

ORAL HISTORY

India's 'Rediscovery' of the East

Sudhir T. Devare, *former Ambassador of India to Republic of Korea, to Indonesia and to Ukraine; Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs responsible for relations with South East Asia; Presently, Director General, Indian Council of World Affairs. According to him: The word "Look East" has been very fashionable over recent years implying that India 'started' looking East - perhaps for the first time, he says. In fact, India has always looked to the East; India's association with the East dates back to thousands of years. ... what happened during the Cold War period can be described as a brief gap in our understanding with the East. ... "We, in fact, began 'rediscovering' the East", he adds.*

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you for consenting to talk to the *Journal* on an important subject with which you have been involved for a long time. Could you narrate the background in which India's 'Look East Policy' was evolved, and also your experience having been intimately involved in the process?

Sudhir T. Devare (STD): I am indeed grateful for the opportunity the *Journal* is providing me to speak about my own experiences and reflections with special reference to India's engagement with the East. The word "Look East" has been very fashionable over recent years implying that India started looking East perhaps for the first time. In fact, India has always looked to the East; India's association with the East dates back to thousands of years. As the famous French author George Coedes wrote in his treatise, *'The Indianized States of Southeast Asia'*; Farther India? today is characterized by more or less deep traces of the Indianization that occurred long ago. One can say that India has had its civilisational and cultural influence as far East as China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and much of that region. On that background, what happened recently during the Cold War period can be described as a brief gap in our understanding with the East.

India's association with the East includes Southeast Asia as well as East Asia or Northeast Asia. India had one of the most intensive diplomatic interactions with the East following India's Independence and in fact even

before Independence. Since I am privileged to be presently associated with the ICWA (Indian Council of World Affairs), I can say that one of the first initiatives in this regard was taken in March 1947 by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru when the Asian Relations Conference was organised by the ICWA in New Delhi. The whole idea, in fact, was to revive the spirit of the unity of Asia, to look at the problems of the colonized Asia, and to evolve a programme of action, to the extent possible a coordinated and cooperative one, which would build Asia again. In this endeavour, India's role was identified and highlighted.

Thus, in the early years after our independence India's close interactions developed with practically every country of the region, be it Indonesia, the Indo-China states, Burma (now Myanmar), Malaya, Korea or Japan. Suffice it to say, from 1947 till about 1962 (till the unfortunate episode of the invasion by our northern neighbour – China), we were constantly engaged with Asia. It will not be an exaggeration if I were to say that in India's formulation of its own foreign policy, the engagement with East Asia has had a major contribution. It had provided a significant input in the policy of non-alignment, the policy of independence of action, focus on decolonization, development and so on. I think, in many ways this was the backdrop to the evolution of India's independent foreign policy.

Post-1962, for nearly two decades, India's attention to the East waned, for a variety of reasons. One of the principal factors was the Cold War and the kind of polarization that took place in Asia and elsewhere in the world. India willy-nilly got sucked into it. For India, there were other serious preoccupations as well such as the war with Pakistan in 1965, the 1971 East Pakistan crisis, subsequent domestic problems and then the Afghanistan crisis during the 1980s. It took nearly 25 to 30 years before India started looking more closely to what was happening in the rest of Asia and re-engaging with it. We, in fact, began 're-discovering' the East.

The resumption of Ambassadorial level relations with China in 1976 could also be termed as one of the important starting points in this exercise. However, after that several years had to pass before India's relations with its Eastern neighbours began to develop. The crisis in Kampuchea, and in that context came up the alignment of forces in Southeast Asia, with Vietnam on one side and several ASEAN members on the other, with support from China, the US and Western countries. India went along with the Vietnamese position. This froze our relationship with Southeast Asia for a long time till PM Rajiv Gandhi's

visit to China in 1988 with a view to exploring to open the relationship with China. His meeting with the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was indeed an important landmark in the context of Look East.

Even then, we had to wait till the beginning of the 1990s, when India's interaction with the East started to become intensive. The geopolitics, which was visible on the Asia-Pacific scene in the early 1990s – the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the US as the sole Super Power in the Asia-Pacific (and the whole world) – marked a major transformation.

China was also rising. Its economic reforms were almost twelve years old. China, which did not even have diplomatic relations with several countries of Southeast Asia, started interacting more closely with the region. The Soviet Union had collapsed. Russia was in the midst of turmoil and its influence waned. It is at this stage India started evaluating the implications of these developments. The long drawn-out conflict in Indo-China came to an end with the Paris Conference in 1992. Indonesia was one of the countries which had played a crucial role in this settlement. India had also been supportive of this process and had closely consulted with Indonesia but the principal players were ASEAN as a whole.

