

Role of Culture in Shaping India-Southeast Asian Security Relations and Confidence Building Measures: Continuity and Change



Dr. Chander Shekhar

Independent Analyst and Author

MPhil and PhD from the CIPOD, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (Delhi)

Abstract

As the world has undergone a popular shift in international relations and facing existential crisis in interaction and struggling to maintain relationship and thereby moving towards an Asian century with the rise of India at its center in last few decades, culture seeks to reconstruct the relations between the countries, namely, India and Southeast Asian countries. In this light, the proposed article seeks to examine how the role of culture is emerging and has influenced India-Southeast Asian relation or ASEAN security partnership and as a stimulus to enhance Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) over the years and make a shift from the antiquated scholarship, thereby, it is maintained that India-Southeast Asia security relations has moved into a new level in which cultural re- engagement facilitate in the process. With the use of primary and secondary sources, it is found that India-Southeast Asia relations have grown upward in maintaining regional peace and prosperity. Given China a strategic rival and a potential disruptor, both can converge and strengthen their ties as well. Thus, it is concluded that culture plays a central role to ameliorate India-Southeast Asia security relations over the years, which makes them an outlier in regional security architecture with a long-term vision.

Keywords: India-Southeast Asia, Culture, Security, CBMs

Introduction

The world order is witnessed a rapid change in the last couple of years; faced challenges, such as economy crisis, protectionism, rise of political conflicts, health securities (the corona virus or COVID-19 for instance) and so on. These challenges are explicitly linked with culture and its preservation. The word 'culture' has largely been neglected by pundits of international politics. In spite of the vast roles that culture carries, it makes sense to discuss it than exaggerate it. 'Culture is generally underrated or overlooked, especially in the field of international relations' (Roth 2015:11). Until the post-Cold War era begins, it was marginalized by existing theories, such as realism and liberalism. The realist scholarship

claims that it is the balance of power and hard force principles that establish order and peace. It is their parochial perspective that restrains it from thinking about culture in foreign policy. The ethics, norms and rules are part of moral foreign policy of a country which is an integral part of culture.

Moreover, this study is limited to examine the roles of culture in international relations—especially India-Southeast Asian security relations. It likewise underlines how culture facilitates in confidence building measures and engineered an environment of non-confrontational through mutual learning and understanding about diverse culture. It will not be contested to point out that 'for centuries, trade and human migra-

tion traversed the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean connected maritime Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent in complex networks that were sustained by commerce, culture and community' (Yong and Mun 2009:20). Historical ties which were shaped by trade and maritime connectivity between India and Southeast Asia are presented opportunities to enhance mutual trust and capability in order to attain long term shared objectives in the region—especially South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region.

India and Southeast Asian countries are geographically close and this is a strategic advantage of forging security partnership to shape regional order as external threats from transnational issues have tested relations. The question is arisen why culture is to be given much attention in India-Southeast Asia relations. In the words of Prime Minister of India, "the ten countries of South East Asia connect the two great oceans in both the geographical and civilizational sense. Our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, a common rules-based order for the region" (Modi 2018). At the onset, India, if colonial period is left as it did not allow to flourish India and Southeast Asian culture, has been engaged well as security of India is largely dependent on its (extended) neighbors. Understanding security relationship between India and Southeast Asia is required to go through the shared cultural and political history which has stimulated these countries to cooperate on security subjects. They form a common civilization root, known as Indic-Belt chains, and symmetrical cultural connections traced thousands of years ago and reinforced after the post-decolonization period. Now, security aspect has become strategically imperative in amidst of strategic contestations risen in the Indo-Pacific region.

Understanding Culture in International Relations

World history is witnessed that scholars have given attention to hard powers studies notably military for national security objectives. On the other hand, the element of culture has also

been poorly read, practiced and understood. It is maintained that 'the notion that culture affects human behavior is, of course, hardly new' (Mazarr 1996:177). It is imperative to understand that it is the culture that gives rise to different civilizations, such as Indus Valley civilization and Indic-Belt chains spread throughout the Southeast Asian countries and extended to East Asia. It is claimed that 'culture is making a comeback as a factor in international relations' as present conditions prove (Pethiyagoda 2014). In the complex international politics, where different actors with diverse cultures interact with each other on several key issues, the importance of mutual learning becomes crucial. This could be seen in 'the 1648 Peace of Westphalia ended the Wars of religion by creating a pluralistic order of sovereign states, in which mutual recognition of sovereignty allowed states of different cultural complexions to co-exist' (Smit 2018). Therefore, countries have been making efforts to prevent the war through various measures in which accommodating diverse culture is significant as it provides a win-win situation for both parties.

