

## SINO-ASEAN COOPERATION: PERCEPTIONS AND COUNTER STRATEGIES OF USA, JAPAN AND INDIA

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### Abstract

*China and ASEAN have established cooperation since 1990 for the pursuit of their respective strategic and economic interests. They have achieved unprecedented heights in their cooperation covering various fields. As a result of the strong relations between China and ASEAN the influence and presence of China in the region has increased manifold. As a consequence of China's growing influence and presence in the South East Asian region, the US, Japan and India appear worried as their strategic and economic interests in the region seem to be threatened by China. They perceive China as an emerging threat to their interests in the region. Thus, the US, Japan and India have designed counter strategies to check the influence of China and protect their interests in the region. This paper attempts to summarise the findings of a doctoral study by Behan, which studies the relations between China and ASEAN and the perception and counter strategies of the US, Japan, and India.*

**Keywords:** *China, ASEAN, Perceptions, Counter strategies*

### INTRODUCTION

China and ASEAN are two important actors in the emerging Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are main drivers of much talked economic growth of the Asian continent. Through the cold war years, ASEAN and China could not develop any strong relations. Both remained at distance due to mutual suspicion and partly under the influence of

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Cold War politics. ASEAN was established in 1967 by the South East Asian countries primarily for their economic and security interests and also for protection against the bloc politics during the cold war. However, China viewed ASEAN as a block like SEATO and CENTO supported by the US to contain communist expansion in the region. Whereas, China was viewed by the South East Asian countries as a communist threat. Therefore, they maintained distance from China as they did not like to be part of bloc politics.

However, soon after the end of cold war, the changed world order and circumstances helped both parties to remove mutual suspicion and establish close relations for their mutual economic and strategic interests. After starting their cooperation in multiple fields, China and ASEAN have reached milestones in their relations. They have become interdependent on each other. Consequently, China has emerged as the regional power of South East Asia. However, the other states like the US, Japan and India perceive China as a threat to their significant interests in the region. So, this paper is an attempt to address the one major question that How do USA, Japan and India respond to the active engagement of China and ASEAN? Further, explanation of the perceptions and counter actions of USA, Japan and India about presence of China in the region as threat to their interests is the main objective of the paper. In the proceeding paragraphs, detailed account of the perceptions interests and counter strategies of the US, Japan and India has been presented.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study based on the primary and secondary data collected for Ph.D. thesis titled 'Economic and Political Dynamics of Sino-ASEAN Cooperation (1990-2014): Challenges and Opportunities'. The primary data was collected through the indepth interviews from the experts of the field. While secondary sources included Newspapers, Research Journals, Books, Online literature and archival sources. The data was analysed using the Content Analysis

method, which is most relevant analysing method for qualitative study.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Overview of China-ASEAN relations**

China and ASEAN started Dialogue Relations in 1991 after the participation of China's foreign minister in ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. During this session, the Chinese representative expressed interest of China to establish cooperation for mutual benefit of both parties. After more than a decade their relations got further strength when China and ASEAN signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in 2003 (ASEAN, 2020). With the signing of this document, their relations were elevated to a higher plane. Later on in 2015, the foreign ministers of China and ASEAN also agreed on the third Plan of ACTION (POA) 2016-2020 to further strengthen their relations by implementation of previously agreed POAs.

For the purpose of strengthening their bilateral cooperation, China and ASEAN have signed various MoUs, agreements and plans of actions. In this regard, in 2011 they have established The ASEAN-China Centre (ACC) in Beijing. The Centre is playing vital role for promotion of cooperation in education, tourism, culture, trade and investment by sharing relevant information between ASEAN and China. In 2018, both China and ASEAN agreed to establish strategic partnership vision 2030, which was aimed to enhance their cooperation in future.

Similarly, in order to improve political and security cooperation China and ASEAN have designed several settings which include ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN-China summit, meetings of ministerial and senior officials' level. Further, China has also joined various ASEAN-led frameworks like the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) which includes China, Japan and South Korea, ASEAN Defence Ministers

Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) for discussing the security and defence related matters between ASEAN and its partners, the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

In 2003, China acceded the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which aims to promote peace and stability through cooperation among the parties by respecting sovereignty and abiding the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of the member countries. By joining the treaty, China became Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. With the accession of China to the TAC its stature as a guiding document outlining norms and rules for governing relations among its member states in the region has been enhanced.