In this evolving geopolitical situation in the Asia Pacific, ASEAN saw for itself a new opportunity believing that they could act as a catalyst amongst the various conflicting powers including the US, Japan, the Koreas, and China and within Southeast Asia itself. India was still not on the scene. At this point, ASEAN started thinking about India and India also started looking at this region.

It was a situation where ASEAN took a strategic view that since its constituents were small, militarily weak, economically just beginning to progress, they needed a collective mechanism to bring together major powers of the region in an effort to maintain peace and security. They preferred a regional approach for the reason, not bilaterally; these small states were in no position to stand against the pressure of large countries.

Their relations with China were soon on the ascent, with the immense economic potential guiding the links. The Chinese communities in all these countries were already very strong – they were, in fact, handling much of the business. Southeast Asian countries were looking at China with awe, apprehension and also with possibilities of cooperation. Out of this came the ideas of a kind of consultative mechanism, a system of a 'Full Dialogue

Partnership', a regional forum (ARF), etc, and ASEAN were able to craft a smart and opportune approach in the Asia-Pacific to which the US, which had emerged as the undisputed power in the region extended full backing. Australia and Japan also started supported these moves. In spite of differences with all these countries, China also began looking for such areas, especially relating to economic cooperation where they could work together with ASEAN.

IFAJ: Against this background, can you narrate your personal association since your first sojourn in Rangoon?

STD: My association with the region of Southeast and East Asia began with my posting to Rangoon (Burma) in 1980 as a Counsellor at the Embassy. I had a great fascination, both for Burma (now Myanmar) as well as the East, may be because of my interest in History, Sanskrit, Buddhism, Indian culture etc. What started in 1980 not only persisted but has also flourished and blossomed since then.

Burma was a closed country at that time; I was very sad to see the situation there. This is a country which is historically, culturally, ethnically and in every respect akin to India. It is a country where Hindi was the spoken language among the large Indian community. I recall during my time much was tried to re-open the closed contacts between Burma and India though without much progress. However, my assignment helped me a great deal to develop a new outlook, not only towards Burma but also to the region beyond in Southeast Asia and East Asia.

I saw for myself that just as Burma had isolated itself, India was also looked upon in the ASEAN as a country which was keeping itself aloof from the region. ASEAN diplomats in Rangoon did not seem to look towards India with much respect because economically, at least in infrastructure terms, we were not as developed as ASEAN countries. Even the setting-up of an informal Asian Group of diplomats for golf and recreation took some persuasion as the ASEAN diplomats preferred to have an exclusive ASEAN group of their own! This demonstrated that India was not considered a part of the wider grouping of Asia.

I had seen great opportunities in Rangoon but the serious problems in Burma like the ethnic insurgency, complete military dominance and as a result the closed nature of the society etc. stood in the way. As I left Burma, I continued to ponder as to how Burma and India could come closer and how the connectivity between the two countries be improved.

I reverted to New Delhi from Burma in 1982. I was asked to head an important desk, known as 'BSM' - denoting Bangladesh - Sri Lanka - Maldives. The then Foreign Secretary, Mr M. Rasgotra decided to include Burma in that desk since I had just returned from there. So the desk became 'BBSM' (Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives) though it was still called 'BSM'. The enlarged BSM Division, a logical grouping, continues till today, to cover all the Eastern and Southern neighbours of India.

It is interesting to note that Burma, till then in the 'Southern Division' – with the other South East Asian countries, had been brought into a South Asian group. Perhaps the immediate reason might have been my returning back from Rangoon and heading the BSM division but this still conveyed a message. We regard Burma as a country in our 'immediate' neighbourhood – within the first of the concentric circles in our foreign policy parameters.

The formation of sub-regional cooperation – the idea of BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan – Economic Cooperation) – came much later in June 1997. However, even then, when I was Joint Secretary BSM, the concept of a smaller grouping within South Asia, which is more compatible, which has less political difficulties as compared to our western neighbourhood, and, therefore, can move forward faster, was being explored. We all recognize today that our Look East policy will be incomplete unless it integrates with Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka – the sub-regional group.

IFAJ: During that term at the Ministry, can you recollect for us any significant development in our quest to 'Look East'?

STD: This was one of the most hectic and also trying time in our diplomacy with our immediate neighbours in the East and South. In Sri Lanka the ethnic insurgency and acute violence started in July 1983. For the next two years that I was in Delhi there were continuing talks and negotiations with the Sri Lankan government as well as moderate Tamil groups. There was however little progress on the proposals of devolution of power and the ethnic situation continued to deteriorate. With Bangladesh too, the relationship with the military regime was marked by coolness and lack of response on key issues such as the Farakka waters, the land boundary, migration etc. With Maldives, economic cooperation had just opened up with the Airports Authority of India completing the airport construction in Male. We started a shipping link also though unfortunately the ship ran aground in the Maldives on the second voyage. One of the important developments during this time was the preparation for

the first SAARC summit which took place in 1985. Bangladesh had taken the initiative in this regard.