Moreover, the term 'culture' is defined as a context-specific system that is made of particular environment, nature or constructed constitutes theories of life. It is stated that how we interact, speak, forge relationship and so on are influenced by culture. Defining culture has always been a difficult task, thereby; no universal definition of it is available which could be considered by all. However, scholars have defined it from different perspectives. 'Culture is a continuous process experienced by every person and community living in a particular natural and social environment. It starts with the natural and communal challenges this environment poses to the individual' (Roth 2015:12). Culture defines the identity of a system and how it is engaging and accommodating through learning. Given the importance of culture, 'cultural values impact what people, and therefore states, want and think in world affairs, often subconsciously. It affects what tools of statecraft are used, what national image is sought and how concepts of peace, freedom and development are

valued' (Pethiyagoda 2014). In international relations, culture has been given attention at the onset, implicitly, while engaging with external powers, for instance, in India different ancient kingdoms used to practice and consider culture an integral part of their statecraft and diplomacy. It however does not recognize by international relation pundits. The two world wars are feasible examples of why instead of cross cultural engagement countries give so much value to hard means, such as military modernizations led cultural supremacy. This theory is invalidated after the Cold War when the only superpower left, the United States, acknowledged the strategic uses of culture which could shape the mind by promoting its way of culture.

International relations as a discipline have largely been a dominant field of realism for a long time. Still it did not lose its credibility as far as international politics is concerned. For realist scholarship, international system, without central government, is an anarchic that could only be tamed through balance of power and military modernization principles instead dialogue. Therefore, it would not be contested to state that 'most IR theories have been shaped in a particular climate and context, which can be or cannot be possible to apply to other hemispheres' (Shekhar 2019:119). There was amoral foreign policy practice and no ethics or cultural understandings were there. At present, countries employ both flexible and non-flexible tools in foreign policy conduct and avoid open conflicts as it would destroy both sides.

Culture, Confidence Building Measures and Security Relationship

The concept of culture has been given major priority as far as the security relationship building is concerned between and among countries in the domain of international politics notably India-Southeast Asia. The latter is shaped by the former as the mutual understanding is considered the initial equation change to maintain political and security relations. The rise of cross-cultural engagement is a phenomena in the affairs of international politics. The small powers can also

leverage it for its development and security protection. As the force is believed to be the last weapon to influence international and regional politics, soft power has emerged as an invincible weapon which enhances the capability of countries as far as security partnership building is concerned. It is maintained that cultural element is an indispensable feature of soft power diplomacy to shape subjective and objective purposes. As a relevance measure in the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), culture shapes identity of the country.

Moreover, culture and the confidence building measures have explicit relations that strive to build security relations based on trust, openness and transparency. It is the culture that reinforces India and Southeast Asian countries security relationship which were sharply deteriorated during the Cold War—as proclaimed that "the CBM concept, that originates from ideas of both the finite deterrence school and of the control school of the 1960s in the United States, was to replace the traditional rules of power policy by more rational modes of behavior based on more openness, predictability and reliability of national policies" (Brauch 1979:123). However, the CBMs have been defined differently by various scholars. The CBMs are entailed as 'measures that address, prevent, or resolve uncertainties among states. Designed to prevent wanted and especially unwanted escalation of hostilities and build mutual trust...can be state-to-state or non-governmental' (CSIS).

In the case of India and Southeast Asian countries relationship, confidence building measures plays key roles. It also has important influences on security partnership and now digital community building. Here, the concept of security is used in a broader way that includes traditional and non-traditional forms of [in] security. It would further make flexible relationship if the mistrust is generated. It is stated that 'the concept of confidence-building measures focuses on a step-by-step reduction of mistrust and fear in order to contribute to the development of trust and better understanding between states' (Br-

auch 1979:123). Therefore, the complex issues between India and Southeast Asian countries could be sorted out through dialogue and mutual learning, and even reinforcing culture exchanges.

Likewise, in the affairs of security, 'confidence building measures should contribute to a favorable climate for the discussion of controversial and conflictual issues. The CBMs should address both the subjective feeling of insecurity and the objective elements of threats' (Brauch 1979:118). Both sorts of security threats are imperative to be understood with how culture can tame it through its century's old connection between India and Southeast Asian countries. Indonesia, an emerging maritime power in Southeast Asia, along with other countries shall keep monitor the activities in the South China Sea. In addition, the relevance of ASEAN shall not be forgotten in security establishment in the region as claimed that 'Southeast Asia is one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world. The ASEAN contributed to this success by alleviating intra-ASEAN conflict, thereby helping to create a political stable and peaceful environment attractive to foreign investors' (Narine 1998:202).

