000. This was around the time when the countries of Southeast Asia had come up with NIMB – Not In My Backyard. In 2008, the US was declared as a resident power, thus reflecting continuity in US presence in the region. The US already has ties with Korea and Japan, hence one
can conclude that the US Pivot to the Asia-Pacific is nothing but reinforcing its presence in the region given China's presence here. Southeast Asia interacts with the rest of the world on two levels - economic and politico-strategic.

The countries in the region are a party to a Non-NATO Alliance and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). Britain, which is a part of the EU, is getting heavily involved in the region. Thus, it can be concluded that the role of external powers in the region is not new. Further, introducing a caveat in the region, China is of the opinion that Southeast Asia has been able to resolve the issue itself. Hypothetically speaking, there could be a few plausible scenarios: an ASEAN-India Alliance, an US-ASEAN Alliance, the ASEAN against China, the ASEAN plus the US plus Australia, the EU plus the ASEAN (wherein, the EU would play the role of mediator).

If two balloons expand, they are bound to collide. The ASEAN is sandwiched between India and China. A stage might come when the US may push the ASEAN to go against China. Thus, how the ASEAN manipulates both powers and deals with the security structure will be a test of the ASEAN’s strategic autonomy.

**RISING CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: CHINESE DIPLOMACY AND CHALLENGES AHEAD**

*Professor Rabindra Sen*

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Being an area of strategic interest, China’s determination to protect its interests and expand its influence in Southeast Asia has been a dominating feature of its foreign policy. The country’s desire to forge a partnership with Southeast Asia has its own rationale, but it would not be an exaggeration to point out that Chinese diplomacy towards the strategically important region in the post-Cold War era, has been to a large extent, designed to guard against and counter the influence of the US, which China has come to perceive as its main threat. The US' concern about China’s growing economic and military muscle stems from apprehensions that an increasingly jingoistic China may well seek hegemony in Asia in the future. China, on the other hand, considers the US as the hegemon threatening China. In the last few years, the US' decision to beef up its
diplomatic and military presence with its ‘Pivot of Asia’ strategy has reinforced Chinese concerns vis-à-vis the US. China has responded to the challenge with a more pragmatic and flexible approach in its relations with its neighbours. Beijing has been actively engaged in ‘smiling diplomacy’ with the ASEAN to counterbalance the US. The country has introduced modifications and adjustments in its policies on various issues in the hope of removing misgivings about its intentions in the minds of the ASEAN’s leaders. During the post-Cold War period, China’s moves to strengthen relations with long time allies in Southeast Asia, and to re-establish links with others who had been unfriendly in the past, have borne substantial fruit. Besides significant improvements in China’s bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries, growing China-ASEAN linkages at the institutional and multilateral levels have considerably strengthened China’s position in the region. The rise of China as an economic power in the post-Cold War era, which has attracted worldwide attention, has given Beijing’s diplomacy towards Southeast Asia additional strength and pull. The Southeast Asian countries have a much bigger stake today in maintaining close relations with China. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis lifted China’s standing in the region and the world, as also its economic leverage. Since then, the country has consolidated its position and influence in the region.

Although China has achieved considerable success in its drive to build cordial ties with the ASEAN and in boosting its image, its diplomatic efforts have not completely erased suspicions and misgivings in the region over Beijing’s long-term intentions and role. With a few Southeast Asian countries laying territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS), the issue continues to be a sensitive one in China-ASEAN relations, and especially so given China’s growing assertiveness regarding its claims over the SCS. The issue has now become a focal point of tension in China-ASEAN relations. China’s most important relationship will remain a difficult one what with the US having recently begun re-engaging with the region in a vigorous attempt to refurbish its image and recover lost ground to China because of the distractions Afghanistan and Iraq had so far posed to it. Beijing, too, would leave no stone unturned in its bid to protect and further strengthen its hard-earned position in the region. It remains to be seen whether China will succeed in achieving its objectives in Southeast Asia.

**CHINA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

Professor Srikanth Kondapalli
China’s rise has proved to be a crucial element in its relationship with Southeast Asia. Despite the global financial crisis, it has huge foreign reserves. These developments have prompted it to go in for investment in Southeast Asia. It is also expanding in terms of market integration in the region. China is amassing 200 to 300 billion reserves every year. In the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, Zhu Rhonji had spent over USD5 billion in infrastructure projects and also spent generously during the current financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis.

There is an estimate that China has spent USD1.7 trillion on local development infrastructure projects. These stimulus packages come at a cost; nearly half of them went to the infrastructure projects. Last year, China came up with a white paper on its foreign aid, which suggested that USD39 million went as foreign aid, eighty per cent of which was spent on infrastructure projects. One of the major areas of interest was the railways, especially the High Speed Railway network (HSR), which is 40,000kms. This is where the sixteen provinces of China have come in the limelight. China is hoping to revive the 1954 Asian Highway project; there has been Japanese financial allocation for this financial project as well. In relation to the Southeast Asian project, in November 2004, China-ASEAN’s transport ministers met to cooperate on the transport sector. Later, the ICT was identified as an area of cooperation. Here, the Guanxi and Yunnan provinces are of particular importance, since they form a bridge to Southeast Asia.