Moreover, after long deliberations the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) was also signed in 2002 between ASEAN and China to manage the affairs in the South China Sea (SCC) (Zaka, 2020). The Signing of DOC was followed by the adoption of the Joint Statement by both parties regarding the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). Both parties agreed to address the issues arising out of unintentional movements in the South China Sea. In wake of such mishaps, they also agreed to establish hotline for regular communications among senior officials of the foreign ministries of ASEAN member states and China in response to maritime crises in the way of implementation of the DOC (ASEAN, 2020).

In addition to that, for strengthening mutual cooperation in security and defense, ASEAN and China have formed ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) to cooperate in the field of defence and security. Further, in order to enhance their collaboration in fighting international crime and other unconventional security matters, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between ASEAN and China for cooperation in the non-traditional security issues was also signed in 2004, which was later extended in 2009. Apart from that both parties hold Annual consultations on various issues of bilateral concern including Transnational Crime, Non-Traditional Security

Issues, illicit drug trafficking, and human trafficking.

Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN continues to thrive and has surpassed their recent records. According to the ASEAN statistics, Sino-ASEAN bilateral trade reached USD 479.4 billion in 2018, which accounts for 17.1 per cent of total trade of ASEAN. Further, China's investment flows to ASEAN also increased which amounted to USD 10.2 billion in 2018, it accounts for 6.6 per cent of ASEAN's total foreign direct investment. China continues to be major trade partner of ASEAN since 2009, and it maintained its status of main trade partner in 2018 where China became third external source of ASEAN in respect of trade and foreign investment among ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. The agreement for facilitation of two-way trade between ASEAN and China commonly known as the ASEAN China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) was realized in 2010, has become fully effective since 2015, which has further improved economic, and trade relations between them.

In order to promote and boost trade and investment opportunities in both parts, China annually host and organize the ASEAN-China EXPO (CAEXPO), which provides platform to display various products from ASEAN and China for hunting the markets. Moreover, they also cooperate in various other fields such as Agriculture, Information and Communication Technology, Education, Environment, Transport, Tourism, Science and Technology as well as Social and Cultural cooperation. Thus, the growing cooperation between China and ASEAN necessitated by their mutual interests has resulted in interdependent relationship. However, Chinese growing attachment with the ASEAN is perceived by the US, Japan and India as a threat to the strategic and economic interests in the South East Asian region.

### **Interests, perception of the US, Japan and India**

South East Asia is strategically and economically very much important for not only China but for the outside powers like the US,

Japan and India. Strategically and economically Southeast Asia occupies significant position for the world powers like the US and China because the region has more than 650 million combined populations and some countries of the region are growing economically which have potential to become vibrant economies (Lee, 2020). Moreover, due to the vicinity of the region to the South China Sea, which is commercially one of the important sea routes facilitating world's trade worth trillions of dollars, the strategic significance of the ASEAN region has increased manifold (Lee, 2020).

Further, in wake of its smooth economic progress and increasing military power, China is considered to be an emerging power of the world. Keeping in view its economic and strategic interests, China has adopted policy of cooperation instead of confrontation. For this purpose, China extended cooperation with ASEAN as the South East Asian region is very much significant for China for its economic and strategic interests. China has strengthened its position in Southeast Asia especially during the last decade mainly through soft power; by extending short-term financial incentives and hard power; by strengthening its control over the South China Sea. The government of China is increasingly resolute to shape the political environment in Southeast Asia in its favour (Aizawa, 2020).

However, Chinese economic and strategic interests in South East Asian region are in direct conflict with economic and strategic interests of the US, Japan, and India. Firstly, its common interest of the US, Japan and India to confine the influence of China to its borders. These competing powers are very much aware that ASEAN region provides China with complacent economic and strategic advantage, which can play an important role in bringing China to become a world power. The US do not want to lose stronghold and mastery in the region and ultimately over the world. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy of the US, which aims at holistic approach to combine diplomatic pressure, economic cooperation, and deepening military countermeasures vis-à-vis China. The said US

strategy is carried out in tandem with likeminded powers that are equally uneasy over China's challenge to the existing order, is an exercise meant for constraintment (Heydarian, 2020). As a part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, the US wants to restrict China to regional level. Similarly, India and Japan also want China to be restricted to the regional level. Thus, the convergence of their interests have unified their interests to encircle China, indirectly to stop it from becoming a world power.

