

SOUTHEAST ASIA IN INDIA'S DEFENSIVE FRAMEWORK^(a)

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It is generally countenanced that the wind-swift supersonic aircrafts and the inter-continental missiles have obliterated the significance of the land bases. In support of this view, it is contended that no country or part of a country is now invulnerable in the wake of an air war theatre. The very similar voices are heard for the seaports also. It is argued that the seaports and natural harbours are not so important, when the naval force may refuel and carry out major repairing of ships, even at sea also. At the same time, submarines, bombing planes and ballistic missiles have reduced the presupposed defensive strength of islands, peninsulas, promontories and the ports of the coast, protected by mountains, deserts and jungles.

Though the aforesaid views in regard to the importance of strategy during the time of war are not anachronistic in the present situation, the far-reaching consequences arising out of the debacle of the most significant strategical points are very clear to every country, irrespective of its strength. The big powers, too, though equipped with the most virulent and catastrophic weapons, do not fail to recognize the strategical points of the world. It has been proved by the several instances that the great powers sometimes become so particular about the important strategical places of the world, that they think their withdrawal from the place as a sheer defeat. The U.S.A. left no stone unturned to stem the tide of communism from penetrating into the Pacific Ocean. The massacre of the Vietnamese people by the American soldiers and the gruesome death of the American soldiers in jungles of Viet-

(a) Unsolicited publication. Dr. Tiwari writes: "I am enclosing an article "Southeast Asia: in India's Defensive Framework" with the greatest expectation that you will be kind to get my article published in your esteemed journal."

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nam, are the result of Washington's diplomacy to maintain its advance checkpost against Communism in the East. The opponents of American diplomacy cast similar coveting eyes of the Vietnamese problems. Both the parties involved in Vietnam are preoccupied with an invariable notion to make its strongest host in Southeast Asia and eventually to put their troops from defensive precautions to offensive projections.

In such circumstances, nobody can doubt the strategic importance of the Southeast Asian countries for India's defense and prosperity. There are two main factors that make the countries of the region of transcendent importance for India's well being during the period of peace and for India's defence in the time of war. These two factors are the following:

- i. The geographical location
- ii. Economic situation

i. *The Geographical location:*

The location of a country always determines its strategic position in the international affair.¹ The Southeast Asian region has a unique location in the world geography. The region is important not only for Asia but for the whole world. For India, the situation of the countries of the region is as significant as that of an integral part of the Union of India. This becomes more vivid, when we make a geographical note of the location of the Southeast Asian region in the world's map.

First: The region lies between India and China, the two great rival powers in Asia. Historically, culturally, economically, and even politically, China's influence in Southeast Asia, since a long time, has been no less than India's own influence in the region. Geographically also, China occupies the same position. Thus, receiving all the privileges which India enjoys in the region, China has always tended to envelop Southeast Asia. But the old historical records prove that the Indians, who built up great

empires, always stemmed the tide of the Chinese influence from coming to the Indian main soil.

At the present time, communist China is applying every overt and covert method to make the region its satellite by outmaneuvering India's influence. So now, Southeast Asia's importance for India has increased many times. The situation, created by the Red Chinese regime, particularly in the Southeast Asian countries, leaves no doubt about the belief that the collapse of the region into the hands of the Communists will ascertain the prophecy of Lenin that "for world Communism, the road to Paris lies through Peking and Calcutta." Mao-Tse Tung has fulfilled half of Lenin's dream, and it seems that if the Communist insurrectionary forces fighting at the instance of Mao succeeded in Southeast Asia, it will be difficult to save Calcutta from the Red forces.

