

# **Analyzing the Possibilities and Challenges of Enhancing Relations between Iran and Southeast Asian Nations**

*Abdolreza Alami*

## **Introduction**

The world is changing and developing these days at a rapid rate and failing to keep up with this development causes catastrophic harm. Analyzing the advances which can aid in our economic progress is one approach to joining this development. Knowing which developing nations have outperformed others in the early phases of development can be more helpful in this regard than the development experience of industrialized nations.

Southeast Asia has received a lot of attention recently. This region has had rapid economic growth in recent years and has grown remarkably in significance in international relations. The relevance of understanding this region for Iran is increased by the inclusion of Muslim-majority nations like Malaysia and Indonesia among the ASEAN members. These nations have a history of positive economic and political relations with Iran.

One area that has received little attention in the literature on Iran's foreign policy is the connections between Iran and Southeast Asian nations. In the previous few decades the nations of this region have had considerable relations with Iran in the areas of diplomacy, commerce, economics, and technology, both individually and through the regional Organization, ASEAN.

Iran's relations with Southeast Asian nations have grown and then shrunk, not because they are economically necessary but rather because of the nature of Iran's interactions with the super powers. In actuality, depending on the state of Iran's ties to China, Western, and regional powers, its relations with Southeast Asian nations have taken on a variety of forms. As a result, the development of Iran's connections with the West, on the one hand, and the nature of its contacts with China and some Middle Eastern states on the other, define the nature of Iran's relations with Southeast Asian nations.

Along with the conflict between China and the United States (US) and their allies in Southeast Asia in recent years, the region has also seen an increasing number of Middle Eastern nations turning eastwards and signing delicate economic and political agreements, like the

RCEP, QUAD, and AUKUS . This region, therefore, occupies a unique position in international relations. In light of this potential, it is now more crucial than ever to research how Asian nations interact with one another as well as to understand Southeast's role and status in the globe going forward (Vaezi 2007).

Due to the significance of Southeast Asian nations' positions concerning the new international context, where Iran attempts to bring about some sort of Islamic world unification in the face of pressure from the West, the question that concerns us here is how Iran's foreign policy is influenced by the position of the ASEAN nations. How do relations between Iran and Southeast Asian nations fit into these factors?

This chapter examines the viability of improving the connections between Iran and the region's nations along with the opportunities, difficulties, challenges, and potential areas of collaboration in Iran's foreign policy.

## **Politics and Security**

Since World War II, Southeast Asia has had two quite distinct phases in terms of its significance in the global order. The importance of this region was eclipsed during the first phase, which primarily covers the years of the Cold War, by the ideological conflict between capitalism as represented by the US and communism by the Soviet Union. Beijing joined this equation in 1949, following the Chinese Revolution, and the enmity between China and the Soviet Union during those decades shaped their overall policy. During this period Southeast Asia was not a significant region for Iran since the focus of Iran's attention in foreign policy was on its relations with the two super powers. The communist nature of some of the countries in the region and their ties to the Soviet Union and China posed a significant barrier to the growth of Iran's relations with this region.

During the 1990s, however, the flow of Southeast Asia's influence in the world order experienced a significant transformation. The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which fought against communism since the 1960s until the conclusion of the Cold War, provided the framework for bolstering significant collaboration between the

region's ten countries. The impression of a threat in the region was eliminated by the fall of the Soviet Union and China's separation from the dogmatic elements of the communist ideology, leading the political systems of the region to place a greater emphasis on boosting economic might than on security concerns. Significant economic powers unilaterally and multilaterally presented in this region, laying the foundation for future economic cooperation. Most of the nations in this region have risen to a prominent position in the process of globalization and have become the focus of international exchanges as a result of the confluence of these factors.

However, the relations between Iran and the nations of the region remained strained during this time, and Iran was unable to advance its interests by taking advantage of the region's expanding capabilities. Since the Islamic Revolution Iran's foreign policy has been affected by unique circumstances, which has so far made security the main focus of Iranian foreign policy debates. Although there has been a development or culture-oriented viewpoint in some of these discourses, Iran has wanted to pay attention to these perspectives for security reasons.