### **US Policy towards ASEAN**

In view of its strategic and economic interests, the US has remained engaged in the region of South East Asia since very long. However, due to its engagement in the War against terrorism, the US had decreased its focus on South East Asia and was more focused in the West Asia and Afghanistan. The US policy makers realised the exploitation of the absence of the US from the South East Asian affairs by other powers like China in wake of its engagement in other parts of world. It was expressed by the then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an article in which she admitted that the U.S. lost time for almost a decade in different wars and other major powers of global politics took advantage of this situation (Kanat, 2019).

After witnessing the growing involvement of China in the region, the US started refocusing on the region and redesigned its policy towards South East Asia. The new policy was called "Pivot to Asia" which was based on the notion of regaining the lost glory of the US in the South East Asian region. The policy envisioned active economic diplomacy among Asia economies for enhancing economic cooperation, the redeployment of the U.S. Navy near Asia for marinating the US presence in strategic positions of the region and advance disposition of the diplomatic hard endeavours of the U.S in the capitals of the region. This major policy reorientation stirred a major debate in the US among the U.S. foreign policy observers (Kanat, 2019).

Under the new policy, the US started its efforts especially for initiation of the new agreements for boosting trade with various countries particularly in the South East Asian region and countries around the world. As a part of its policy, the US also started new diplomatic initiatives in countries of Southeast Asia. Further, as a part of its revised policy the US also started military exercises near the Pacific and around the South China Sea. Keeping in view the significance of ASEAN for attaining its policy objectives, the US also increased its interaction with ASEAN and started collaboration in various areas of common interest. Recently, in Malaysia the leaders of the US and ASEAN declared the advancement of the ASEAN-U.S. dialogue relations to a strategic level. In this regard, they have agreed to adopt a Plan of Action for Implementation the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership from 2016 to 2020. The United States remains engaged with ASEAN for the cooperation in political and security areas through their vigorous partaking in different mechanisms formed by ASEAN. Those mechanisms include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for fostering cooperation in political and security realm, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) for strengthening defense cooperation and the East Asia Summit (EAS) for establishing strategic cooperation against regional issues.

Areas of common interest between the US and ASEAN comprise maritime security which aims at protection of Sea-lanes, cyber security, and battling international crime in the region, which includes terrorism and human trafficking among others. More recently, the recent joint maritime exercise of ASEAN and the U.S around the maritime boundaries of the Southeast Asia was the latest initiative of the US in its bid to enhance the maritime security of the South East Asian countries (Lan, 2019). Moreover, cooperation in battling the crime-taking place in the region and other unconventional security matters has been enhanced by the involvement of the US with the ASEAN through Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC).

Apart from security and political area, the United States also continues to be a key trade partner of ASEAN. In 2019, the bilateral trade between US and ASEAN reached to US\$ 294.6 billion, which makes US the second major trading partner of ASEAN among its Dialogue Partners (ASEAN-2020). Their growing cooperation has resulted in vibrant trade and investment relations between them, particularly through the execution of the 2020-2021 ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA). Thus, the US has adopted very vigorous approach towards the South East Asian region through its three-pillar policy to maintain its position in the region as well as to check the growing power of China in the region.

### **Japan's Policy Towards ASEAN**

Japan and ASEAN have old relations as compared to China. Japan and ASEAN started their informal dialogue relations in 1973; however, with the convening of the ASEAN-Japan Forum, their relations were formalized in March 1977 (Pradhan, 2020). Due to the active and efficient diplomatic efforts by China, it gained strong footings in the ASEAN region within a short period. Since, China and Japan are competing strategically for maintain influence in Southeast Asia through infrastructure financing as one of the main source of competition (Cook, 2018) Thus, in reaction to the growing influence of China, Japan realised the necessity for a new security partnerships and its central role in influencing the order in the South East Asian region.

Moreover, Japan has strengthened its relationship with Southeast Asian commonly known as ASEAN since the last many decades in the security, political, and economic areas. In order to extend cooperation for marinating peace and stability in the ASEAN region, Japan acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which is formed by ASEAN. The main purpose of the treaty is to seek cooperation of its signatories for securing peace in Southeast Asia. Japan stood the first Dialogue Partner of ASEAN to appoint an ambassador to ASEAN at its headquarters in Jakarta. ASEAN and

Japan manage their relations through various forums and bodies like the 'ASEAN-Japan Summit' which provides direct link between Japan and ASEAN for discussion of issues of mutual concern, 'Ministerial Meetings' work as a second tier to regularly remain in contact over multiple issues, 'Senior Officials and Experts Meetings' is another vibrant platform for policy discussions and follow ups.

