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Two Decades of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Odyssey of Friendship and Prosperity

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Introduction

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative turns twenty this year. Over the last two decades, India has steadily engaged extended neighbourhood eastward in a series of regional and sub-regional forums. Starting in 2000, the MGC initiative, one of the oldest of such measures, is a sub-regional cooperation organisation comprising India and five ASEAN countries, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. While there was a slow progress in the MGC since its inception, last couple of years have witnessed a greater engagement by India and other member countries. India, under the rubric of 'Act East' policy, which is upgraded form of India's Look East policy, has taken several measures to strengthen the relationship. In fact, the MGC has come out with a new Plan of Action (POA), adopted by the member countries in August 2019. Why the MGC matters for India and what can be done to make this relationship more meaningful?

A Glorious Legacy

The Mekong sub-region has strategic significance and economic weight. It is located at the junction of active expansive markets of Asia. The cultural and religious diversity of the Mekong sub-region in Southeast Asia is remarkable. Nearly 100 different ethnic groups live just in the lower Mekong basin. In this region, Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese people have depended upon the Mekong's resources for thousands of years. The Mekong still forms an integral part of each distinct culture and they all rely upon its fish to eat and its waters to travel and trade. The diversity of cultures and traditions is

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legendary. Indian culture, religions and political ideas played a considerable role in the politico-cultural landscape of the Mekong sub-region. Moreover, the cultural influence flowed both ways and Southeast Asia has also contributed in enriching India's culture and traditions.

Despite a rich civilisational linkage, the cultural connectedness and communication between these India and Mekong sub-region is very limited. We are living in an interconnected world in the age of diffused culture based on a modern outlook that relies on science and rationality to address emerging challenges. While we celebrate our past, we also witness modifications and adaptations and infusion of new elements in our relationships. The contemporary dynamics of the region and the fast-changing global society brings new ideas and pose different challenges. Therefore, it is important for the Mekong-Ganga regional forum to deliberate upon issues on which they could share their expertise and experience and learn from each other.

Deepening of Bond

The MGC Plan of Action (POA) 2019-2022 lists eleven priority areas to further deepen and enhance cooperation: cultural cooperation; tourism; education; public health and traditional medicine; agriculture and allied sectors; water resource management; science and technology; transport and communication; MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises); skill development and capacity building; and quick impact project scheme. Each area has envisioned focus areas to implement these strategies. We are already witnessing some actions on the ground. It is important, however, to highlight some areas which could result in greater visibility and impact.

Cultural cooperation seems a starting point for this relationship. The action plan agreed to establish a Common Archival Resource Centre (CARC) at Nalanda University as a repository of information on areas such as archaeological sites, world heritages, history of trade, population and religious distribution data, and historical linkages between India and Southeast Asia for the use of academicians, researchers and scholars. In fact, Nalanda University has already implemented this decision. India has also worked closely with the Mekong countries to collaborate on cultural heritage restoration and conservation. Indeed, India's support and partnership with some of the countries of the region for restoration and conservation of their heritage monuments has played a critical role in India's soft power augmentation. Some projects like the Angkor Vat temple, the Ta Prohm temple, the Vat Phou temple, the Cham Monuments of 'My Son' are excellent examples of India's assistance for restoration and conservation of heritage sites. Similarly, India assisted to open MGC Asian Traditional Textile Museum in Siem Reap with an aim to acquire, exhibit and preserve materials, equipments, traditional and contemporary textiles in natural fibres of MGC countries, and to showcase rich diversity of this region. Opened in April 2014, the Museum underlines the fruits of collective efforts of in bringing together ethnic and regional variations in textile

and to learn from each other. Further, sustainable management of resources is utmost important and therefore, India and the Mekong countries need to amplify their cooperation in the field of cultural resource management. Intercultural communication is another important aspect and is vital to develop a better understanding of each-other practices and sensitivities, likes and dislikes, and thus, it could be very helpful in boosting mutual interaction. Similarly, cultural industry is another important dimension which requires better coordination and structured approach. Cultural industries are a great source for enhancing countries' soft power and have the potential of cultivating lucrative export enterprises. Indeed, culture is linked to both the developmental idea of amassing national wealth and to enhancing the national image by promoting the export of national cultural products. As a result, government-led discourses of cultural policy, culture and cultural products throughout the region have acquired both economic and political value. In fact, the external dimension of culture has become an important tool of enhancing national image. How the cultural industries of the Mekong sub-region and India collaborate will depend much on governments' policies and support.

