

Rekindling Pakistan's Southeast Asia

Engagement under Imran Khan

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Summary

As Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan seeks to break new ground in Pakistan's foreign policy, it is time for his government to give Southeast Asia a closer look. Through both bilateral and multilateral engagements by way of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Pakistan stands to benefit on several principal fronts: symbolically, strategically, economically, geopolitically and on matters of defence and security. If Khan's Pakistan stays the course, and charts its own path by devising a unique blueprint to engage Southeast Asia, it is only a matter of time before Pakistan achieves its aspiration of becoming a full dialogue partner of ASEAN. The journey towards reaching this goal can rake in benefits for Pakistan, which could then further endear the Khan government to the country's domestic population.

Southeast Asia in Pakistan's Foreign Policy Diversification

On matters of foreign policy, Pakistan has not traditionally been coherent and progressive. Part of the reason is the disruption caused by domestic compulsions, border convulsions, and Pakistan's role in the war on terror, which have collectively hindered the conduct of a robust and effective foreign policy by successive governments in the regional and global arenas.

However, in more recent times, there has been a renewed diplomatic appetite to revamp Pakistan's foreign policy after gradual breakthroughs in democratic transitions and attendant domestic political stability, and successes in the war against terrorism. The economic liberalisation of Pakistan,¹ despite the recurring domestic roadblocks, has also enabled Islamabad to conduct a foreign policy that is elastic and effective enough to attract investments into the country.

Against this backdrop, the Pakistani government under popular Prime Minister Imran Khan should consider Southeast Asia a feasible testbed for the conduct of a foreign policy that is synonymous with the *Naya* (new) Pakistan.² Early indications suggest that Khan's government has shown a genuine enthusiasm to advance Pakistan's policy towards Southeast Asia by stepping up both multilateral and bilateral engagement with the region.³

¹ "Pakistan's investment regime 'most liberal' in region, senior diplomat", *Associated Press of Pakistan*, 28 February 2020. <https://www.app.com.pk/pakistans-investment-regime-most-liberal-in-region-senior-diplomat/>.

² "The Road to Naya Pakistan: PTI Manifesto 2018", *Prime Minister's Office (Pakistan)*, 2018. <https://pmo.gov.pk/documents/manifesto-pti.pdf>.

³ "Pakistan to step up ties with Singapore", *The Business Times*, 23 March 2020. <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/hub/pakistan-national-day/pakistan-to-step-up-ties-with-singapore>.

The time is therefore opportune and conditions are ripe for Islamabad to prioritise Southeast Asia in Pakistan's foreign policy, and concomitantly, redress the benign neglect in Pakistan-Southeast Asia relations. Doing so should breathe new life into Pakistan's 'Vision East Asia' policy, which was enacted in 2003 to look eastwards for economic engagement⁴ but which instead stagnated because of domestic exigencies and a preoccupation with looking westwards. By now looking east, the Khan government could further diversify Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan's ASEAN Engagement

An obvious starting point to engage Southeast Asia is through the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Apart from India, which is a full dialogue partner of ASEAN, Pakistan is the only other South Asian country that has a dialogue partnership with ASEAN, albeit a step down at the sectoral level.⁵ It has been Pakistan's strategic aspiration to upgrade its sectoral status to a full dialogue partner of ASEAN, as reiterated by the country's current Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in 2019.⁶ It is thus not a surprise that Islamabad has been actively lobbying ASEAN-member countries to support Pakistan's ascent to a full dialogue partner.

For a start, Pakistan is leveraging on the 'Muslim brotherliness' of Malaysia and Indonesia to secure the support of the two biggest Muslim countries in Southeast Asia. Pakistan has also been courting Singapore, although thus far, Singapore's support for Pakistan's upgrade to full dialogue partnership appears to be lukewarm. Engaging the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries has brought some joy to Islamabad, as the CLMV countries, and not least, Cambodia, appear to be amenable towards supporting Pakistan's full dialogue partnership. The CLMV countries have benefited from the ASEAN-Pakistan Cooperation Fund⁷ in aiding their human resources development, including offering scholarships and English language training, which, on the whole, have strengthened the relations between Pakistan and the CLMV countries.