In light of the Islamic revolution's unique nature and its confrontational stance towards the prevailing Western-dominated order, post-revolution foreign policy discourses sought to strike a harmonious chord in relations with the major global powers.. If Iran has ever looked eastward, its attention has typically been drawn to China's capacity to challenge the West or exploit its energy demands and military capacity.

During the late 1990s, Iran underwent a phase of easing its foreign policy. The discourse of de-stressing, prevalent towards the end of the nineties, focused on promoting cultural tolerance in the international arena and aimed to de-securitize Iran's foreign policy. This approach held significant potential for fostering cooperation with the Southeast Asia region compared to other discourses within Iran's foreign policy. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances and subsequent challenges arising from the events of 9/11, this approach did not achieve notable success in the Southeast Asia region. Due to contradictory policies of withdrawal from international agreements, insurgency and creating hostilities with allied countries, by the US and some Western powers, as well as pressure from sanctions imposed by these powers, and intra-regional tensions with Iran in the last decade, Iran's foreign policy has increasingly focused on the East. Interacting with China and Southeast Asian nations, therefore, as well as attempting to take part in regional agreements like ASEAN, has played a crucial role for Iran.

## **Iran's relations with Southeast Asian nations**

The country-region concept of the relations between a country and a region can be used to discuss the relationship between Iran and Southeast Asia nations. In this case, the region is a collective identity for the constituent nations. The issues that affect a country's relations with a region generally go beyond those that pertain to bilateral relations. These issues might impact the country-to-country interactions. In research, however, it is essentially thought of as a separate domain from the country-centered field. We are presented with a model known as the country-region model whenever we attempt to investigate the relations between a country and a region (Aminzadeh 2008). In this model, we deal with the issues that are very similar to those that are country-specific. What transpires in the interactions between a nation and a region is not unrelated to issues with politics, security, defense, economy, trade, culture, etc. For instance, when we discuss Iran's relations with ASEAN or with Southeast Asia as a transnational identity, or problems like energy crisis, and so forth, that have impacted the South Asian region in a way, this model can be used (Shafi'I 2008).

To effectively guarantee the security of the nation against regional instability and to achieve the greatest possible economic, social, political, security, and cultural cooperation with neighbors and other nations are fundamental objectives of Iran's foreign policy (Tajik 2001). Therefore, the following factors explain why Iran has to increase regional cooperation:

First, to achieve the regional position, set as a goal according to the 20-Year Vision Document. By the year 2025, Iran must have reached the development and advancement of technology that aligns with the first economic, scientific, and technological position in the South Asian region.<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this objective, the average economic growth rate must be 8%.

Second: to improve international relations by developing regional and global bilateral relations, promote greater convergence among Muslim nations and make the community of Muslim nations and neighboring friendly nations a regional pole in terms of economy, industry, science, and technology with a focus on the fourth five-year plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Iran 20-Year National Vision, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision>.

Third: Government policies emphasise rejection of relations of dominance and highlight the need to establish fairness and balance in international relations.

Fourth: Regional cooperation can ensure Iran's political and economic security in the new regional and global contexts.

It is vital to use a variety of deterrents to deal with the threats brought on by the US due to Iran's nuclear program (Sheikh Attar 2006). In Asia in addition to significant cultural and civilizational adaptations between countries, economic development also plays a crucial role in introducing this continent. Asia no longer holds the title of being the most populous and impoverished continent in the world. The development of this continent, particularly of its most populous nations—China and India, which are also the descendants of great civilizations—has altered the landscape of this area, and this continent is now characterized by a startling growth rate and share in global growth statistics, as well as incredible economic leaps and global competition (Aminzadeh 2008).

