

# Political and Cultural Relations between the Eastern Coast of India and Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

India's "Look East" Policy (LEP) stretches back far before the '90s. Over the course of many centuries, four different waves contributed to its growth. India's eastern neighbours were an important part of the country's culture and economy up to the 12th and 13th centuries. The British Empire added an important strategic element in India during the second wave of their expansion. To achieve its aim of Asian rebirth, India's independent leaders, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, focused on East Asia during the third wave. The demands of the Cold War, intra-Asian turmoil and rivalries, and India's economic and military constraints all hampered the country's Asia policy. Cultural exchange is beneficial to international relations because it promotes mutual understanding and acceptance among participants. The Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand share a cultural past with India but also retain a unique "Southeast Asianism" of their own. The term "Indianization" or "Hinduization" describes the extensive influence of Indian culture in spheres such as government, religion, the arts, and literature. India's earliest relations to Southeast Asia may be traced back to commercial exchanges, which then expanded into politics, religion, and the arts. After a period of disconnection caused by colonialism and the Cold War, the Look East strategy was implemented in 1991, and since then, things have only gotten better under its revised moniker, Act East, which was approved in 2014. This essay avoids any hegemonic material that proposes a "spiritual mother," instead focusing on how to effectively use this cultural influence in bolstering ties via the cutting-edge Look East-Act East method. Although India is sometimes used as an example of a nation that "exports" its culture to the rest of the world, this is far from the truth.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Polity, Southeast, Economic, Religion, Asia,.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian thinkers and leaders like Mahatma Gandhiji, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jawaharlal Nehru have promoted a "Asianism" or "Asia identity" rooted on the more abstract and spiritual aspects of India's history and culture. India's contemporary Look East policy is trifold and based on the country's longstanding connections to Southeast Asia and East Asia (Acharya, 2015). India's first interactions with the ASEAN governments were founded on the country's deep cultural links to the region (Das, 2013). The Look East strategy seeks to establish a partnership of these dimensions so that "while commerce, connectivity, and capacity-building continue to drive the India-ASEAN links to new milestones," the relationship between these two regions will also benefit from cultural exchange and creative exchange (Chand 2014). In this dissertation, I examine the deep historical roots of the Indian cultural connection to the contemporary Look East policy and cultural diplomacy as a tool of soft power in mainland Southeast Asia, also known as the Mekong basin, which consists of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand.

The 1991 Look East policy places an emphasis on the historical, cultural, and religious ties to Southeast Asia. Specifically highlighted are the Sanskrit, art, and architecture that have been impacted by Hinduism and Buddhism across Southeast Asia (Blarel, 2012). Hinduisation (Das, 2013), Indianisation (Pandya & Malone, 2010), Kleinmeyer (2004), Ooi (2004), and even 'Greater India' have all been used to describe the global expansion of Hinduism and other aspects of Indian culture (Das, 2013). There is a "effect of Indian religion, literature, and ideas" on contemporary culture, claims Ooi (2004). Indian culture has a profound impact on not just the arts but also politics and society, claims Vladimir Braginsky.

India had its first known contact with Southeast Asia at the end of the first century B.C. This was the period when India and Sri Lanka were linked to the rest of mainland Southeast Asia by marine trade routes linking the eastern Roman Empire and the Han dynasty in China via the Thai peninsula, the Mekong Delta, and the Indonesian islands (Kossak, 2001). It made it possible for Indian merchants to start taking part in the lucrative maritime trade with Southeast Asia via the Strait of Malacca. More than anything else, it allowed for a mingling of traditions between India and Southeast Asia. In these ports, Indian traders often socialised with local lords, an act that contributed to the eventual rise of governments patterned after India's divine monarchy. This was plausible since traders seldom came here on their own. Sanskrit script and a plethora of Indian religious texts carried to the West by Brahmins and Buddhist monks (Kossak, 2001). Religious and political harmony led to the construction of the "architectural marvels of Angkor, Borobudur, and Prambanan" (Kumar & Siddique, 2008). Southeast Asian Hindus and Buddhists who travelled to India to worship at sacred sites helped maintain a two-way flow of ideas and artefacts that would continue for the "next thousand years" (Kossak, 2001). Because of this enormous effect, Jawaharlal Nehru started referring to Southeast Asia as "Greater India" (Pandya & Malone, 2010). These authors tracked the spread of Buddhism all the way from China and Korea through Japan and Vietnam, where it eventually prospered, and on to Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, and Thailand, where it was widely practised. These nations embraced the Hindu faith after it was introduced. Islam was introduced to Southeast Asia via commercial routes that ran along India's eastern and western coasts.