The Philippines has received the largest volume of Chinese foreign aid, Vietnam has received aid for its railways’ construction, Brunei for forestry, energy, commercial oil and gas sector cooperation and in the establishment of sister cities; Myanmar for its roads, railways, energy, riverine, coastal and dam projects. A USD2 billion oil pipeline project is underway between China and Myanmar. In relation to Myanmar, Wen Jiabao has promised to spend over USD200 billion in the country. The Kunming-Hanoi-Haiphong highway is important, and the Myitkyina highway is presently under construction. All this basically highlights the significant volume of construction activities presently underway in the region.

China is expanding its telecommunication network in the SCS. The Chinese controlled islands of Paracels and Mischief Reef, acquired from the Philippines in 1995, have good 3G and 4G connec-
tivity. The scale of such infrastructure projects is unprecedented; with China displacing American and European companies from the region in terms of sheer investments. This indicates the economies of scale and competitiveness in the international markets. China’s strategic diplomacy is pitching the US, the EU and Japan. Thus, one can conclude that China is increasingly displaying its assertiveness in the region.

**EAST ASIA AND THE ASEAN**

**Dr. Sandip Mishra**

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The East Asian countries of Japan, South Korea and China have recognised the significance of the ASEAN and have forged economic, social, cultural and educational partnerships with it. They aspire to imitate the success of the ASEAN in their own region, however till date, the results have been abysmal. The only positive impact of the ‘ASEAN way’ has been that these countries, in spite of their political differences, have learnt to increase their economic interactions. Although they have failed to establish their own regional mechanism, they appear to be interacting via the ASEAN in the form of the ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Summit.

On ‘soft issues’, the ASEAN mechanism might have shown satisfactory results, but on issues pertaining to security, the impact of the ASEAN has been inadequate. Although countries of East Asia, including North Korea, do interact with one another at the ARF, China’s assertive behaviour in the region is of great concern to South Korea and Japan. These countries feel that the ARF might not be able to contain China, and have been trying to forge overt coalitions with like-minded countries such as India and Australia to address the issue. The ASEAN needs to have a more cohesive and coordinated approach to move further in the scenario of power politics between an assertive China and a rejuvenated US. At present, it appears that the ASEAN is divided on the issue and it would be interesting to see how the ASEAN countries stir this in the future. East Asia is keenly looking at the ASEAN and one will have to wait and watch to ascertain whether the ASEAN can still provide able leadership, by way of how it pulls out of this impasse.
INDIA’S INTERESTS, INFLUENCE AND STRATEGIES: A CRITIQUE FROM A NON-DELHI PERSPECTIVE

Dr. V. Suryanarayan
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India has land boundaries with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar and maritime borders with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. It is high time that we, in Asia, redefine the concept of ‘area’ taking into consideration, both historical and geopolitical realities. The concept of ‘ocean’ as a unifying force and as an instrument of regional cooperation has not yet been fully grasped. Historically, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have been deeply influenced by Indian political ideas, religions, arts and languages. In fact, as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the fascinating encounter among Indigenous, Indian and Chinese influences deserves deeper study and sharper focus.

Southeast Asia has always been subjected to external influences. But in the early phase of its history, it was the Indian influences that were most dominant. While Southeast Asia traded extensively with China and the Far East, it was from India that much of Southeast Asian religion, philosophy and aesthetics were drawn. The significance of Northeast India, as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia, is being increasingly realised by policy makers in New Delhi. For a long time, the security dimension dominated New Delhi’s thinking. As a result, Northeast India was viewed as a liability and a burden. However, in the context of India’s Look East Policy, there is an increasing realisation that if infrastructure development takes place, Northeast India could become a point of convergence amongst the dynamic economies of Southern China, Southeast Asia and India.

Southeast Asia is a fascinating laboratory for a comparative study of Chinese and Indian natives settled overseas. China’s bilateral relations and to a lesser extent, India’s relations with Southeast Asian countries are rendered complex by the presence, over generations, of Chinese and Indian minorities. China has made tremendous strides in winning friends and influencing people in Southeast Asia. However, there has been a changing perception of Southeast Asian countries towards India and China. The ASEAN is sharply divided on China’s long-term intentions and capabilities. While Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines share India’s perception on the issue, other countries are ambivalent. India must step up its diplomacy in Southeast Asia and engage in dialogue with governments and think tanks. We must follow a calibrated policy towards China and continue dialogue to broaden areas of convergence and minimise areas of dissonance. At the same time, we must be vigilant, for eternal vigilance is not only the safeguard of democracy; it is the only guarantee of our survival.