Although Pakistan is unlikely to achieve full dialogue partnership anytime soon, the journey towards reaching this goal can rake in benefits for Pakistan which could then endear the Khan government to the country's domestic population. In the economic field, for instance, Pakistan's total bilateral trade with ASEAN of around US\$6.3 billion (S\$9 billion) as of 2016-2017⁸ suggests that there is scope for Islamabad to scale up its economic engagement with

⁴ "Pakistan has Vision East Asia policy", *Dawn*, 10 August 2009. <https://www.dawn.com/news/896180/pakistan-has-vision-east-asia-policy>.

⁵ "Overview of ASEAN-Pakistan Sectoral Dialogue Cooperation", *ASEAN Secretariat*, October 2017. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Overview-ASEAN-Pakistan-Relations-as-of-Oct-2017-fn.pdf>.

⁶ "Progress made on full dialogue member status to Pakistan: FM Qureshi", *PakTribune*, 23 July 2019. <https://timesofislamabad.com/12-Jul-2016/pakistan-stands-with-china-in-south-china-sea-dispute>

⁷ "Overview of ASEAN-Pakistan Sectoral Dialogue Cooperation", op. cit.

⁸ Ibid.

ASEAN's member states, especially when compared to India, which has a total bilateral trade with ASEAN of around US\$96.8 billion (S\$138.2 billion) as of 2018-2019.⁹

It would be in the Khan government's interest, which is keen on pursuing economic diplomacy in the country's foreign policy, to lend greater urgency and synergy to bring the Pakistan-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) into fruition. Although a joint feasibility study of this FTA was concluded in 2009, there has been little headway made since then, and it appears to have faded into oblivion. Pulling the FTA off – as onerous as the task may be – will be a feather in the cap of Khan's government while also testifying to Pakistan's seriousness to engage ASEAN. Given that ASEAN, as a collective, boasts the fifth largest economy in the world with a gross domestic product of around US\$3 trillion (S\$4.3 trillion),¹⁰ such an agreement should bring tremendous domestic economic benefits to Pakistan and thereby help it to improve the lives of Pakistanis, which, in turn, enhances the political legitimacy of the Khan government.

As a country that has long battled an 'image problem' of being a haven for extremists and terrorists, Pakistan should look to ASEAN as a viable conduit to emphasise to the international community that it is deeply committed to counterterrorism efforts, while also revamping its image as a country that is moderate, inclusive, and diverse. As such, Khan's government should not only continue to ensure that Pakistan remains an active member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, following the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, but should also inject more momentum to the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism, which was signed between ASEAN and Pakistan in 2005.¹¹ Working in partnership with ASEAN on counterterrorism allows Pakistan to boost its chances of becoming a full dialogue partner while also 'normalising' it as a country of repute in the eyes of the international community.

The way ASEAN-member countries have been managing their relations with China can yield lessons for Pakistan. As Pakistan draws much closer to China due to financial inducements under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in particular, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it has to be mindful of not losing its territorial sovereignty and being pressured to do China's bidding – albeit easier said than done. Islamabad should also recognise that while it may be a strong supporter of BRI projects, some countries in Southeast Asia have taken a more cautious approach. Pakistan should also take a neutral stance on the South China Sea dispute instead of supporting China,¹² so as to remain on good terms with claimants from Southeast Asia.

⁹ "India-Asean bilateral trade may double by 2025 to \$300 billion: Study", *Business Standard*, 12 November 2019. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-asean-bilateral-trade-may-double-by-2025-to-300-billion-study-119111200547_1.html.

¹⁰ "ASEAN world's fifth-largest economy: Report", *The Jakarta Post*, 26 November 2019. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2019/11/26/asean-worlds-fifth-largest-economy-report.html>.