## 2. TRANSFERENCE OF INDIAN TRADITIONS

Because of its proximity to India and its wealth of natural resources, Southeast Asia was viewed favourably by ancient Indians, as is seen in the country's classical literature. Ancient texts like as the Ramayana and the Pali Nidesa use a variety of descriptive words for the country of Bardia, including "land of gold" (suvarnadvipa), "island of gold" (suvarnabhumi), "island of coconuts" (narikeladvipa), "island of camphor" (karpuradvipa), and "island of barley" (yavadvipa). Based on the writings of Chinese historian Liang shu, a party of Indian Brahmins ventured to the Malay Peninsula in search of economic opportunity and eventually established in the little kingdom of P'an-p'an. It has been shown through the study of a Sanskrit stone inscription (named Vo-Cahn) from the third century that Indian Brahmins resided in the territories we now call Vietnam and Cambodia. Furthermore, as a result of Buddhist missionary activities, many Indians settled there. The term "Indianization" is often used to describe the influence of Indian culture on Southeast Asia; this influence was mostly peaceful and apolitical. What elements of Indian culture resonated with the people of Southeast Asia were enthusiastically adopted by them. Historically, there has been just one major invasion from India, a naval war commanded by Rajendra Chola in 1025 CE that aimed to conquer the Srivijaya realm. The best way to provide readers more concrete examples of early IndianSoutheast Asian interactions is to consider genuine instances of communication between Indians and the people who inhabited what are now prominent Southeast Asian states. It will be shown that the exchange of ideas and culture between India and Southeast Asia was not unidirectional, especially in the case of Islam.

The spread of Buddhism to the east follows the expansion of Hinduism in the same area. Religions and cultures all around the globe owe a debt to India and China as the two main conduits of their dissemination. The results of this cultural synthesis of these two dominant thought systems are still felt today. The Ramayana's tremendous popularity in Southeast Asia, a region dominated by Buddhism, may be attributed in part to this mingling of ideas. Representations of the Buddha, Ganesha, Garuda, Shiva, Parvati, Rama, and Sita are universally worshipped and honoured throughout Southeast Asia. There is also a linguistic heritage, with many Southeast Asian languages deriving their basic grammar and vocabulary from Pali and Sanskrit. The names of people and places, the rituals and festivals practised there, and the architectural plans of ancient temples like Indonesia's Borobudur, Cambodia's Angkor Wat, and Laos's Wat Phu all attest to the region's distinctive cultural synthesis. Temples at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, and Luang Prabang, Laos, have intricate carvings depicting stories from the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Bihar, India's Nalanda 4 University rose to prominence during this period as the region's preeminent centre for Buddhist intellectual and theological debates. This allowed Buddhism to spread across China and Southeast Asia. Indian cultural practises were widely disseminated across Southeast Asia during this time period, and commerce was a major factor in this. The spice trade route connected West Asia, the Persian Gulf, and beyond to Indonesia and beyond, drawing in travellers and traders from all around Asia. This link not only boosted economic development in the region, but also helped Islam expand across Southeast Asia. The "Bali Jatra" is a yearly festival held in the Indian state of Orissa to remember the many traders who perished crossing the Bay of Bengal, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea to carry commodities and ideas to the nations on the other side of the Indian Ocean.