Culture as Strategic Asset in India-Southeast Asia Security Relation

The concept of culture is and has been read poorly in the affairs of international politics especially in developing countries. It is due to the colonial history that has shaped the regional order. In case of India-Southeast Asia security relation, culture at the onset has been constructively playing an indispensable role. Likewise, 'the relations between India and the Southeast Asian countries or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are as old as the Indic civilizations itself that thrived in the South Asian sub-continent and had influenced the ASEAN countries holistically' (Shekhar 2019:120). This historical memory has never been researched well among scholars of international relations.

Furthermore, culture as a currency that is forged centuries ago and as asset is being utilized in the security relationship among countries. Culture both as asset and liability is brought up differenc-

es and conflicts down to maintain security and peaceful relationship. It is stated that 'cultural proximity is considered one of the major factors to build a trustful relationship among countries in the domain of international relations such closeness, one can see with the common and shared cultural civilizational roots in the relationship of India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)' (Shekhar 2019:118). On the other side, culture and its asset are challenged by factors, such as non-state actors.

However, 'perceptions of India's rise and its expanding military capabilities have raised hopes within the region for a stronger Indian security profile in Southeast Asia' (Mohan 2013:134). The strategic uses of culture can be demonstrated as scholar point out precisely, 'It (India) exported Buddhism, facilitated the spread of Islam, and provided the platform from which Western imperialism could establish itself in Southeast Asia' (Mohan 2013:135). It is indeed an opportunity in India-Southeast Asia relations that 'southeast Asia's security politics have arrived at an inflection point, thanks to the renewal of territorial conflicts, deterioration of great power relations and the seemingly inability of existing regional institutions to cope with these challenges' (Mohan 2013:134). And, India can play a critical role as peace loving country in preservation of regional order and stability vision designed in international law under the United Nations charter. Thus, it is the consequences of India-Southeast Asia's dynamic culture as asset which can be proved by stating that 'the teaching and idols of Buddha and Hindu god and goddess can be seen in the streets of Thailand, Vietnam as part of the Indic civilization and its influential culture' (Shekhar 2019:121). As an asset, culture can do more to shape security partnership between countries.

India-Southeast Asia Security Relation: An Era of Transformation

The twenty first century has been witnessed a dramatic transformation in the field of international relations. This transformation has brought up, thereby, challenges and opportunities to sustain this long term relationship among countries.

India-Southeast Asian countries have also been facing several sorts of security challenges that are and have posed a civilization threat to their economy and national security. It is proclaimed that 'great civilizations had once flourished in these regions, but their destinies had been suppressed by long periods of colonial rule' (Yong and Mun 2009:20). The emergence of non-state actors in the form of terrorism after the September and Indian parliament attack in 2001 has posed an important security threat. This threat perception is reinforced by maritime threats in Indo-Pacific region.

During the Cold War period, the spread of communism was the major security threat to regional peace and security, thereby; the five major countries of Southeast Asia established the Regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to contain it. Likewise, it is maintained 'it is evident that the failure of India to establish its cultural and geographic affinity with the region stemmed largely from the dictates of regional politics and the Cold War regime' (Yong and Mun 2009:24). Nonetheless, the post-Cold War period, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, provided opportunity to improve its relations with the neighboring country like India. Moreover, maritime, cyber threat, health insecurity and other potential challenges have presented challenges to forge a security partnership between India and Southeast Asia.

From the 'Look East' policy to upgraded 'Act East' policy, India has been keep improving and resetting its security and defense relationship with the Southeast Asian countries. Given the complex equation in the region as claimed that 'India's "Act East" policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels' of which Southeast Asia is a major focus (Kesavan 2020). In spite of that, In the 1940s, as India headed towards political independence, Jawaharlal Nehru had looked to Southeast Asia as a region whose history, fate, and destiny are somewhat linked with India's' (Yong and Mun 2009:20). India at onset has maintained close relations with its extended neighbors.

The visible change in India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia can be seen in the last few decades as it broadened its scope to accommodate the emerging areas. The role of India to Southeast Asian region can be: 'to maintain regional stability, and prevent regional domination from external powers; to secure maritime lines of communication, and increase connectivity of infrastructure; and to ensure that territorial disputes, such as the South China Sea dispute, are settled peacefully' (Southgate 2015). Nonetheless, it shall not be neglected that 'there were cogent factors why the Vajpayee government wanted to develop closer relationships with the ASEAN countries in March 2000, Vajpayee began to speak about the importance of maritime security partly in response to the increase in piracy attacks in the Straits of Malacca' (Yong and Mun 2009:32). On the other hand, 'the Manmohan Singh government's approach towards ASEAN was also very much a continuation of that pursued under the Vajpayee government' (Yong and Mun 2009:37). It is feasible as above mentioned periods shown that India's outlook towards Southeast Asian region has been dynamic to accommodate emerging challenges and opportunities from time to time.