Second: The region is like a land bridge between the two continents, Asia and Australia. India and Australia, very close friends to each other, are linked through the region. If the linking agency is disrupted, India's close contact with Australia will be in jeopardy. It is worthy to bear in mind that on the most important Southeast Asian issues, India and Australia have endeavoured to follow an identical policy. Mr. Desai, the Indian delegate with the U.N., said in the Security Council in 1949 that, "Together with our colleagues of Australia, we belong to the South-East Asian sphere and therefore we are concerned in this problem."²

Third: The Southeast Asian region is a link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. India, the greatest Indian ocean state, has close contacts with the Pacific. At the present age these contacts have enormously increased. In no case can India remain unaffected by the events happening in the Pacific. The so-called architect of India's foreign policy, Pandit Nehru, remarked, "Though not directly a Pacific state, India will inevitably exercise an important influence there."³ Since the World War II and especially after the Communist victory on the mainland of China, the importance of the area conjoining the

two oceans, the Indian and Pacific, has soared very high. Of late, China's continuously growing bellicosity against India has added one more point in the importance of the Pacific region for India.

Now, it would be worthwhile to discuss the location of the different countries, constituting Southeast Asia separately and see how far it affected India.

Burma, India's closest neighbor, shares a common border with India both on land and water. In Assam and in N.E.F.A., Burma makes a long border with India. In the same way the Bay of Bengal washes the Burmese territory. The nearest Burmese outpost is only at a 40 miles distance from the Andaman islands.⁴

The geographical location of Burma is so important for India, that the latter can ignore the existence of the former at its own peril. Pandit Kunzru has perspicuously pointed out: "Whether there is any agreement between India and Burma or not, it is clear that the ultimate interests and security of India lay in the continued freedom and independence of Burma."⁵ Burma has been destined at such a geographical location that if it falls into the hands of the belligerent expansionist powers or turns itself hostile to India, the Indian Government will face a pernicious situation in both the cases. A cursory glance at the map makes one believe that from Burma, easy and successful attacks may be launched against the eastern provinces of India, where India's main mineral resources, heavy industries and fertile agricultural fields are located.⁶

The Sino-Pak collusion against India has again added one point more to the importance of Burma for India's defence and well-being. It can be mentioned that if Burma is friendly to India, then it may prove to be a good agency to intercept the Chinese and Pakistani forces meeting together to attack India. Otherwise, when Burma succumbs to the joint bellicose temperament of China and Pakistan against India, the destiny of the people will be jeopardy. Because, if the Chinese forces hold a base in Burma to

operate against India, the former's position will be very strong. The Chinese troops will be greatly benefited by the Burmese petroleum—scarcely found in China, and this opportunity will give an unending momentum to the Chinese government to unleash massive onslaught on India.

The situation of Burma on the bay of Bengal has given it an added advantage of availing the opportunity of control over the vast body of water, as and when required. If it goes against India or if it is under the influence of a belligerent country, Burma can provide a good land base for attacking India. It can also serve as a naval base and her military ships can easily disturb the coastal areas of India. In these circumstances, India's position, especially its defence, will be put to a lot of strain which may ultimately undermine our existence. K.M. Panikkar is rightly of the view, "Besides, as recent events have proved, a power which controls Rangoon can control the Bay of Bengal."⁷

The control of the bay of Bengal in the hands of an enemy nation will coincide with paralyzing India's ocean borne trade and traffic with other countries. In such circumstances it will also become difficult for India to regulate its international trade through the Arabian sea waters and this will cause the origin of multidimensional fronts, which is disastrous for the country.

With the development of the Nagas' and Mizos' hostilities in the Assam areas, Burma has assumed additional strategic importance. The Burmese jungle clad territories may provide a good refuge to the hostile Nagas and Mizos.⁸ At this juncture it is essential that Burma should behave like a good friend and should not help the Naga rebellions in their subversive and disruptive activities against the Indian government or give them refuge at the time when they were being chased by the Indian Police or military personnel.

Thailand, the heart of Southeast Asia,⁹ and quite near to the Indian group of islands—Andaman and Nicobar, plays an important strategical part for India. Its impor-

ance for India can be reckoned in both positive and negative ways. With its central position in Southeast Asia, if Thailand is inclined to India, then the latter may keep vigilance from here on the activities of the countries of the region. The Thai government will also not allow to develop a situation that may ultimately embroil India's position. During the second World War the importance of Thailand was estimated. It appears probable that, had Thailand denied the Japanese troops passage through the Thai territories or disallowed it to make Thailand its base to attack other Southeast Asian countries, and restored to war against Japan, the British and the Dutch forces would not have been so easily defeated.