## 3. INDIA- ASEAN RELATIONS

The ASEAN group consists of the countries in Southeast Asia (ASEAN). The Indian government has made developing a tighter and more comprehensive collaboration with ASEAN a top priority in light of the tremendous changes in the world political and economic scene during the early 1990s and India's own march towards economic liberalisation. To broaden its economic prospects, India implemented the "Look East Policy." The "Act East Policy," an expansion of the "Look East Policy," has been implemented in recent years. During the 12th ASEAN India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in November 2014, the PM formally unveiled the Act East Policy. Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are included in India's regional policy initiatives like BIMSTEC, MGC, etc. India participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). India's foreign policy is based on the Act East Policy and its involvement with ASEAN. Since India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996, and a Summit Level Partner in 2002, the upgrade to a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a natural progression to the ground covered. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have 30 different Dialogue Mechanisms.

More than 60 celebrations were held in 2017 to honour the 25th anniversary of the Dialogue Partnership, the 15th anniversary of Summit Level interaction, and the 5th anniversary of the Strategic Partnership between India and ASEAN. These events took place in India and through our Missions in ASEAN Member States. On January 25, 2018, in New Delhi, the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit was held under the theme "Shared Values, Common Destiny." There was a Dharma-Dhamma Conference, a Hackathon and Startup Festival, a Global SME Summit, a Business and Investment Meet and Expo, a Textiles Event, an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Expo, and a Business Council meeting. There were also port calls by Indian naval ships, a workshop on the blue economy, a connectivity summit, a meeting to strengthen our Network of Think Tanks, and a summit on connectivity. These efforts, which were astounding in their breadth and depth, laid the ground for a permanent partnership between the two groups. During the ASEAN-India commemorative summit, Narendra Modi and the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) decided to prioritise marine cooperation as part of their strategic partnership. The result of this choice was the passing of the Delhi Declaration. A first has been the invitation to the 69th Republic Day Parade in India of the heads of state from all ten countries that make up ASEAN. India's successful hosting of the ASEAN Summit, attended by all 10 of the region's leaders, is particularly impressive considering the short time period of just five years in which it was accomplished. In 2012, ASEAN and India held a Commemorative Summit in New Delhi with the theme "ASEAN-India Cooperation for Peace and Shared Prosperity" to mark the 20th anniversary of dialogue engagement and the 10th anniversary of a Summit level collaboration between the two organisations. The leaders of the ten ASEAN countries met a commemorative summit where they voted to upgrade their cooperation to the level of "Strategic Partnership." The leaders also ratified the "ASEAN-India Vision Statement."

### **National and Regional Policy Reforms**

Recommendations for regulatory reforms to promote trade and investment are made, with a primary emphasis on the ways in which tariffs and NTBs continue to limit the breadth of fostering economic connections between South Asia and Southeast Asia. To reduce trade barriers, most-favored-nation (MFN) tariffs have been utilised, but preferential tariffs, which are even lower than MFN, have been applied relatively seldom. It seems that additional tariff barrier reduction is achievable to boost trade, FDI, and economic growth since the MFN applied tariff rates are close to the effective applied rates on cross-regional trade by both regions. The estimations show that between 75% and 80% of NTBs that are biased against international corporations are still in force. The largest economies in the area also tend to be the most vigilant in terms of NTB enforcement. India is responsible for 260 of the 307 non-tariff measures identified in South Asia, followed by Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Indonesia accounted for 65 of the 148 indices for Southeast Asia, followed by Viet Nam and more developed countries.