With regard to Myanmar one small contribution comes to my mind and that was the issue of maritime boundary between Myanmar and India. This was hanging fire for a long time. When I was in Rangoon, we did try but nothing could materialise. Even after returning to Delhi, I still had good contacts in Rangoon. We did seriously discuss sorting-out some of the outstanding issues and one of them was the maritime boundary.

During my stay in Delhi, a Burmese delegation visited New Delhi for the purpose. These were very critical negotiations, and till the very last minute, we were not sure whether we will have an agreement. Discussions went on. Several alternative proposals were made by the two sides with regard to the boundary in the Andaman Sea but they were not mutually acceptable. The time for the conclusion of the talks was drawing nearer. Finally with the help of our technical expert we drew a line and proposed it to the Burmese. Perhaps due to the personal association that I had with the Burmese officials, the delegation said that they will consider our stand and revert to us within the hour. We waited, and after one hour they came back and to our surprise conveyed their agreement to our position. The agreement was finally signed and one longstanding issue between India and Burma was resolved.... A Burmese friend of mine from their delegation told me that afternoon which I still remember, "if we cannot do it now, Sudhir, I am not sure if and when we can have it again. We have come to Delhi for this after eight years. For us to come back again it may be another eight years or more!"

IFAJ: After your stint in New Delhi, when did you next 'link up' with the East?

STD: As the luck would have it, after my assignment in Delhi, I was posted to South Korea as Ambassador. So the association with the East continued. That was also a fascinating time. Today India-South Korea relations are booming. We have a huge Commercial-Economic interaction, technological cooperation, etc. South Korea has emerged as an important economic entity and a strategic partner of India. But those days were difficult for both South Korea and India. Exploring the relationship with South Korea became the part of 'Looking East'.

The 'Look East' policy was not formally declared as such at that point of time. It came into parlance eight-ten years later. But when I went to Korea, I could discern the changing attitude in India towards the East. South Korea at

that time was not on the same side of the political divide so to speak. They were an ally of the US and not even a member of NAM. South Korea, therefore, was often regarded as a stooge of the US but it was very clear that it had a very different approach towards India.

First of all, they had enormous goodwill for India as a country of Lord Buddha; people would stop you on the street and bow with folded hands before a person from the land of *Sakya Muni*. That was the level of respect India had always received from South Korea. They were also looking for India's growing market and Korean Chaebols (big conglomerates) had started coming to India. Several commercial ships were built in South Korea. The Indian Navy, for the first time took the decision to build naval ships in South Korea. Three patrol vessels were constructed in South Korea and, my wife had the privilege to perform the naming ceremony. Indian participation in the Asian and Olympic games at Seoul was on a big scale – that was perhaps also seen by the Koreans that India was fully supportive of South Korea's plans and efforts.

During Rajiv Gandhi's Prime Ministership, he evinced keen interest in the 'Korean economic miracle'. By mid-1980s, when I was there, Korea had nearly a decade and half of sustained export-led growth. It had already developed a fair amount of infrastructure. The Korean GDP was growing at a phenomenal rate of 13-14 per cent annually. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sent a delegation consisting of top level of experts from India to study the Korean experience. The foundation of the relationship between India and Korea was being developed.

I am mentioning this in the context of Look East. It is important to bear in mind that the concept of Look East did not come about overnight. Indian leaders, officials, economists were watching the East Asian scene closely. That was the time when South Korea was under military dictatorship. However, in 1987 a remarkable democratic revolution took place on the streets of Seoul and within a month the regime changed, initially to another but a more liberal General and very soon to full-fledged democracy. For me the recollection of those dramatic events is very vivid since students' demonstrations against the military government used to take place on the street next to our Embassy (which is in the vicinity of a University) and the Embassy used to be full of tear gas for nearly a month.

During the severe military rule, opposition leaders were not allowed to mix with the people. However, foreign diplomats could meet them. I think,

during my many postings, I had the privilege of knowing opposition leaders of various countries closely as I used to take the opportunity to see them. I knew the three Kims well – Kim Dae-Jung, Kim Jong-Pil, and Kim Yong-Sam. One saw the kind of goodwill, interest and respect they had for India. Kim Jong-Pil would talk extensively about his own family connection with India through the legendary Princess of Ayodhya. When democracy came, two of them became Presidents and one Prime Minister and they all visited India.

IFAJ: Any specific event that comes to your mind?