¹¹ "ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism", *ASEAN Secretariat*, 29 July 2005. https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-pakistan-joint-declaration-for-cooperation-to-combat-terrorism-vientiane-29-july-2005-2.

¹² "Pakistan stands with China in South China Sea dispute", *Times of Islamabad*, 12 July 2016. <https://timesofislamabad.com/12-Jul-2016/pakistan-stands-with-china-in-south-china-sea-dispute>.

Deepening Bilateral Cooperation

On the bilateral level, Pakistan should look for ways to strengthen relations with each of the 10 Southeast Asian countries, especially in the area of trade and investment, as the economic potential in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia is immense and has not been tapped by Pakistan to the fullest. There are opportunities galore for collaboration in infotech, fintech, logistics, food processing, smart cities solutions, manufacturing, and hydropower projects. Pakistan also imports the bulk of its palm oil in millions of tons from Indonesia and Malaysia. To further cement bilateral economic cooperation, Pakistan should look into concluding FTAs with more ASEAN-member countries, in the same way it has thus far only achieved with Malaysia.

Another area that is relatively underdeveloped is in defence cooperation, as this could aid Pakistan in its indigenous defence production and manufacturing. In fact, Pakistani defence planners, including those affiliated with the country's leading defence production organisation, Pakistan Ordnance Factories, have identified Southeast Asia as a lucrative market to export Pakistan-made arms¹³ and have access to the region's training facilities by conducting joint defence and military exercises with ASEAN-member countries. Islamabad should look to formalise defence relations with Southeast Asia by sealing more bilateral defence cooperation agreements, following in the footsteps of Pakistan and Indonesia.

The existing maritime (naval) exercises Pakistan conducts with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, its military exercises with Thailand and intelligence cooperation with the Philippines should continue under Khan, as they help build trust and confidence between Pakistan and Southeast Asia and in so doing contribute to geopolitical tranquillity and regional security. Similarly, Pakistan should continue to invite the ASEAN-member countries to its biennial multi-national AMAN exercise as it did in 2019,¹⁴ which was participated in by all ASEAN-member countries except Laos, testifying to the importance Southeast Asia gives to Pakistan on defence and security matters.

People-to-People Diplomacy

As Southeast Asia is home to a significant Pakistani diaspora (the largest in Malaysia) with a rich history dating back to before the First World War, well before the formation of Pakistan, Khan's government should redouble efforts to court overseas Pakistanis in the hope that they would project a more favourable image of Pakistan in the Southeast Asian countries where they reside, and also maintain a link to their homeland while contributing to the economy back home. Pakistan has also been passionate on exhibiting a people-oriented diplomacy in its foreign policy which would include encouraging people-to-people contacts between Pakistan and Southeast Asia.

¹³ "With China as its mentor, Pakistan triples arms exports", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 9 November 2019. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/With-China-as-its-mentor-Pakistan-triples-arms-exports>.

¹⁴ "46-nation Aman-19 naval exercise kicks off in Karachi", *Dawn*, 8 February 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1462579>.

Recently, Islamabad launched 'Brand Pakistan' to promote the country's tourism industry as a global brand,¹⁵ as Pakistan is home to diverse picturesque tourist destinations and heritage and archaeological sites belonging to the Gandhara civilisation, which was a cradle of Buddhism as well as shrines of famous Sufi saints visited by Muslim pilgrims.¹⁶ As Southeast Asia is a multicultural potpourri of both Islam and Buddhism in the maritime and mainland subregions respectively, Islamabad should market 'Brand Pakistan' under the aegis of cultural diplomacy to the people of Southeast Asia in the hope that more tourists from this region visit Pakistan.