However, tariffs and NTBs still restrict the scope of commerce and investment between South Asia and Southeast Asia. An increase in the number of FTAs between the two regions is one way for reducing these barriers and fostering greater trade connectivity. They should cooperate to remove any remaining tariffs and non-tariff obstacles if the two regions wish to maintain their trade momentum and realise the full advantages of greater cross-regional trade and investment (NTBs). When compared to the rest of the members of the World Trade Organization, South Asia still uses MFN duties that are higher than the average of 8.8 percent. 15 Moreover, averages don't tell the whole story; for both South Asia and Southeast Asia, there are considerable tariff increases at the product level, suggesting additional room for liberalisation. Unilateral liberalisation or free trade agreements (FTAs) might lead to lower tariff rates for trade between the two regions. In terms of South Asian FTA establishment, only India and Pakistan play significant roles. The Regional Comprehensive

Economic Partnership (RCEP) would establish the largest trade bloc in the world, accounting for 40% of global business, but so far only India from South Asia has participated in the negotiations for it. This will make it easier for Indian businesses to enter the S.E. Asian market and use the region's cheap labour force. So far, only the government of Bangladesh has expressed any interest in joining the regional integration group, but that might change if the other South Asian countries start to experience the severe economic repercussions of being left out. Worse still, four Southeast Asian countries have just recently initiated TPP talks (TPP). Other regional economies may elect to participate later on, as time goes on.

Exchange rate regimes may distort trade, investment, and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) business activity so long as exchange rates are permitted to stray from economic fundamentals. Controlled floating exchange rates have been implemented in the economies of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The real effective exchange rates throughout time show that all currencies have seen substantial swings in value. Making currency rates more flexible might stimulate increased trade and economic cooperation between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital to the economies and livelihoods of many South Asian and Southeast Asian nations. That's why it's possible that a robust M&E sector might boost regional integration and accelerate equitable growth. However, SMEs want greater access to cash in order to take part in South Asian- Southeast Asian trade and investment. Bank funding for SMEs may be facilitated by removing informational disparities and improving the integrity of credit databases, forming credit guarantee organisations, and finding creative strategies to boost collateral. Developing local currency, bond, and stock markets are a few more options. Local investment trust funds are another. Affordable and high-quality technical, marketing, and other business support services may help small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) thrive.

#### **4. CULTURAL AND CIVILISATIONAL INFLUENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIA**

The Indian government's "Act East plan" is an initiative to forge closer economic and political links with Southeast Asia, a region that has had close relations with India for millennia and that is both culturally and geographically intertwined with India. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have many cultural and socioeconomic similarities, thus when they signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2009, it created new opportunities for economic collaboration between the two groups.

Modern-day Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Burma all show various overt and subtle signs of Indian influence on their art, culture, and civilisation. India has long been an inspiration for the ASEAN countries, and its impact can be seen across the region's contemporary creative and physical landscapes. There are now eleven countries that make up ASEAN: Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, the Philippines, and most recently, Timor Leste.

When compared to Indian temples of the same age, some of these buildings are even more stunning due to their size, the amount of stone bas relief sculptures they include, and the general arrangement. Authors throughout Southeast Asia, inspired by the Ramayana, have produced a plethora of works that share many characteristics with the original but also have a strong local flavour as a consequence of commerce and cultural contact with India.

The cultures of China and India had significant impacts on Southeast Asia, although locals only embraced practises that worked with their way of life. The Ramayana's flexibility has allowed it to spread to many different civilizations.

Folklore singers and performers were instrumental in popularising and adapting Indian literary works in Southeast Asia, making them the most effective way of propagating Indian culture there. Ancient Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata grew in popularity by being told from one generation to the next and then being rewritten with each telling. Artists who contributed to their dissemination were dubbed "dalangs," and they played a part in localising these imported epics by making additions and adjustments. In its wake, several regional retellings of the Ramayana appeared, such as Seri Rama in Malaysia and RamKer in Cambodia. You may come across some of the best writing ever produced in Southeast Asia.