STD: One of my most memorable moments in Korea is attending a meeting of students addressed by Venerable Ham Seok-Heon, known as Korean Gandhi on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti. The man with his long flowing white beard and grey robes was a true symbol of piety and peace. In his late seventies he had been a life-long follower of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. He had himself practiced *Satyagraha*, courted arrest and remained in jail for many years fighting the military rule in Korea. The meeting was arranged at a great risk (as Korea still had a military-backed government) and the organisers invited me to the function which I accepted. Around one thousand students were gathered and the Korean Gandhi addressed them. Everybody was weeping overcome by emotion. In a distant land I was witnessing the power of conviction of this apostle of peace while also seeing the love and admiration for Mahatma Gandhi and India.

At that time the India-Korea relationship was beginning to grow across the whole spectrum – political, societal, economic, and cultural. The last few years have seen an incredible progress in that direction and today Korea is a very important constituent of our Look East policy matrix.

IFAJ: When was your next brush with the East? Which would you call the turning point when India started looking to East seriously?

STD: Suffice it to say, my experiences in Burma, Korea and MEA helped preparing my own academic and professional background to undertake responsibilities which came my way later on, again purely accidentally. I was not associated with this region only for a few years – I was posted to countries in the West. In 1994, I was posted as Ambassador to Indonesia and I was back in the region.

Even when I was away from this region – for that brief period (1989 to 1994) profound geopolitical changes were taking place, the world order was changing and a new order was emerging. The Cold War, which had engulfed the entire world, including Southeast Asia and the whole of Asia-Pacific had

ended and the region was now transforming at a fast pace. In that context, I saw our economic reforms (initiated in 1991) beginning to have impact everywhere including in this economically progressive and dynamic region.

I would put the end of the Cold War and the economic reforms as a turning point in our diplomatic history as far as our opening towards the East Asian region is concerned. At that time, we were also looking for an opening.

At the end of the 1980s we were feeling somewhat 'boxed in'. We had 'very close' relations with the Soviet Union and 'good' relations with the West – except on some issues, like Afghanistan. India's economic progress during the 1980s was minimal. Our manoeuvrability was increasingly becoming limited. India's growth rate was still small though it was beginning to get better. We had, therefore, to innovate by studying the politico-security and economic environment around the country and seize whatever opportunity that was available. I think one of the major successes of Indian diplomacy was to have seen and seized the opportunity of looking to and going to the East.

IFAJ: When India was looking towards the East, was the East also looking towards 'its West'?

STD: Initially, the East was not looking much towards 'their immediate West'. They were looking towards Northeast Asia and Australia, etc. and they continued to look to Europe and the US. But they were increasingly becoming aware of the great potential that India could offer. When they saw that India also shifting gear and that it was not frozen in its attitude towards Southeast Asia, the progressive leaders of Southeast Asian countries thought rightly that now was the time that India should also be approached and they extended a welcoming hand to India. There were great perceptive leaders in Southeast Asia like Lee Kuan-yew and Goh Chok-tong of Singapore, Soeharto of Indonesia and others who visualised the benefit of involving India. That was also the moment when equally perceptive leaders in India like Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh had similar visions.

I went to Indonesia in 1994. Jakarta is the seat of the ASEAN Secretariat. Most of the action with respect to building ASEAN-India links was happening there. A little background would be in order.

In 1992, India took a major initiative – Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit and Secretary K Srinivasan came to Bali for meetings with ASEAN countries. Among them Singapore had taken the initiative to invite India to this gathering.

Many Singapore leaders and academicians were keen for India to join. So, a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership was worked out in 1992 at this meeting. As the name implies, sectoral partnership was limited to tourism, investment, trade and capacity building only.

It was at that stage that I was posted to Jakarta. I started seriously looking at the situation in Indonesia and towards our partnership with ASEAN. I identified two aspects: (1) If we wished to develop our “Look East” policy, we must build our bilateral links with each of the ASEAN countries. Since I was in Indonesia, it was my duty to do that with Indonesia; (2) We needed to nurture and further our relationship with ASEAN – as a whole, where the matter was then at the Sectoral Dialogue level. And this must be done as quickly as possible. This was to be developed with the Secretariat.

Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia. Indonesia and India had enjoyed goodwill, commonality of views, close relations in terms of history etc. but the enormity of the traditional relationship was somehow missing at that time in economic cooperation, coordination at the international level, communications and people to people links, etc. The role that Indonesia could play in India’s Look East policy had not been recognised. President Soeharto, on account of his long innings as the President was also a much respected leader within ASEAN. The Indonesians, especially the Javanese, and Soeharto was also one, have a good deal of cultural familiarity and to some extent, affinity with India, be it due to common mythology, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* or similar socio-cultural traits. The layers of attachment between us are however so deep that one cannot easily discern or identify them. President Soeharto also respected India for its successes in education, health, culture, and so on. He came to India twice in 1994 with an interval of a few months. He also had a great regard for Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.