According to this perspective, Iran views Asia as a crucial strategic partner for trade, industry, and development. Iran is also seen by Asians as a crucial partner for energy supply as well as the market for Asian nations' goods and services. Iran and Asian nations' strong economic relationship is underpinned by a mutual need for development.

A sort of regional diplomacy, which is in essence an international activity at a medium level and is mostly manifested in regional organizations, is necessary to develop relations between the nations of the region. Given that Iran has substantial ties with Asian nations, particularly with the region's leading powers, and that these ties have grown over the past year, its eastward policy can help it satisfy its developmental and economic needs (Sheikh Attar 2006).

The status of Southeast Asian nations and regional agreements like ASEAN has grown crucial over the last decade as a result of Iran's shift in strategy towards fortifying regional ties and turning its attention towards East.

Before the constraints of the Trump administration and his economic war with Iran, the process of developing political relations and economic contacts with the member nations was such that Iran's relations with the region could be deemed as increasing. Before the West's

economic war with Iran began, trade between Iran and ASEAN had experienced significant development.

In their 49<sup>th</sup> summit held in Laos in 2016, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Cambodia welcomed Iran and three more nations to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) to reach the number of the members to 36 nations. Iran formally joined TAC in 2018 after the foreign minister signed this agreement.

TAC is a set of guidelines for how ASEAN members should behave towards one another. The two principles of ‘peaceful settlement of disagreements’ and ‘non-interference in each other’s internal affairs’ are among the matters that are of concern to this group. TAC’s most important goal has been the establishing of permanent peace, solidarity, and permanent unity as well as people’s cooperation. The aims of this treaty, therefore, were advancing cooperation in a variety of areas, including economic development, peace and stability in Southeast Asia, and respecting all members’ independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and identity. In addition to the limited business opportunities that can be expanded for Iran in this region, there are also significant capacities for enhancing cultural and social regional cooperation. This presents an opportunity for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to learn about Iran's capabilities and potentially establish Iran as a gateway for the development of ASEAN's relations in West Asia. By leveraging Iran's unique strengths and resources, ASEAN can further strengthen its ties with countries in the West Asian region and enhance cooperation in various areas such as trade, investment, and cultural exchange. This collaboration has the potential to bring mutual benefits and contribute to the overall development and progress of both ASEAN and Iran.. On the other hand, another way for Iran to increase its footprint in this region is through its permanent participation in Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the biggest regional organization in the world.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of the most significant international organizations that make no mention of ‘the West’ in its literature and proceedings which may pose a threat to the West’s total hegemony in global affairs. With the quiet withdrawal of the US from the Middle East and its presence in South East and East Asia; the China Sea; the signing of

trilateral agreements between the US, Britain, and Australia (Aukus); and the Quad<sup>2</sup> to prevent Chinese hegemony, Iran's participation in the Shanghai treaty has become a sort of reaction to the US disstrainment in this part of the world.

As the fifth-largest economy in the world, ASEAN places a high priority on its economic interests, commercial growth, and cooperation with other nations to maximize economic gains while minimizing friction. Thus, ASEAN has made an effort to keep out of international disputes to stop multinational corporations from withdrawing their capital. Accordingly, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA<sup>3</sup> and threatening other nations to stop trading with Iran to avoid cutting ties with the US, due to the latter's hegemony over the world's economy and financial system, had an unfavorable impact on those nations' relations with Iran.

Many nations in the region attempted to keep their relations with Iran under normal conditions by pursuing a policy of neutrality to the greatest extent feasible, even though Iran's economic and political relations began to deteriorate with the introduction of international sanctions and economic pressure recently. Interactions between Iran and the regional nations have recently decreased as a result of international pressure.

## **Variables between Iran and Southeast Asian nations**

### **Geographic variable**

Relations between Southeast Asia and Iran have a long history that date back to ancient times. As a result of the extensive economic and commercial interactions that the two regions experienced through the Silk Road trade, they were influenced by each other's languages, cultures, and lifestyles, which resulted in the formation of an Asian identity in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – Quad for short – is a security dialogue on a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' begun in 2007, and paralleled by joint military exercises, but which waned and was then revived in 2017. The concern of the primary actors —Japan, India, Australia and the U.S.—has been to limit Chinese maritime domination as their military and economic power has increased.