Artists in Southeast Asia did the same thing, taking inspiration from old Indian themes but giving them their own unique twist with the help of local aesthetic features. Khmer (Cambodian) sculpture of the eighth to thirteenth centuries AD takes its inspiration from Gupta period symbols but is quite different in form and style. Gods, goddesses, Buddha, Apsaras, and devils from Southeast Asia are shown in these sculptures.

India, on the other hand, did not use force or intimidation to extend its cultural sphere of influence. There was no proof that large numbers of Indians migrated to Southeast Asian countries, nor any proof that those countries were colonised or oppressed. The Indians who went there weren't looking to set up a monarchy or expand their area of influence.

Some of the fancy names given to Southeast Asia by India's wealthy merchant class include Swarnabhumi (meaning "country of gold"), Tokola (meaning "land of cardamoms"), and Narikeldeep (meaning "land of coconuts"). Getting to Southeast Asia involved taking two different routes. One route went overland, via Bengal, Assam, Manipur, and Burma. Boats could also traverse the Malacca Strait from the Coromandel coast or the Bay of Bengal coast to the Malay Peninsula.

During the Gupta period, India flourished economically and produced a wide variety of works of art, including exquisite textiles, jewellery, metalwork, and sculpture. Trade flourished between India and Southeast Asia, which was considered as a nation with plentiful spice and rice growing regions, since Indian goods were in great demand. To begin with, Indian businessmen established themselves in the Mekong Delta city of Funan, Vietnam. Because of the influx of merchants, the area quickly developed into a major trading centre.

## 5. TRADE AND INVESTMENT WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

The goal of India's Look East Policy (LEP) is to strengthen connections with its Southeast Asian and East Asian neighbours via increased trade and investment. Since its inception in the mid-1990s, the LEP has been aggressively pursued in a wide range of ways, including issues as varied as connectivity, trade, and investment. Significant progress has been achieved by the LEP in establishing commercial relations with the ASEAN countries, the People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for MultiSectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), East Asia Summit, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have all worked together to help the LEP succeed (MGC). With the second phase of the Look East Policy (or Act East Policy), India is actively expanding its influence in the region to the east. 5 The Northeast Region of India serves as the hub of India's expanding economic and geopolitical ties to East and Southeast Asia (NER). Through this land passage, South Asia may reach Southeast Asia. India has negotiated many major free trade agreements (FTAs), comprehensive economic cooperation agreements (CECAs), and comprehensive economic partnership agreements (CEPAs) since the LEP was signed. The FTA with ASEAN is the most important of them. 6 Every single ASEAN member has ratified this pact. Nothing has been done with respect to the completed trade in services and investment agreements. At the same time, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its Free Trade Agreement (FTA) partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand) are discussing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have been friends for 30 years. Beginning as a "sectoral partner" in 1992, "dialogue partner" in 1996, and "summit partner" at the 2002 ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh, India has been an active participant in ASEAN since then. The ASEAN-India strategic partnership, a heightened engagement begun at the 2012 Commemorative Summit, gives rise to greater hope over the delivery of enhanced bilateral relations.

India's commerce with ASEAN has increased from \$7.13 billion in 2000 to \$76.26 billion in 2012, making ASEAN one of India's most significant commercial partners (Table 1). Up from 8% of India's overall trade in 2000, the percentage of trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has increased to roughly 10% now. Over the last several years, India's exports to these nations—as well as Singapore, Japan, and the Republic of Korea—have skyrocketed. While just 6% of Indian exports went to ASEAN in 2000, that number has increased to almost 11% now. Meanwhile, 9% of India's total imports came from ASEAN, up from 9% in 2000. Despite this, not all ASEAN members are seeing the same rate of increased commercial activity. India's trade with Singapore in 2012 was worth \$22.49 billion, whereas its trade with Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic combined was little over \$100 million. The value of India's commerce with the ASEAN+3 nations increased from less than \$14.57 billion in 2000 to more than \$182.23 billion in 2012, a compound annual growth rate of roughly 21%. This increase may be the highest trade growth India has ever had with any economic bloc in the world. Trade between India and the PRC is largely responsible for this growth.