In 1992, at the NAM summit in Jakarta, Prime Minister Rao was treated with utmost respect. Soeharto treated him like first among all other NAM leaders. When Prime Minister Rao asked Soeharto in 1995 for a location in one of the strategically key islands for setting up of a facility to monitor India’s space launch vehicles, Indonesia agreed without any hesitation.

During that period, 1994–97, Indonesia was very active on international scene and was full of confidence. They were NAM Chairman; had held a highly successful APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit at Bagor near Jakarta to which President Clinton had come. Indonesia was aspiring for a permanent membership of the UNSC along with India and Japan. That was

the situation before the political crisis of 1998. With its standing Indonesia had thus emerged as the critical member state of ASEAN for any decision regarding India's enhanced engagement with ASEAN. Clearly without Indonesia's support and backing we could not have moved far in the whole process. For this kind of bilateralism, we had to develop links at all levels.

Besides establishing good equation with the Indonesian leaders and establishment I had also developed rapport with the opposition leaders Megawati Soekarnoputri and Abdur Rahman Wahid who subsequently became Presidents of Indonesia. On another plane my efforts were centred on developing a close ASEAN-India connection through the ASEAN Secretariat which was the focal point. Dato' Ajit Singh, a Malaysian of Indian Origin, a senior Ambassador, was then the Secretary General of ASEAN. A good personal relationship with him again helped a great deal. For India, just becoming a Sectoral Dialogue partner was not enough - we had to invest that partnership with greater content. ASEAN had to satisfy its constituent members that India was serious and it will bring something concrete to the table which ASEAN needed.

That required proper coordination and continuous study. We persuaded the Ministry of External Affairs to create an ASEAN Special Fund in which Government of India would put money every year from which several ASEAN-related projects would be undertaken, mainly for capacity building – for IT, education etc and studies concerning trade, investment, tourism, civil aviation, etc.

This process went on steadily for about a year and a half. I had set before me one specific objective for my term- India should become a Full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN and a member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). I was closely monitoring the events and was also watching what other countries were doing. Pakistan was totally inactive; in fact, when we got Sectoral Dialogue Partnership, Pakistan also asked for the same and through their friends in ASEAN also received Sectoral Dialogue Partnership. But they did not take any interest in pursuing it. Evidently they did not have much to offer to ASEAN.

This tempo was being built in Jakarta and simultaneously Delhi was pursuing with all other members of ASEAN, especially Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. The Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir had no doubt considerable connection with India but he had his own views, sometime supporting and some time not so forthcoming. But he went along on the issue

of full dialogue partnership for India.

IFAJ: It looks as though 'the East' was also realising that they need to look towards India. How was it in case of Burma?

STD: Burmese leaders were not so keen and were also inactive. In this respect, it was India that seemed to seek a closer relationship. On our side, there was a thought that we must pay greater attention to Burma because it was our direct neighbour and appeared to be in a 'frozen' state. Since I had returned to Ministry from Burma, I was given the task to find ways to further the relationship. During that time, for India, Burma was however not a priority. From geopolitical point of view, Burma had shut the doors and in economic terms the tightly controlled economy did not show any opening.

I remember, I accompanied a trade delegation led by Dr Abid Hussain, the then Commerce Secretary. Also, I went to Burma with Mr Khurshid Alam Khan, the then Minister of State for External Affairs. The outcome of these visits was unfortunately rather minimal.

IFAJ: Though there was an interregnum in our links with the region, don't you think that the entire region is organically linked with us and it was inevitable that they had to come closer at some point in time?

STD: I entirely agree with this view. Surely we would have come closer at some point in time. The organic linkage between us would have ensured it. But that might have taken long. A bold, out-of-the box initiative was therefore necessary. At the beginning of the 1990s, when we formulated this policy, we, so to speak, 'jumped over' some of our closer neighbours like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Myanmar was not a member of ASEAN in 1991) and went straight to ASEAN, primarily because South Asian countries were not responsive whereas Southeast Asia was. However, the thought was never lost sight of that unless we linked ourselves with Myanmar and Bangladesh we will not really have a credible Look East policy. So, while we went forward we were conscious that once we were on a course of improved relationship with our extended neighbours we should not lose any time in strengthening the links with our immediate neighbours.

IFAJ: Please take us through the next stages in our links with ASEAN.

STD: At the December 1995 ASEAN summit in Bangkok; it was declared that India will be given Full Dialogue Partnership (FDP). It was a decision which was made at the highest level and there was no earlier indication to that

effect. We were delighted because this was major step in our evolving relationship with ASEAN.