Apart from that, Japan has also been taking part in the various forums formed by ASEAN like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is very significant forum to discuss security related matters of the region among its members through mutual consensus. ASEAN Plus Three (APT) is another important setting exclusively for Japan, China and Korea (South) for discussing the mutual issues, the East Asia Summit (EAS) is also an important forum for countries from Asia Pacific, ASEAN members and outside powers like the US, and Russia being its members, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM- Plus) provides platform to discuss regional security matters of mutual concern, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) which works a key forum to deliberate on maritime affairs between ASEAN and its maritime neighbouring states.

In addition to that, Japan has been actively participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum since very long. Japan has been on forefront in organising different events on the platform of ARF along with ASEAN Member States in many areas. Japan has played important role for promoting of preventive diplomacy, it has also significantly contributed to the peacekeeping operations, took active part in disaster relief, joint efforts in countering terrorism and transnational crime, maritime security issues, extended defence cooperation, has worked for the protection marine environment and security of space. Further, in order to address the problems concerning terrorism and cross border crime, Japan and ASEAN have formed another important forum known as the ASEAN Plus Japan Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC+Japan) which provide second tier platform to regularly discuss the problems arising out of

the conjunction of the criminal networks working in different countries of the region. Similarly, ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) + Japan Consultation is also very significant forum for senior level officials from Japan and ASEAN to formulate policies in accordance with mutual consent.

In the area of trade and investment, Japan remains an important trade and investment partner of ASEAN. The trade between Japan and ASEAN touched US \$ 225.9 billion in 2019, making Japan the fourth major trading partner of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2020). Further, in 2019 Japan was the second main outer source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of ASEAN while FDI flows from Japan to ASEAN reached to 20.4 billion US dollars, which accounts for 12.7 per cent of total FDI flows to ASEAN. Moreover, Japan and ASEAN have signed several agreements, MoUs, Plans of Action, which govern their relations in various areas of mutual interests. Further, in order to promote a substitute to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japanese Premier Abe has pushed his vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) for last many years. The said idea was obviously outlined in 2016, which is aimed to encourage connectivity, free trade and infrastructure across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as Abe's 'pivot to Asia'. The FOIP was developed as a main pillar of Japan's strategy to counter China's military and economic power in the region (Maslow, 2016). Thus, despite China's strong relations with ASEAN, Japan is well-positioned to counterbalance China in Southeast Asia.

### **Indian policy towards ASEAN**

India has very strong relations with the countries of South East Asia. In fact, India and the South East Asia share a long history in terms of cultural bonds, which over the years has facilitated in shaping the relations between them in multiple areas, which include economic, social, political and security relations. The unveiling of 'Look East Policy' in 1992, which was later retitled as 'Act East' policy in 2015 was a landmark in India's relations with the South East Asian nations (Bhagal, 2018). India became Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in

1992 while its status was raised to a Summit Level Partner in 2002. Further, its ties were elevated to Strategic partnership in 2012. India has engaged the group of South East Asian countries both at the multilateral and the bilateral levels. Multilaterally, India and ASEAN are conducting relations at the several levels, which includes India-ASEAN Summits (IAS), India ASEAN Defence Ministers Meet Plus (IADMM Plus), India-ASEAN Strategic Dialogue (IASD), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), EAS Foreign Ministers meeting, and East Asia Summit (EAS) etc. Bilaterally, India's relations with all the nations and arrangements for cooperation exist including for capacity building in security areas.

Economic and strategic factors are the main drivers behind relations between India and ASEAN. Further, India also indorses the ASEAN's vision of rule of law, freedom of navigation, self-restraint and believe in multi-polarity. Thus, in order achieve its policy goals and to compete with China in a bid to counter its growing involvement and influence in the South East Asian region, the Indian government started to take new initiatives under its revised policy to attract ASEAN countries. In this regard, India conducted a preliminary study to explore the areas of mutual economic cooperation with the ASEAN countries. Thus, Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore in 2002, and Framework Agreement on a Free Trade Areas with Thailand in 2003 reflect the Indian objectives and reveal that it had already embarked on a 'Look East' strategy. However, Indian policies do not exhibit any element of confrontation with China rather there was an element of friendly competition with China (Tan Tai Yong & See Chak Mun (2009)). For India, ASEAN is essential for trade due to huge market of more than 600 million combined populations. Further, India also desires that the strategic balance should not be disturbed to allow it freedom of navigation and exploration in collaboration with friendly countries. India wishes to see no irritants between India and ASEAN.