With a population of about 655 million, Southeast Asia is a regional goldmine for tourist travel to Pakistan, helping thus to boost the Pakistani domestic economy. But Islamabad needs to first demonstrate that the 'new' Pakistan is now a safe country for tourists, as the global perception, perhaps unfairly, still lingers on of it being a dangerous place.¹⁷ What is also necessary for tourist travel is better air connectivity between Pakistan and Southeast Asia, necessitating aviation agreements to increase flights to Pakistani towns and cities. Being a cricket-obsessed country, Pakistan could also use cricket diplomacy as a form of soft power to endear itself to ASEAN by promoting the sport of cricket among youths and organising an annual Pakistan-ASEAN friendly cricket match, venues alternating between Pakistan and ASEAN-member countries.

Towards a Promising Future

By courting ASEAN, Islamabad hopes that the regional organisation and its member-states are more sympathetic to Pakistan's interests vis-à-vis India, including on the issue of Kashmir. Although ASEAN has taken a neutral position by calling for negotiation to deescalate tensions between India and Pakistan,¹⁸ a Track-II ASEAN advocacy group is set to be created to support Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir.¹⁹ Islamabad also hopes that engaging ASEAN could illustrate that Pakistan under Khan is a normal and stable country open for business.

Rather than fixate on India's engagement of Southeast Asia and view it through the lens of geopolitical competition, Pakistan under Khan should chart its own path by coming up with its own blueprint for engaging Southeast Asia. It should be Pakistan's engagement of Southeast Asia as a standalone pursuit, rather than engaging Southeast Asia as a countermove to India, as doing so would agonisingly take Pakistan down an ill-advised path of frustration and futility.

¹⁵ "'Brand Pakistan' to promote tourism", *The News international*, 26 December 2019. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/588987-brand-pakistan-to-promote-tourism>.

¹⁶ "Pakistanis celebrate heritage", *The Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2020. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1884325/pakistanis-celebrate-heritage>.

¹⁷ "ICC Chief: Perception of Pakistan being a dangerous country has changed 'slowly' but 'surely'", *Dawn*, 18 March 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/896180/pakistan-has-vision-east-asia-policy>.

¹⁸ "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on India-Pakistan Tensions", *ASEAN Secretariat*, 6 March 2019. <https://asean.org/storage/2019/03/FINAL-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-India-Pakistan-Tensions-6Mar2019.pdf>

¹⁹ "Asean advocacy network to be formed soon to resolve Kashmir issue, says NGO", *The Star*, 6 November 2019. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/11/06/asean-advocacy-network-to-be-formed-soon-to-resolve-kashmir-issue-says-ngo>.

As such, the Khan government should give bureaucratic prominence to the South East Asia and Pacific subdivision of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs by enlarging the size of the directorate and endowing it with resources commensurate with the importance of Southeast Asia in Pakistan's foreign policy. By the same token, Islamabad should continue to maintain the nine diplomatic missions in Southeast Asia, and, someday, open one in Laos.

On the whole, Pakistan should be lauded for its efforts to engage Southeast Asia in the past couple of decades, and the litmus test right now is for the Khan government to continue the twin momentum of multilateral and bilateral engagement with Southeast Asia, and in so doing, contribute to bringing the regions of South and Southeast Asia together. Once the COVID-19 virus global pandemic is brought under control and travel normalcy resumes, Khan should visit more Southeast Asian countries, as he has thus far only visited Malaysia.

Whereas Pakistan's first meaningful engagement with Southeast Asia through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation – a collective defence alliance put together in 1954 to curb communist expansionism in Southeast Asia – came to naught, there is cause for optimism that Pakistan's renewed Southeast Asia engagement through the auspices of 'Vision East Asia' would be a more successful venture for the Khan administration. Staying the course would allow Pakistan to enhance bilateral political trust and build up a reservoir of goodwill with countries in Southeast Asia. Thus, in time, when ASEAN is prepared to enlarge its current slate of 10 full dialogue partners, Pakistan could find itself at the front of the queue, making it a watershed moment and fitting climax to Pakistan's engagement of Southeast Asia.

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