After FDP there was now the issue of membership of ARF which was set up by ASEAN in the early 1990s to basically discuss with major powers, both regional and extra-regional, issues of security, peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. This Forum had acquired considerable relevance in the context of the South China Sea issue – a contentious problem between China and other five Southeast Asian countries. ARF was seen as a unique multi-lateral security forum, only one of its kind in the world. All the nuclear powers were members of the Forum. India was also keen on this membership. With that, strategically our reach would extend to the Asia Pacific, we would go beyond the confines of South Asia.

But we realised that membership to ARF was not automatic. We would have to work for it and negotiate it with ASEAN.

At that stage, we had to play a very active role in Jakarta because Indonesia was the Chairman of the Standing Committee of ASEAN. India had to abide by certain conditions to acquire the membership. A consensus was necessary within ASEAN which itself was not easy. Some ASEAN members had reservations about bringing India into this forum. Chairman of the Standing Committee also decided to consult with non-regional powers on this question. After several months of negotiations, India was accepted as a member of ARF. We became the only non-Pacific country represented in ARF. The Indonesian leadership had again played a key role in the decision. Mr I.K. Gujral was by now the Foreign Minister. His equation with Foreign Minister Ali Alatas was no less helpful.

The first meeting of our Full Dialogue Partnership and ARF membership took place in August 1996 while I was in Jakarta. That was the day which actually marked India's entry into a multilateral council of the Asia Pacific. Hitherto India was not associated with the politics of this region. It was also the beginning of India's engagement with ASEAN not only on economic issues under FDP but also on security and stability in the region. It continues till date and we pay considerable importance to our ARF membership.

Along with the Full Dialogue Partnership of ASEAN, came the responsibility to put content in it. There was good deal of expectation from India and no doubt we had to fulfil them.

As we were progressing gradually in our new relationship with ASEAN and settling down with this experience, came the Asian financial crisis of

1997. It was a testing time for India. How to respond to this was a major concern. Around the same time, the Indonesian political situation started deteriorating. When I left Jakarta at the beginning of 1998, Indonesia was virtually at the brink of collapse, both economically and politically. Most East Asian countries, including Thailand, and Korea, were also severely affected. They were looking for some kind of response even though India did not have the wherewithal and the necessary capital to assist these countries. We ourselves were coming out of the financial crisis of our own. It was an equally difficult time for India. That was the stage when I came back to Delhi.

IFAJ: Can you recall any difficult issue during those negotiations for entry into the ARF?

STD: The main concern within ASEAN was that by bringing India into the grouping they would needlessly invite the contentious issues of South Asia to the Asia-Pacific. They did not want to be bogged down with our regional problems because they were well aware what was happening in South Asia. So, the question was why should India be brought in? Our South Asian neighbours also no doubt brought pressure on some of ASEAN members. We argued that India has had a “geographical footprint” in the Asia-Pacific in every sense of imagination, be it in economy, the Indian Diaspora, history, culture or the maritime connectivity. So we argued that India will only make a positive contribution to the security and peace in this region. India has always been a benign power in this part of the world, in its age-old association with Southeast Asia it has had no historical baggage of any invasion or occupation and will therefore not create any problems for the region - which they finally accepted.

There were however detractors within ASEAN who were not readily convinced. Not only ASEAN members but also countries outside ASEAN, who are members of ARF, had to be convinced. The negotiations were very complicated as they had to be conducted, not only in Jakarta but also in different capitals of the world. We had to coordinate all these negotiations.

IFAJ: When you returned to New Delhi, did this aspect of work fall within your new area of responsibility?

STD: When I came back to Delhi, my new charge was Secretary for Economic Relations in the Ministry of External Affairs. In addition to Economic Relations *per-se*, it also included a number of territorial divisions such as South, Northeast Asia and Africa. That encompassed the entire political and economic relations with the Asia-Pacific, excluding China. In addition, I had several

multilateral matters to handle like ASEAN and Full Dialogue Partnership, ARF, Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), BIMSTEC, Group of 77 in the UN, World Trade Organization, etc.

IFAJ: Anecdotally, when was the term 'Look East' come into vogue? As Secretary(ER) how did you assist in advancing this policy?

STD: The phrase Look East was not declared on a particular date but it was talked about frequently. Even during his famous lecture in Singapore in 1994 that firmly launched this policy, Mr Narasimha Rao did not mention the phrase!

Though I had the charge of other divisions with very diverse work, my focus remained on the aspect of Look East. I knew that we had certain objectives to attain and certain steps to climb. One of the first things I had to deal with at that time was the Asian financial crisis. Our leadership had to be briefed on the extent of the suffering and how we could assist the affected countries, what specific measures we should adopt, etc. We offered soft credits, training facilities, IT scholarships, loans with concessional rates, assistance to small and medium industries etc through our EXIM bank and other organisations.