<sup>3</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal or Iran deal is part of UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

Southeast Asian nations are in considerable danger from any threat or foreign presence in the Middle East region since they depend on it for their energy supplies and because Iran is one of the region's major energy centers.

Since Southeast Asian nations have some natural and historical geographic ties with Iran, communication channels need to be expanded to foster economic and commercial cooperation between Iran and Southeast Asia. This development of cooperation involves convergence in the region unaffected and unhindered by outsiders.

### **Political variable**

Stronger political systems and their more similarity and compatibility in the region can lead to greater probability of cooperation among the regional nations. Iran's political relations with Southeast Asian nations primarily center on the issues of nuclear energy, proxy wars in Muslim nations, the presence of foreign forces and their interference, and the establishment of military bases.

Iran needs a redefining of bilateral ties with East Asian nations in light of regional development, emerging Asian powers, and international interest in the Southeast Asian region. The majority of the nations in Southeast Asia are Non-Aligned Movement members which firmly supports Iran's nuclear program (IRNA 2010). Despite this, many nations in this region—including Malaysia—have tried to work together with international sanctions against Iran in some areas based on their interests throughout the sanctions period.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia was also impacted by its dependence on some Arab countries and tried to improve its relations as a result of political developments, proxy wars, and rivalry in the Muslim world and the Middle East over the last decades between Saudi Arabia, some Arab countries, and Iran. Therefore, Southeast Asia nations adjust their relations with Iran based on sensitive issues such that they suffer less harm due to their relations.

Iran holds a crucial geopolitical and regional position, making it a significant nation for its neighbours and the Islamic world. Therefore, it is essential for the nations in the region and the Islamic world to take a clear stance on Iran's issues. Additionally, Iran should actively seek



connections with regional power centers like Indonesia, not only in political matters but also in economic aspects. Due to Western sanctions and rivalry within the Muslim world, Iran is continuing the pattern of looking eastward in its foreign policy.

### **Security variable**

The fight against drug cultivation and trafficking is one of the significant security problems that might be brought up in the context of ties between ASEAN nations and Iran. During the Cold War, the majority of ASEAN members were drug consumers rather than actual drug producers. The greater portion of actions carried out in this organization, therefore, were focused on preventing and controlling drug usage.

However, as additional members among drug-producing nations joined ASEAN (Emmers 2014), this organization's attempts to combat narcotics became more formalized after the Cold War. The most significant of these producer nations were Laos and Myanmar, followed by consumers, particularly Thailand and the Philippines. Consequently, these nations try to keep their interests centred which makes it challenging to reach an agreement on this issue (Sazmand 2010).

With the presence of the military forces in Afghanistan, drug production in the Middle East has multiplied, which is extremely concerning for Iran as a neighboring country. Southeast Asia and Indonesia are the destination of the international drug cartels. In this regard, the Indonesian police and Iranian police must work together in several areas, such as the sharing of information, experiences, training, and joint operations to combat various beyond-borders crimes such as terrorism and narcotics.

Cooperation in combating terrorism is another crucial issue in the sphere of security, especially in light of the rise of Islamic extremism and terrorism during the last decades.

### **Economic variable**

Some theorists of regional studies (functionalists and neo-functionalists) contend that the formation of cooperative behavior in one area can result in the establishment of related behavior in other regions (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1997: 60). There is a type of expansion logic based on the idea that when cooperation and convergence are successful in one area, it can then be extended to other areas (Hass 1961).

The ASEAN region has a great deal of potential to develop into an economic power pole thanks to its rapid economic growth, large and expanding markets, and abundant natural resources. The development of regional cooperation and convergence, or the development of an intra-regional economic system, is what will determine whether this approach is successful.