Since the Sino-Indian conflicts turned into an open war, the importance of Thailand for India has grown very high. If favourably disposed to India, Thailand, being an anti-Chinese and anti-Communist country, may provide all sorts of help to the Indian government to fight against the Communist China in Southeast Asia.

The countries of Indo-China, although comparatively far from the Indian border, have a long and decisive influence on the Indian strategic policy, against a threat coming from the East. The geographical position of the countries of Indo-China is so important that a strong power based on these countries will be in advantage to threaten even India, through Thailand and Burma. In the remote ages the countries of present Indo-China had proved a strong barrier against an enemy tempted to swallow up the whole of Southeast Asia and eventually India. The well planned expeditions of the Chinese kings, could not touch the Northeast Frontier of India, because the great empires built by the Indian princes in Champa and Kambuja proved a deterrent to all those expeditions. It was the stiff resistance of the great Hindu empires that the Chinese generals could not succeed to establish their bases in the Indian Ocean and thus India was saved from both the sides—land and water. K.M. Pannikar has aptly observed, "If ever the expanding empire of China did not

extend its authority to Singapore and if the Indian Ocean remains today what its name indicates, it is due to the resistance which Kambuja and Champa put up against the continuous pressure of China."¹⁰

At the present age, with the increasing use of the air as a war theatre, China's determination to outmanoeuvre India's influence from Southeast Asia and a considerable success to the Chinese Communists in all the three countries of Indo-China, have greatly heightened the importance of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam—the constituent parts of Indo-China, for India.

In the context of the present swiftly oscillating politics of Indo-China countries, China appears to be a conspicuous menace to India, because the Chinese communists have left no stone unturned to absorb the Indo-China countries—very near to the mainland of China. The Chinese government has achieved a grand success in North Vietnam and in the Northern provinces of Laos. Cambodia is also falling in the orbit of the Chinese Communists.

All these recent developments do not fail to impress one that China's strong hold in the countries of Indo-China will create grave menace to the neighboring countries of Indo-China and ultimately "would open the way to India."¹¹ Thus the geographical location of the countries of Indo-China and the contemporary situation prevailing in and around Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, remind the Indian government and the people of India that "India's strategic frontiers" as M.R. Masani observed, "lie in Indo-China."¹²

Similar to the continental zone of Southeast Asia about which we have studied above, the insular countries are also the life-blood of India's defence and prosperity. Indonesia, the largest Southeast Asian country, "is a bridge or a series of stepping stones between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, linking the Malayan mainland to the northern tip of Australia by its main trend while the northern extension through the Philippines, connects Australia to the mainland of China by another series of island stepping stones."

A few points we have just referred to about Indonesia's geographical location, indicate that India's farthest defence actually lie in Indonesia. Along with it there are two other important factors that greatly increase Indonesia's value for the maintenance of India's integrity and solidarity. First, the Andaman group of islands are only 90 miles away from Sumatra.¹³ Second, all the major ports and coastal settlements of Indonesia, lie on the northward of Indonesia,¹⁴ comparatively nearer to India. The above mentioned two points ascertain the exigency of Indonesia, as India's safeguard and menace both are extended in Indonesia. These two facts may be elaborated thus: the joint Indo-Indonesian operation against a belligerent power can be safely and efficiently maintained, if Indonesia is in amity with India. This action will completely save India's sea bases to be a battle ground. But, if Indonesia becomes hostile to India, Indonesia's major ports located in the northward of Indonesia, may provide a good base to launch attack on India as well as to pulverise India's maritime activities.