We had to contend with the Chinese and Japanese policies as well. They created at that time the ASEAN+3, Chiang Mai Initiative, and so on. What came to our eventual rescue was our own economy. It withstood the shock-effects of the crisis. In a way, the strength and resilience of the Indian economy became a positive point for ASEAN states as their exports to India were not affected.

My second major interaction with these countries, as the Secretary in charge of the region, was after the Indian nuclear tests. Our nuclear tests in 1998 received a very sharp reaction that required considerable diplomatic skill, energy and time for the next year and a half. I recall the ARF Official Level Meeting in Manila took place within ten days of our nuclear tests. We were the primary target of the twenty odd countries and came under very severe criticism. We knew that this was going to happen, so we absorbed the first salvo. I repeatedly placed before the meeting India's position: our unilateral decision of moratorium on further tests, announcement of no-first-use and non-use against non-nuclear states. We also explained at length the grave security threats and compulsions under which we had no other choice but to go nuclear while emphasizing India's longstanding commitment to nuclear disarmament and our deep disappointment at the total lack of response of nuclear weapon states towards that end.

After the Manila meeting when we came back, I briefed the government about the mood in different capitals. The Ministerial Meeting of ARF was scheduled for July 1998, so we had about two months to plan what we needed to do. Minister of State Vasundhara Raje and I undertook visits to three countries – Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam – and tried to explain our position. I myself went to all other ASEAN (and to many African) countries. In July, at the ARF, ASEAN decided to change its position from that of the Western countries. ASEAN perhaps felt that India did have a point. So the final statement of ARF was modified to “deplore” instead of “condemn” India’s nuclear tests.

Within a year’s time, the issue actually blew over. At the next ARF meeting, India’s nuclear test was mentioned in a proforma language and from the third year onwards the issue did not arise. Clearly a new understanding about India was emerging in Southeast Asia in terms of our Look East policy. India was being recognised as a major power, as a nuclear and responsible power prepared to contribute to the security and stability of Southeast Asia. We also made an announcement in 2000 that India will abide unilaterally to the ASEAN Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Protocol. As a *de facto* nuclear power (even though a non-NPT state) our assurance was well received in Southeast Asia.

IFAJ: Why did Indonesia take on the role of the catalyst for India? Did they have any reciprocation expectation from India?

STD: I think they were looking towards reviving that old relationship with India. Going back to the 1950s, they saw India as a liberal democracy, India had done very well in many areas; they see a great deal common with India. Therefore, they started believing that they could do much more with India. They were also frustrated with the policies of a number of other countries, particularly the West and Australia; they had several problems with China. On the other hand, they had not such apprehensions about India. Visionary leaders and thinkers in Indonesia began to see in India’s democracy, peaceful development and expanding economy a good promise and prospects for partnership.

A forum, Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) was soon established between ASEAN and India after we became full dialogue partners and would meet once every year. That interaction enabled us to engage each other more substantively. Soon we began looking towards possible India-ASEAN Summit Partnership. While preparing for this, we were also paying close attention to the improvement of bilateral relations.

One example comes to mind distinctly. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore during his visit to Delhi in January 2000 made a speech at a business forum where he said, India and Singapore should have a free trade area. The industry, business groups etc. were taken aback by this proposal. How can there be a FTA with Singapore which is a highly developed economy compared to India? At that time, India had a free trade agreement with only Sri Lanka and in a very limited way with Thailand. In the Ministry we felt that this was the time we should take a broader, strategic view. If we looked to and hoped for economic integration with the Asia-Pacific we should have our economy closely associated with advanced countries of Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Goh's offer therefore provided a timely opportunity and we should seize it. We decided to respond positively to the Singapore proposal. A study group was set up which was followed by hard negotiations with Singapore for a few years and finally a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) was signed. Today we have similar agreements with other major economies of the region, namely, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia and CECA has in a way become a template for such agreements.

IFAJ: How about security issues?

STD: Trade and economic relations were important but when we are developing close relations with the East, security matters were equally important and we did not lose sight of that aspect. We had to assure Southeast Asian countries on the security issues as they were militarily weak states, needed a good deal of our assistance. We also benefited by their understanding – on issues like maritime security, security in the Malacca Straits, South China Sea, and so on. We decided to step up cooperation with Singapore. We have now a fair amount of cooperation with them, especially in the maritime field. I recall with Indonesia, a defence cooperation agreement was signed during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit in January 2001. We were also working with Vietnam, Malaysia with regard to defence cooperation.

IFAJ: Was China apprehensive? What was its response?

STD: We were not doing anything that was directed against any other country. We did not see why any other power including China should have apprehension about our programmes of cooperation with our extended neighbours in Southeast Asia. During this period I however do not recall any incident when China or any other country expressed any reservation in this regard.