An opportunity for the establishment of an intra-regional economic system exists through bilateral economic interactions between Iran and Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, it is imperative to delve into Iran's economic relations with Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. These countries not only share religious and cultural ties with Iran but also offer favorable conditions for fostering mutual interactions. The nations in this region have a particular need for energy. A joint investment project can be very well received. In the post-sanctions era, participation by certain oil corporations from this region in an Iranian oil project may signal future cooperation in other fields. Many countries in this region are interested in concluding a free trade agreement, so in recent years, in addition to concluding this type of agreement among themselves in an institutional form and by ASEAN, and even separately from many countries that are not even in geographical proximity in this area, they have moved in this direction.

Since 2012, ASEAN member states along with Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand had been negotiating the creation of a free trade area. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) became the world's largest economic pact in East Asia and was signed after eight years of negotiations on November 15, 2020, by the leaders of 15 nations in the Asia-Pacific region.

These nations are the home of almost 2.3 billion people, or 30% of the world's population. Additionally, the area covered by this agreement becomes the largest free trade zone in the world because the combined gross domestic product of the members is more than \$25,000

billion (one-third of the global GDP). In the upcoming years, many regions will experience a progressive reduction in tariffs thanks to this agreement.

The RCEP agreement will tip the balance of economic power in the world from the West to the East. Therefore, participation in such agreements can be an opportunity for Iran to interact more closely with the key players in the Asia-pacific region and thereby to improve its economic, commercial, and strategic position in the region. This is especially true given Iran's role in TAC, Iran's recent participation in the Shanghai Agreement, and Iran's view towards the East.

On the other hand, given Iran's economic potential and the likelihood of its growth in the absence of sanctions, ASEAN nations will undoubtedly be inclined to trade with Iran. This is a matter that is crucial for Iran in terms of luring new investments and trade multilateralism that is useful to avoid the monopoly of some nations.

### **Socio-cultural variable**

From the socio-cultural perspective, Iran and Southeast Asia share a number of common cultural characteristics. It is possible to promote cultural cooperation and the development of cultural ties between Iran and ASEAN given the religious resemblances between Southeast Asia and Iran, and as a result, the similarity of the cultures at a higher level that govern them.

The role of Muslims in the area is one of the significant cultural capacities of the region that may be of interest to Iran. One billion Muslims, 62 percent of the world's population, reside in South and Southeast Asia. 12.7% of the world's Muslims live in Indonesia, constituting 88% of the nation's population, making it the largest Muslim nation in the world. Following Southwest Asia and North Africa (92%) and Black Africa (29.6%), the Muslim population of South and Southeast Asia represents 24.8% of the overall population of this region.

600 million Muslims dwell in Southeast Asia, the majority in nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei and the minority in nations like Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. Due to their religious, cultural, and linguistic affinity, Malaysia and Indonesia have considerable cultural contacts with Iran. In this capacity, Iran can provide conditions for strengthening

relations with the countries of the region through cultural exchanges, common customs and traditions, scientific and technological exchanges, and the use of public diplomacy.

Cultural relations are two-way processes that involve the common or aligned links between people. This crucial realization will be made possible when the elites and educated people pave the way for cultural exchange and understanding of other sectors by finding a common language and cultural understanding. Based on the comparison of the significant variables in regional formation within ASEAN's framework, there are areas of security and economic cooperation between ASEAN members and Iran due to shared cultural and social components and security requirements. This needs the recognition of shared strengths and enhancement of bilateral interactions.

### **Limitations and challenges to closer ties**

Iran's nuclear program, as the first challenge in recent years, has led to the most significant tensions between Iran and the West. This challenge made other nations unable or unwilling to have extensive relations with Iran due to the dialectic of power in the international system. The second challenge is Iranophobia and Shia-phobia due to the tensions in the Middle East and Western media propaganda in Southeast Asia during the last decade which has limited cooperation with other regional nations. Iran's relations with Southeast Asia have been significantly affected by the efforts of regional and international actors over the last decades. The Americans and a few other nations in the Persian Gulf region have played a significant role in the field of security, and their propaganda has been highly successful. Along with extensive economic ties to the US and other European nations, many nations in this region have close military and security ties with the US.