The Delhi Declaration of 2018 was an important landmark in the ASEAN-India relations when 10 ASEAN leaders were invited on the Republic Day of India in 2018. It reflected the growing importance of ASEAN for India and of India for ASEAN to work for their mutual interests through strong cooperation. During the summit, the ASEAN leaders resolved and articulated their desire to make stronger and durable strategic partnership between ASEAN and India for mutual benefit. The heads of ASEAN member countries also stressed the necessity of a long-term collaboration between India and ASEAN covering the across the whole range of issues which include political matters, security issues, economic interests, and the cooperation in the development sector (The National, 2018). Both sides reaffirmed their commitment and significance of maintenance and promotion of peace & stability, the safety of maritime boundaries and security & freedom of navigation in the strategic sea lanes for smooth flow of trade and energy supplies, abiding the law of seas, promotion of unhindered maritime commerce and the resolutions of disputes through peaceful means (Nasir, 2018).

They, ASEAN leaders and their Indian counterpart, endorsed implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in letter and spirit and stressed for a timely agreement on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) between the parties. Aggressive policy and unilateral claims of China on the South China Sea, has forced ASEAN countries to look for a strong security partner ultimately they are driven closer to India (SASEC, 2018). Growing cooperation and continuous negotiations and consultations concerning the political, security issues, discussions on joint military exercises and training for forces between India and ASEAN reflect the true picture of their mutual apprehensions and quest for stabilizing strategic partnership between them (Rajagopalan, 2018). Further, India and ASEAN have signed various documents, which govern their bilateral relations. These documents include ASEAN-India Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism as terrorism is a universal

phenomenon therefore both sides have shown their resolve to jointly work for combating this menace which is universal in nature.

Moreover, Joint Declaration on ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity was adopted in 2004 for extending cooperation in the proposed areas of mutual concern. Furthermore, the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2010-2015) expresses the desire and will of the both parties to continue their cooperation for long time. In addition, Delhi Dialogue V Strengthens ASEAN-India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity 2013, Plans of Action for Implementation of the envisioned goals in the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2016-2020 & 2021-2025) respectively reveal the objective and resolve of India and ASEAN to take their cooperation in said areas until 2021 and beyond (ASEAN, 2020). The agreements, treaties and Memorandums of Understanding between ASEAN and India cover multiple areas. Engagement of ASEAN with India under these documents reflect the mind set of ASEAN in dealing with other states. It is evident from their cooperation that ASEAN do not like to be reliant on China only. Therefore, she has signed these various documents with India for fulfilling its objectives.

## **CONCLUSION**

China and ASEAN enjoy very close and cordial relations since 1990s. Before establishment of formal ties, multiple factors kept them at distance until the realisation of mutual cooperation in both sides. However, the changed international order in consequence of the termination of the cold war and their mutual interests pushed them to establish formal relations. Their relations are expression of their converging economic, political and strategic interests, which are foundations of their unprecedented bilateral cooperation. Their relations cover various areas of mutual interests, which cover variety of issues faced by them.

China and ASEAN cooperation covers political, economic, trade, security, non-traditional security, transport, agriculture, communication and information technology, education, health and socio-cultural areas. They have adopted different mechanisms and signed various agreements, MoUs, and Plans of Action, which govern their relations. Consequently, China and ASEAN have achieved unprecedented heights in their cooperation especially in the economic and trade areas. The growing cooperation between China and ASEAN is perceived by the US, Japan and India as significant threat to their economic and strategic interests in the South East Asian region commonly known as ASEAN region. Thus, in order to check the growing influence and presence of China in the South East Asian region and partly to protect their significant economic interests, the US, Japan and India have also revised and reoriented their policies towards the region.

Due to the growing power of China militarily, and its strong footholds in the South East Asia, the regional countries seek to maintain the balance of presence between China, the US, Japan, and India. Therefore, the South East Asian countries have responded positively to the counter policies of the US, Japan and India to extend their cooperation to them. Consequently, the South East Asian region has become ground for economic and strategic competition between China and the US, Japan and India. Thus, it poses major challenge to the Sino-ASEAN cooperation, which may also jeopardize the regional peace and stability. Dialogue and cooperation among all these competing powers is the best strategy to pursue their respective interests without indulging in confrontation.

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