IFAJ: You spoke about the sub-regional cooperation in our East. What was your involvement?

STD: The story about BIMSTEC and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) is fascinating. The then Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan (who is the present Secretary General of ASEAN) had come to Delhi with his initiative to set up cooperation between India and countries of the Mekong basin. He met the then Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and I was called in. Mr Pitsuwan wanted this association centred on tourism, Buddhism, education and culture. He then said, 'let it be called Suvarnabhumi Cooperation'. We didn't agree to it. We felt that neighbours of Thailand, proposed to be members of this grouping will not accept it. I chipped in with a suggestion, 'why not Ganga-Mekong Cooperation' to which Pitsuwan said 'let it be Mekong-Ganga Cooperation'! On the sidelines of the next ASEAN meeting in Bangkok, in presence of all members – Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and India we agreed to this association and later on it was formalised.

IFAJ: Was the idea of transnational connectivity among these countries a dream?

STD: No, we worked on these ideas a great deal, particularly on the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway. They are still on the table and a part of it has been accomplished. For example, during late 1990s India built, within Myanmar, a stretch of road of about 165 km (Tamu-Kalemyo- Kalewa road) which is a part of the Asian Highways network. There were differences among member countries on what should be the alignment. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok had its own ideas. Anyway, a part of the road network is there now but there has not been much progress on the railway connectivity idea.

The BIMSTEC is a very promising forum. I dealt with this subject a good deal. I remember, during my time, Nepal and Bhutan joined BIMSTEC. At the Dhaka meeting of BIMSTEC we requested Myanmar to be the coordinator for energy and Myanmar agreed.

IFAJ: While India was 're-discovering' the East, the East was also 're-discovering' India. India's economic prowess, as you rightly pointed out, did help. Has this process given rise to any apprehension amongst 'others'?

STD: This century is said to be the Asian century. In any case, during the last few years the economic gravity of the world is seen to be shifting to the East. With the rise of China, India, Japan and ASEAN as major powers, a considerable amount of economic activity is taking place in the East. In fact, we are visualising an economic integration of Asia and multiple arrangements are being worked out and coming into being. The ASEAN-India FTA was signed

last year; currently we are negotiating services and investment agreement.

India has signed free trade agreements with other countries also – with South Korea, Japan, Malaysia and we are negotiating with Indonesia and Australia. A kind of web is getting formed. Within a few years this web will be operational and with that the interdependence of these economies will grow enormously. This is in a way an inexorable trend and India is an integral part of it.

India on its part has been promoting and propagating the idea of an Asian Economic Community. After my retirement, I had a long association with Research and Information System (RIS) for Developing Countries which works on issues of Asian economic integration. The concept of the Asian Economic Community is gradually getting acceptance across Asia. Economic progress and integration of this region is going to increase. Nearly 40–50 per cent of India's trade and investment is with this region. Therefore, 'Look East' becomes an inseparable part of our national policy. It has become a part and parcel of our economic and security matrix. There may be problems; some countries may not respond fully. Undoubtedly, how we manage our relations with China will be a key part of our Look East policy. In that context we have problems as well as opportunities. Management of bilateral relations with China would be thus a major challenge to India's diplomacy and Look East policy. In my view, it can be handled well with determination, sagacity and vision. Fortunately there has been a broad consensus on 'Look East' policy in the country cutting across party lines and political ideologies. We have all witnessed it over the past two decades.

IFAJ: Any other anecdote you would like to recall relating to your 'engagement with the East'?

STD: Well, there have been many hilarious experiences. I would like to recall one interesting event. The last evening of the ASEAN annual conference is always reserved for fun and enjoyment. All are invited to the gathering in an informal dress and the hosts insist that each delegation gives a 'performance.' It is almost like a pre-condition for ARF membership. This has become a serious business and delegations (including head of delegations) have to practice weeks in advance!

In July 1998 when we went to Manila, (after Pokhran II), the atmosphere was very tense as I have said earlier. We hadn't thought of the post-ministerial conference 'performance'. Once the main meetings were over, the Indian delegation had to think of something as our 'show'. We had some talented

people amongst us and we composed a song highlighting Pokhran II in a hilarious way. We all sang it on the tune of '*Chhodo Kalki Baten, Kalki Bat Purani, Hum Hindustani, Hum Hindustani*'. In that song we had a dig at everybody – the Americans, the Chinese, the Australians, the Japanese, the ASEAN, etc. They were not exactly amused. But we provided a translation of the song and requested everyone to take it in the true ASEAN spirit.

IFAJ: Thank you very much for sharing with us your experiences and opinions on such an important Indian foreign policy undertaking which would be of much interest to the policy makers, researchers and academia.