Business between India and the People's Democratic Republics of Cambodia, Lao People's Republic, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) is stagnating. That's encouraging news for expanding trade connections with the CLMV countries. The export mix might change if the countries have favourable trading conditions, such as lower and more liberal trade costs. According to current trends in trade between ASEAN and India, India may soon

emerge as a key market for ASEAN-made products. The reciprocal trade between India and ASEAN is growing rapidly, especially in the intermediate and capital goods sectors. Recently, India has seen a rise in its exports to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), particularly in the fields of electrical machinery, transmission equipment, and vehicles.

### **Only a second-rank relationship**

India's "Look East" approach has resulted in a steady increase in collaboration between ASEAN and India over the last twenty years (LEP). While the LEP has been successful in increasing trade and fostering economic cooperation with ASEAN and Southeast Asian nations, the political side of this LEP is light and not yet recognised as a priority, which explains why the strategy has not yet evolved into a comprehensive and meaningful process. The lack of excitement on both sides is indicative of their reluctance to completely commit. Few people give increasing political conversation a high priority. India's policy of involvement with the area is not well-known among ASEAN member states since it has not been organised along clear political lines. The Indian government is not seen as reliable. This political relationship is not related to any major political endeavour or discourse, at least as far as the public's impression of ASEAN members is concerned. There is a paucity of political substance in the so-called common political announcements, despite the fact that a network for political dialogue has been developed through committees and functional groups. Political cooperation is viewed through the lens of cooperation on practical projects like building roads, bridges, or hosting a car rally, but the selection of societal and political values, as well as the establishment of institutions to protect them, are not discussed unless they directly affect the prospects for future prosperity. The ASEAN/India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG) could play a significant role in changing this outlook<sup>15</sup> and creating a reason and motivation to increase this aspect of collaboration as an epistemic community of committed individuals together to offer directions and instruments to improve the relationship.

Indian diplomacy with ASEAN remains mostly empty, since the country has not yet agreed on a common political objective. Its sluggish actions often dissatisfy and irritate. The approach taken to the issue of human rights is one such example. In 2009, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established an intergovernmental commission on human rights, and since then, the ASEAN Charter has been updated to more clearly recognise these rights. It seems that China and India share a similar degree of concern and significance, since China has approved India's choice to leave out this "sensitive" item from the Plan of Action. How do we bridge the gap between us when it comes to our shared sense of self, shared values, and shared experiences? To become a global or regional force, India should not be afraid to solidify its political position. ASEAN has its own unique difficulties. The Association did not exhibit sufficient enthusiasm for this political debate. Since the relationship between ASEAN and India is not seen to be a danger, it takes a back seat to more pressing issues. Despite being pursued by superpowers like China and the United States and approached by middle powers like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, ASEAN has not put forth nearly enough effort to forge stronger ties with like-minded nations. Internal concerns, such as continuing nationalism and mutual distrust, undermine the Association's capacity to present a single front internationally, explain policy, and boost collective power. Due to intra-ASEAN conflict and local instability, the Association still lacks collective authority, making it difficult for outsiders to engage in negotiations with the group. After establishing its charter, the Association has become better at reacting to changes in the environment than creating them. Unfortunately, the average person in India knows very little about the country and hence will not support any particular policy.

Given the stakes involved, one may expect India and ASEAN to rapidly and readily collaborate on Myanmar. In reality, hardly no results are found while researching this issue. It's interesting to learn the reasoning behind this diplomatic position, which is anything from casual. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have the same stance on Myanmar as does the United States: no meddling in the country's internal affairs and change only when invited. It's possible that the couples' similar outlook and reluctance to cooperate on a public political front might be explained by the fact that they share these values. Note that India, as an ASEAN member, has never counted on force or unfriendly diplomacy to bring about a peaceful change of power in Myanmar. They were really anxious because of Western pressure (and ASEAN paid a heavy price for its position<sup>18</sup>). In addition, they were far more at ease speaking with the junta than any other political actor in order to "change the system from the inside." Second, geopolitical factors were crucial, as both nations were concerned about China gaining control of Myanmar. Third, the United States and the European Union's promotion of the concept of a "pariah state" was considered as unrealistic by both sides since Myanmar was a participant in Asian power games and a member of ASEAN; further ostracising it was fruitless.