Indonesia's strategical importance for India was greatly visualised by the Chinese government and it is not inconsistent to say that the Sino-Indonesian far-developing collusion against India before September 1965, was a plan to threaten India's sovereignty.¹⁵ Indonesia's location in the Indian Ocean, adds one more point in Indonesia's importance for India. The Indian Ocean has been proved the nerve centre for India's independence. India lost her independence when her control on the Indian Ocean became weak. But at the same time it should not be forgotten that the collapse of Indonesia in the hands of an external power, constrained the Indian government to maintain its control on the Indian Ocean routes. This is known to the great Indian leaders. Pandit Nehru once remarked, "If some kind of colonial administration continues in Indonesia, if it is permitted to continue, it will be a danger to the whole of Asia, it will be a danger to us in India."¹⁶

Next to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore possess

vital strategical importance for India. The Strait of Malacca, Panama and Suez of the East, is the most important place in Malaysia. Its importance will grow many folds in the event of an Indo-Indonesian conflict because India's influence in the Strait of Malacca will enable the former to foil the Indonesian aggressive policy against India. Otherwise, India's entry into the East will be sealed, if the Strait of Malacca goes in the hands of an enemy.

Singapore, though very small in size, is very important, so far as its geographical position is concerned. The then Chief Minister of Singapore, Mr. David Marshall, once remarked that "Although we are a small territory, geography has made our destiny a regional destiny."¹⁷ Singapore also shares a great responsibility in India's defence.¹⁸ An expansionist power, determined to reach the Indian border, may be stemmed from Singapore. Though Singapore does not possess enough potentiality to stand against an attack, India can successfully strengthen the government of Singapore.

The Strait of Malacca and Singapore, both have been destined to such a marvelous geographical position that a country like India, whose more than 75% trade is carried out through the Indian Ocean routes, cannot ignore both Malaysia and Singapore. It has been aptly pointed out, "whosoever controls the Strait of Malacca and Singapore, dominate a sea route and strategic key point that is comparable in importance with Panama Canal."¹⁹

Since the east Pacific zone became one of the most controversial regions in the world diplomacy, the strategical importance of the Philippines reached at its culmination. The day by day brewing conflicts between the Western allied forces led by the U.S.A. and the Communist forces, made the countries of the Indian Ocean open "to the pressures emanating from the side of the Pacific."²⁰

Though the Philippines is far away from India, its significance in the recent times cannot be ignored. India's friendly relations with the Philippines count a great importance in India's successful diplomacy. To divert the attention of a belligerent power, stationed in a Southeast

Asian country, the islands of the Philippines may prove a good base. From the far-stretching island of the Philippines, successive air attacks may be made against a power, who is determined to invade India.

ii. *Economic richness*:—

The storage of economic resources in abundance in the countries of Southeast Asia, makes them (Southeast Asian countries) very important for India. From the time immemorial, the Southeast Asian countries have been a centre for the Indian merchants. Being motivated by the search for a veritable *el dorado*, the Indian merchants braved their ways through jungle and seas and swarmed over the Southeast Asian countries. The Indian merchants who with the passage of time became the permanent citizens of the Southeast Asian countries, proved to be a good agency in bringing the Indian and Southeast Asian economy very close.

During the time of the Western domination also, the region remained a great attraction for the Indian businessmen and a large number of Indians founded business enterprises, acquired agricultural land, operated money lending business, etc., in these countries. The British colonial government in India also strengthened India's economic relations with the countries of the region.

Even in the present time, the importance and prospects of close economic relations between India and Southeast Asian region have not decreased,²¹ rather they have increased to a great extent—which may be illustrated by some facts given below:

India, the developing industrial country, have numerous advantages in the countries of the region to accelerate her industrial output. The Southeast Asian countries are famous for their richness of rubber, tin, tungsten, nickel and bauxite.²² These economic resources, will be very useful for the Indian industries. The importance of these economic resources for India becomes very great in the sense that the Southeast Asian countries are not

in a position to utilize all their economic resources in their own industries. And there are certain difficulties before most of the countries to become highly industrialized. Burma, Indonesia and Malaysia have a large accumulation of oil and petroleum.²³ These countries jointly produce oil 3/4 percent of the world output.²⁴ Though the Indian government is extensively busy in exploring its own oil wells, there is shortage of petroleum in India. If India succeeds in getting the surplus quantities of oil from the oil yielding Southeast Asian countries, it will be very beneficial for India.