A significant factor like the relations between the Southeast Asian nations is also the relations between Muslim nations and the Middle East. Southeast Asia, particularly the Muslim nations in this region, have been encouraged to deepen their collaboration with Iran as a result of the renegotiation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the friendly atmosphere produced in the process of resolving numerous concerns between these two big Muslim nations. Given Iran's relations with the US and some regional rivalries in the Middle East, these nations should keep

these factors in mind in their interactions with Iran, given that they have shared their security zone with both the Americans and some Muslim nations of the Persian Gulf.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, four models for Iran's relations were put forth, using the country-region-oriented model to analyze Iran's relations with ASEAN. Accordingly, in discussing Iran's foreign policy with regard to Southeast Asia, the following points should be taken into account:

1. Iran's foreign policy should prioritize Southeast Asia and the Malay world as a crucial and delicate region, devoting the appropriate value to it. This area has tremendously promising economic potential, is quite significant in terms of security, and is also heavily influenced by Iranian culture and civilization.

Southeast Asian nations have come to the conclusion that if they are going to have a significant impact on the future international system and, if they would like to deal with security concerns and challenges that certain powerful nations like China and the US may involve them with, there will be no other option but to develop mutual reliance and multilateral contacts with these powers to keep the world in balance. Even though the efforts of Southeast Asian nations were severely unsuccessful during the financial crisis of 1997–1998, they persisted and eventually found their vigor.

It appears that in order for Iran to pursue its mission of adjusting the international order, it needs to enhance its international cooperation and utilize the existing capacities within this order to achieve its goals. Although this approach may take time, it will be less costly for Iran, similar to the strong commitment of the Chinese in following this approach.

In this context, it appears that the ground will be laid for the growth of relations between Iran and the nations of this region if tensions between Iran and the West reduce and some of the mutual main challenges progress towards resolution. However, Iran's ability to demonstrate more economic prowess and make bilateral trade in goods and services appealing to the nations of this region is necessary for their development; a challenge that, given Iran's resources and capabilities, is not particularly daunting or unattainable. It would appear, therefore, that peaceful

economic and cultural ties should come first. However, developing appropriate intellectual platforms will be the first pressing necessity if Iran is to profit from such regional capabilities.

2. Although the US is a significant determinant in the relations between Iran and Southeast Asia, the region's strategic realities necessarily compel cooperation among its nations. One of these realities is Southeast Asia's need for energy and Iran's capacity to meet this need. The nations in the Southeast Asia region are one side of a triangle with China and the US as the other two sides, given the region's political and geopolitical circumstances. Recent political and economic developments in the regional politics of Southeast Asia have accepted China as the main side of this triangle. Also, the signing of significant agreements like CPTPP<sup>4</sup> and RCEP<sup>5</sup>, as well as China's efforts as a mediator to renew the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Middle East and this region accept China as the main actor in the region. However, as a result of US pressure and Western betrayals, Iran has chosen to pursue an Eastward policy in the triangle of Iran-the US-the West and China, attempting to reach a 25-year agreement with China, taking into account all of China's interests and its cooperative partnerships with significant powers and its limits. Accordingly, Iran needs to reinforce its regional policies by energizing its strategy of looking to the East with more active involvement in regional treaties in the arena of competition between the US and China in Southeast Asia.

3. One of the key elements in improving Iran's relations with Southeast Asia is its strategy of lowering regional tensions, enhancing relations with Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia, and concentrating on shared Muslims issues like Palestine. This means that improving relations in the areas of politics and security, with a focus on the Muslim world, can serve as a foundation for interactions with Iran's and this region's potential for both sides.

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<sup>4</sup> The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

<sup>5</sup> Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

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