In addition, post-2014 period has witnessed a strategic and diplomatic improvement in India and Southeast Asian relations as the administration explicitly maintains its engagement with people (diasporas) by stressing on forging digital community of shared future in the region. At the onset, through various platforms or visits to Southeast Asian countries, the first and foremost element that was discussed, which is considered a foundation of relationship between India and Southeast Asia, is cultural and with going beyond economic relations has opened new areas of co-operation to converge common objectives.

Moreover, Indo-Pacific region an emerging hotspot that my reinforce the existing security ties between India-Southeast Asia is a strategic zone that would shape the international order, or whatever it would provide with India-Southeast Asian security partnership as an alterna-

tive. 'Malacca Straits are important to both India and Indonesia and the two countries signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2001 and have had regular defence exchanges including the exchange of high level visits, ship visits, officers studying in Staff Colleges in either country and joint coordinated patrols in the mouth of the Malacca Straits' (Anand 2013).

Thus, they are required to cooperate on emerging and critical technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and utilize it for the welfare of people in the world and create an environment of win-win situation as 'trade, economics and connectivity are important drivers of India's enhanced engagement with Southeast Asia, security factors are of increasing importance' (Southgate 2015). These drivers would further shape the regional equation in the region and balance threats growth from state and non-state actors.

Challenges

As India-Southeast Asia security relations have entered into a new era of partnership, they are further needed to closely ties up their relationship to reinforce for the long term. India-Southeast Asia in spite of advancing their relations is likely to face challenges as follows: the first challenge is the maintaining mutual trust and transparency. It is one of the major setbacks that could be faced by them. This has been a key problem in international relations that counties could not maintain equilibrium in friendship and enmity. It shall be noted while engaging with other countries.

Likewise, there are several issues in the region when countries do not agree, whether it is economy or security. To reinforce the relationship, it is required that India and Southeast Asian countries should maintain their trust and openness. The crucial challenge that India and Southeast Asian countries might face is on the rise of radicalization and extremism. In the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia and Malaysia are two Muslim populated countries and is claimed radicalization would change the perception. Realist theory despite of its criticism may change the narrative and posses another pivotal challenge. In the war, as

claimed by scholars only hard means matter and decisions are made based on balance of power principle. To tame it, it shall be a win-win situation for both India and Southeast Asian countries to monitor external threats.

The rise of China as competitor in the region is one of the unprecedented events as it has become economically sound, thereby, it is likely to present challenges to other neighboring countries to continue their existing relationship as seen between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea issue. It is maintained that 'from a soft to a sharp power shift in Chinese foreign policy make it more suspicious and cautious with regard to its traditional adversaries' (Shekhar 2019:348). India and Southeast Asian countries are centuries old and connected through ways means, such as land, culture, shared history and so on.

Conclusion

In spite of given less attention to culture for a long time in the domain of IR, India and its thousands year old Harappa civilization and the connectivity of Southern states' kingdoms of India have kept maintain its culture engagement with Southeast Asian region. Thereby, this research has concluded that culture plays a central role to ameliorate India-Southeast Asia security relations over the years. This has likewise influenced security relations as well. It has demonstrated that after the Cold War period the importance of culture has increased and played an indispensable role in forging relationship. Given the complex nature of international system whether multiple actors engage and of course there is a possibility of opinion differences and potential conflicts, it is the mutual understanding of diverse culture among actors, such as seen in India-Southeast Asia as they understand each other well, to prevent potential conflicts.

As an asset, it has proved that India-Southeast Asia relations in security interdependence have leveraged it to navigate the rise of China and provide an alternative to it. It has been India's accommodative policy to avoid conflict and open doors for mutual development with the neighboring countries. It will not be wrong to

maintain that it is culture that separates it from other countries. Geo-strategically, both can work to leverage the given geopolitical location in the region. Likewise, it has shown that since 2014 the digital connectivity has proactively enhanced and broadened cultural engagement and ways of life between India and Southeast Asia. Given the threats to International liberal order, it shall be feasible for India and Southeast Asian countries to forge a security partnership and shape the regional order that bring peace and development, not instability and authoritarian regimes. In this process, the confidence building measures like mutual learning and interaction, trust building sort of cultural elements would play critical roles. Thus, cultural proximity of India-Southeast Asia has likewise affected regional security as well and helped to achieve objectives of United Nations to maintain peace and stability.

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