This region is rich not only in the field of mineral resources, but it has a large stock of foodstuffs—especially rice. For its production of rice in large quantity, the region is named as the “rice bowl of Asia.”²⁵ Though India is an agriculturist country, there is acute problem before the Indian government to feed the millions of people in India. In such circumstances, the Southeast Asian countries may be a genuine helper to India.

The next important factor with the Southeast Asian economy is, that it is not competitive but it is a complementary to the Indian economic resources. What India needs the Southeast Asian countries have in abundance and vice versa. P.A. Narielwala who led an Indian Trade Delegation to the Southeast Asian countries said in a speech in New Delhi that the “important factor in the development of trade between India and these countries is that the economy of India and these countries is fortunately not competitive but is complementary. Most of these countries are rich in natural resources; many of which, we ourselves in India, need as raw materials for our industries. It is, therefore, possible for the Indian industries to import raw materials from these countries and to export our manufactured goods to meet their requirements not only of consumer goods but also of industrial products.”²⁶

Narielwala's report about the future of India's and Southeast Asian economic rapport, clearly manifests that it is an imperative cause for the government of India, not

to show the slightest slackness to boost its commodities into the Southeast Asian countries. Rather, it should pay a special heed to strengthen its trade and commercial relations with the Southeast Asian countries. There are two most important agencies that may successfully herald India's centuries old economic ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. First, almost all the Southeast Asian countries have expressed, more than once, their deep propensities to be in close economic relations with India. Second, a large number of Indians, dwelling in the Southeast Asian countries, may prove to be a proper agency to introduce and strengthen India's economic relations with the Southeast Asian countries. In this connection it is not improper to say that the Indian citizens, living in the Southeast Asian countries are businessmen and have a decisive hand in the economy of the countries they inhabit.

China, the greatest Asian rival of India in the region, is applying every method to outmaneuver India's economic influence from the countries of Southeast Asia. The Chinese nationals living in large numbers in almost all the countries of the region, are busy to flood the Southeast Asian countries with the Chinese manufactured commodities. Though the western countries, highly industrially developed, have captured an unquestionable status in the Southeast Asian economy, China's intention to dwindle India's economic effect in the region, will create a lugubrious situation for India.

The facts we collected enable me to say that India's defence really exists in the Southeast Asian countries. The natural location and economic resources of the region are so important that the Indian government, irrespective of its internal policies cannot and should not be unaware of the Southeast Asian policies. The recent developments arising out of the Vietnamese war, give a beacon to the Indian government to be more wary and vigilant towards the Southeast Asian countries.

Though the unchallenging supremacy of any external and expansionist power in the Southeast Asian region is

a doom to India, China, a nuclear power, a potential enemy of India and with its great obstruction for India.²⁷ The primary object for India is to do her level best not allow the Chinese influence in the region. The Indian government has to reconsider its policy applied to the Southeast Asian countries and it has to pick up the threads of ancient cultural relations that can bring the people of India and Southeast Asia very close to each other.