Tourism is another priority sector under the action plan. Religious and health tourism are two particular areas where India requires enhanced momentum. Promotion of civilizational connect is an important feature of the Indian government. Prime Minister Modi's visits to cultural sites during his foreign trips, where ancient civilizational connections between India and partner countries are still visible, is indeed noteworthy. Indian Prime Minister has also talked extensively on shared values, traditions and heritage and therefore, strengthened these ancient ties. Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam have a sizable Buddhist population. Promoting Buddhist circuit should be given priority and the Indian government may consider taking a pro-active approach to develop Varanasi as a hub connecting all MGC countries. Varanasi is already connected to immediate neighbourhood, facilitating greater religious tourism. Similarly, India is working on technological innovations in health care, tele-medicine and traditional medicine. It is also developing as an affordable and quality healthcare destination for many countries. An active collaboration in the health tourism as well as capacity building of the MGC countries could have a lasting impact on the relationship.

Education is an essential priority area to deepen the relationship. India has already announced to offer many scholarships to students and professionals from these countries. For example, India has launched an initiative to fund 1,000 scholars of Southeast Asian countries to pursue PhD at its 23 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), covering the entire cost of study, and living expenses for up to five years of a PhD program. However, a better awareness and promotion efforts are required to popularise these available scholarships. Some institutions, for example, Nalanda University are already contributing to fulfil these objectives. Establishment of CARC at Nalanda University is an important step in the right direction. In fact, Nalanda University is being led by a woman educationist with an illustrious leadership record,

and the university offers courses on Buddhist studies among others. It is important to underline that women and girls represent over half of the Mekong sub-region's population, and therefore, India needs to provide adequate attention and facilitate a bigger role of women leadership. The inclusion and leadership of women could be game-changing in the field of education. Further, India could make strategy to send skilled teaching faculty for English and Science and Technology, in which India is a pioneer, to these countries. India can also extend its knowledge and experience in the areas like satellites for education and other developmental cooperation. Institutional collaborations will enrich partnership.

Some other areas which could be immensely important to build a stronger partnership between India and the Mekong countries are, for example, sharing experience and expertise in the field of microcredit, fintech, weather forecasting, agrotech, etc. India can share its expertise in the field of microfinance whereby Indian organizations like Bandhan Bank can help in capacity building in these countries. Collaboration in fintech could help developing digital infrastructure, which is a priority area of all Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, India through its meteorological and oceanographic satellites likes INSAT series, Kalpana-1, Megha-Tropiques, Oceansat-1 & 2 could provide weather forecasting which has numerous applications. With exceptions of Lao PDR, all other members are littoral states. Inputs from dedicated oceanographic satellites will be helpful not only for navigation but also in averting disasters like cyclones. Such information could be helpful in measuring, predicting, and limiting climate risk to agriculture. More importantly, India has emerged as a leading country in start-ups and innovation in many of these areas including in agriculture. It could provide quality agro inputs to the farmers of the MGC countries at their doorstep using digital platforms and engaging industries and emerging players in this field. India's experience in agriculture could be shared in increasing soil fertility to achieve higher agricultural productivity and crop yield with lower resource use, eco-friendly crop protection methods, improve mechanization at horticulture farms with the use of R&D and high quality farm equipment, a smarter and safer food supply, the use of technology in aquaculture and so on.

India has taken several important steps to enhance regional connectivity and trade through agreements and projects. Indian Prime Minister outlined the vision of maritime cooperation through the idea of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). SAGAR envisions deepening economic and security cooperation in the littorals, enhancing capacities to safeguard land and maritime territories, working towards sustainable regional development, Blue Economy, and promoting collective action to deal with non-traditional threats like natural disasters, piracy, terrorism, etc. India has also been taking steps to enhance infrastructure and capacity at all major ports under the Sagarmala Project. ASEAN India Centre (AIC), RIS has done in-depth studies on various connectivity projects (railroad, air and maritime) as part of India's Act East policy and has made valuable policy suggestions to enhance regional

connectivity and trade between the two regions. India has been implementing several connectivity corridors, for example, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway; Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and other maritime connectivity projects like development of ports at Chabahar, Sitwee, etc. Enhanced connectivity will not only ease the transportation of goods and people but is vital for developing a vibrant economic growth corridor between India and the Mekong sub-region.

Robust Cooperation

Strategic significance of the region is well known, and India has institutional arrangements with almost all countries to deepen relationship in defence and security relation, capacity building and so on. India's Act East policy is embedding trilateralism into bilateralism to increase the scope of collaboration and partnerships. In fact, an active collaboration and partnership with extra-regional/major powers on issues of mutual interests, for example, infrastructure development, information sharing, technological cooperation, and growing cooperation between law enforcement agencies to counter transnational threats such as terrorism, narcotics, trafficking, financial and economic fraud, cybercrime, etc. has emerged as an important feature. Such collaborations will not only boost regional cooperation but will also result in tackling the menace of transnational crime.

In today's web of interconnected world, human life has improved, and communication has become very fast. More and more people in more and more places are enjoying better lives than ever before. We are witnessing increasingly overlapping areas of commonality among people and regions with similar aspirations. MGC countries should work proactively to highlight the positivity and good things that are happening in their countries and engage more constructively to address pressing transnational problems. The fusion of cultural past could be enriched further through a robust cooperation between the Mekong sub-region and India.



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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. The AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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