To begin communicating with the "legitimate" political actors in Myanmar, ASEAN formulated its policy of "constructive engagement" around the end of the 1980s. An important driver of this approach was the desire of

ASEAN governments to profit from hitherto untapped investment and resource opportunities<sup>19</sup>. Rangoon was invited to join the Association in the early 1990s, and it finally joined in July 1997. (and with this acceptance, India became ASEAN's next-door neighbour, sharing a 1,600-kilometer boundary). Due to the fact that "the sanctity of national sovereignty is ASEAN's most important corporate value"<sup>20</sup>, the organization's policy at this period was characterised by a firm adherence to the non-interference philosophy in order to engage and socialise the junta, therefore prioritising stability. A large portion of this "contact" was really just economic dealings between ASEAN nationals and the Burmese government. As a consequence of this shift in perspective away from political persuasion as an aggressive feature and toward a more conviction-based approach, the "constructive engagement" strategy was abandoned in favour of the "flexible engagement" policy, with the same results<sup>21</sup>. Multiple ASEAN member nations had financial and subsequent sociopolitical problems in 1997, exacerbating the situation. In spite of everyone's best efforts, they got virtually little done since they were all too wrapped up in their own personal lives (from Thailand to Indonesia). It was already difficult to achieve the adjustments sought by some because of the divisions within ASEAN between new and founder members (Thailand and the Philippines). Not only did the assassination of Depayin<sup>22</sup> draw attention to ASEAN, but so did the turmoil surrounding the organization's leadership in 2013. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) does not want to change its approach toward Myanmar, which has been criticised for being inconsistent and unable to exert any influence on the junta. Most academics agreed with this view, despite evidence that ASEAN's risk-averse posture on this issue was linked to its "critical disengagement" approach and that the establishment of the ASEAN charter was yet another attempt to influence Myanmar's administration via quiet diplomacy. After the devastating cyclone that hit in May of 2008, the Association decided to adopt a more vocal position, pleading for more international cooperation and highlighting the importance of international assistance to India.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The creation of an ASEAN Community by 2015 is one such goal. Cambodian and Laotian (both close to China) governments are less convinced of the interest of such a community and have put it in jeopardy by not doing enough to prepare for the ASEAN market, by ASEAN as a regional institution not being well equipped to deal with its new responsibilities, and by the prevalence of nationalist discourses. It's true that the ASEAN Community may serve as an illustration of the radically diverse impulses that have hurt the Association and may also help to increase the divide between the Association's founding members and its more recent additions. This isn't only an economic issue; it's also a political one, and it makes it seem like the members don't really want to work together. The deadline is set for 2015, and action must be taken to reestablish unity, coordination, efficiency, and legitimacy under a common banner. The succeeding chairmen' lack of confidence just adds to the gravity of the situation. After Cambodia, Brunei and Myanmar are next on the list. Due to their inexperience and lack of authority, it will be more challenging to make these two ready for 2015. The Association's already tenuous position is further jeopardised by the need to find answers in a dynamic environment with more powerful neighbours. In this way, it is in its own self-interest for it to strengthen its political relationships with its neighbours. The support and enhanced political cooperation of India are two potential good indications. India has to show that it is capable of more than simply unity; it must also exhibit its ability to innovate. A stronger articulation of the political ideas that gave birth to the ASEAN community, notably the democratic management of diversity, is necessary if the connection between the two is to develop beyond a purely functional one.

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