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4. *The Statesman* (New Delhi) January 6, 1965.
5. "The Hindu (Madras)" August 2, 1955.
6. K. M. Panikkar has rightly remarked, "It should not be forgotten that Calcutta, the first City in India and centre of its Jute industry the Itharia Coalfields which produce the largest amount of coal, the Tata Iron Works, the most important of India's industrial achievement, lie within easy range of air attack from Burma." *The future of Southeast Asian*, pp. 43-44. India's important oil fields are located in the Assam area of Dighoy, Naharkatiya, Hagrijan, Moyan, Sibsagar etc. The Russian experts "associated with the O.N.G.C. feel that the Sibsagar Oil basin is of a magnitude which may give this field an international ranking, a status which no Indian oil field so far has." *The Statesman* (New Delhi) April 14, 1965.
7. *The Future of Southeast Asia*, op. cit. p. 42.
8. Dr. D. S. Raju, the Deputy Minister for defence said in the Lok Sabha that a gang of about 1,500 hostile Nagas, who had skirted the Mizo hills, was moving northwards through the Burmese territory. *The Statesman* (New Delhi) April 20, 1965.
The two underground Naga leaders Mr. Z. Ramyo and Mr. Zashie Hurie also confirmed that some hostile Nagas had "crossed into the Kachin State of Burma from the Tirrap district of N.E.F.A." *The Statesman* (New Delhi) May 12, 1967.
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15. Rt. Reverend Richardson, the Bishop of Nicobar and the former M.P., once said in that Indonesia's increasing alliance with Communist China and the former's activities in "Indian waters off great Nicobar and apprehended the people of Nicobar." *The Statesman* (New Delhi), May 28, 1965.
16. Quoted by S.P. Patel, *India's Foreign Policy*, p. 69.
17. *Asian Recorder*, December 3-9, 1955, p. 547.
18. K.M. Panikkar wrote about Singapore's importance for India that "with Istanbul, Gibraltar and Panama, Singapore shares equivocal honour of being a point of greatest importance in world strategy, its defence is vital primarily to India." *The Future of Southeast Asia, op. cit.*, p. 102.
19. Lennox A. Mills and Associates, *The New World of Southeast Asia*, p. 6.
20. Ravindra Varma, *Foreign Affairs Report*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Jan. 1964, p. 5.
21. B. N. Ganguli has rightly remarked that with her "vast and diversified economic resources and a more balanced political and economic organization, India is a little apart from Southeast Asia, but not so apart as the 'peripheral' countries. It is this, somewhat intermediate position of India which invests the reorientation of India's economic relations with the nuclear countries of Southeast Asia with a special significance. Nevertheless, like the 'peripheral' countries India has the distinct role of adjusting her economic relations with these countries to the requirements of their economic stability and integration in the context of a new rational economic regime which they have to build up for sheer survival as autonomous countries." B. N. Ganguli, *India's Economic Relations with the Far Eastern and Pacific Countries in the Present Century*, p. 3.
22. According to the report of the E.C.F.F., released on March 5, 1960, mentioned that the S.E.A. region and the Far East produced 90% of the world natural rubber and two thirds of it was yielded in Malaya and Indonesia. *Asian recorder*, April 16-22, 1961, p. 3902.
23. India is a main importer of oil from the Southeast Asian countries. In 1964-65 about 500,000 tons of Crude Oil was imported from Indonesia. *The Statesman* (New Delhi) August 12, 1965.
24. W. Gordon and O. R. K. Spate, *The Changing Map of Asia*. p. 195. In 1962, Burma's oil fields yield 600 thousand metric tons of petroleum, Indonesia's 22,800 thousand and Malaysia's 3,500 thousand metric tons. *The Statesman Year Book 1964-65*, p. XXV.
Mr. Arnold C. Brockman writes, "Indonesia is the largest oil producer between the Middle East and California," *Indonesian Communist*, p. 303.
25. E. H. G. Dobby, *Monsoon Asia*, p. 18.
26. P. A. Narielwals, *Trade Prospects with Southeast Asia* India Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1951, p. 111.
The Economic Weekly has also greatly exalted the importance of the Southeast Asian countries for India. It

mentioned: "It is rather an amorphous market consisting as it does of Malaya and Singapore on the one hand, and Indonesia, Borneo and certain other territories on the other. For it is a centre of active entrepot trade and does a lot of re-exporting to the latter group of the countries." June 20, 1959, p. 707.

27. About the Sino-Indian position in Southeast Asia, E. H. G. Dobby has remarked, "It is difficult to avoid supposing that, whatever the sentiment they profess, India and China in varying degrees may become involved with the control of Southeast Asia no less intimately than the colonial powers have been. Possibly this marginal, internally disrupted zone can only exist as an appanage and countries there may become the satellites of Asiatic powers rather than independence." E. H. G. Dobby, *Southeast Asia*, p. 397.