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India's Tourist Visa on Arrival: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back?

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Abstract

Since 1991, following the currency crisis and subsequent liberalisation, India has involved itself with what has been deemed the 'Look East' policy. In doing so, India's involvement in 'looking East', towards Southeast Asia, has sought to forge a greater and deeper economic and political relationship. As economic ties have deepened, the Indian government has made further moves to increase tourist inflows from the region by introducing the tourist visa on arrival (TVOA) scheme in 2010. Although on a limited (but incremental) basis the extension of the TVOA to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is quite significant in the perspective of India's mounting engagement with the region, both economically and politically. However, some roadblocks remain, which may well dilute the objective of the scheme.

Since its currency crisis and subsequent liberalisation in 1991, India has been engaged in what has been termed the 'Look East' policy. The policy, initiated in 1992, was articulated by the then Indian Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao.² Accordingly, India has been 'looking East', towards Southeast Asia, to forge greater and deeper economic and political relationships. Since it started its engagement of ASEAN, India has gone from being a sectoral dialogue partner in

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² See Chak Mun, *India's Strategic Interests in Southeast Asia and Singapore* (New Delhi: Institute of South Asian Studies & Macmillan, 2009), pp.2-3.

1992 to a full dialogue partner in 1995 and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) from 1996. India and ASEAN have also been holding annual summit-level meetings since 2002. Additionally, the two signed an ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in August 2009.

As economic ties have deepened, the Indian government made further moves to increase tourist inflows from the region by introducing the TVOA scheme in 2010. The scheme was initially extended to Singapore, along with Japan, Finland, Luxembourg and New Zealand starting on 1 January 2010. According to the Indian tourism ministry, by December 2010, over 6,500 tourists from these five countries had travelled into India using the TVOA. Singapore alone accounted for over 1,800 of the TVOAs issues.³ Given this relative success of the TVOA, beginning on 1 January 2011, the Indian government has now extended the scheme to four other ASEAN countries, namely Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Vietnam and the Philippines.

The extension of the TVOA to ASEAN countries, albeit on a limited (but incremental) basis, is significant in light of India's growing engagement with the region, both economically and politically. Singapore has long been at the centre of India's 'Look East' policy. Indeed, India identified the island-nation as a key partner back in the 1990s, as it recalibrated its foreign (economic) policy towards Southeast Asia, given Singapore's 'tremendous strategic location'.⁴

India's ties with other Southeast Asian states have also been steadily deepening. In 2008, Choummaly Sayasone, President of the Lao PDR, visited India. This was the first time after 33 years that such a high level visit had taken place. Subsequent to his visit, the Indian President, Pratibha Devisingh Patil, also visited Laos in September 2010. The two states have also signed a number of bilateral agreements to boost both economic and military ties.⁵ Indeed, India is now one of three countries training Laos defence personnel in English, computing and basic tactics.⁶ India's economic and political relations with Cambodia have also improved in recent years with India providing bilateral financial assistance to Cambodia to help develop infrastructure –

³ Singapore ranked second behind New Zealand at 1444 TVOAs issued.

⁴ Amitendu Palit, 'India's Economic Engagement with Southeast Asia: Progress and Challenges', ISAS Working Paper No.60, *Institute of South Asian Studies* (2009), p.1; Kripa Sridharan, 'The Evolution and Growth of India-Singapore Relations' in Yong Mun Cheong and V.V. Bhanoji Rao, *Singapore-India Relations: A Primer* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1995), p.33.

⁵ These include a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection agreement in November 2000, an agreement on Cooperation in Defence in November 2002, an agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology in June 2003, and an agreement on Cultural Exchange Programme for the years 2011-2013 in September 2010. See 'India-Laos Relations', *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India* (February 2011), <http://meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/foreignrelation/laopdr.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

⁶ *Ibid.* The other two countries are Vietnam and China.

including electric transmission lines and irrigation networks.⁷ Additionally, since 2003, India has been aiding in the restoration of the Ta Prohm Temple in Siam Reap.⁸ Similarly, India's trading relations with the Philippines and Vietnam have also improved. India's trade with the Philippines has more than trebled, going from US\$338.50 million in 2001-02 to US\$1061.84 million in 2009-10.⁹ In that same period, India's trade with Vietnam grew over ten times to hit US\$2.75 billion in 2010.¹⁰

Given the increased political and economic interactions between India and the ASEAN countries, the TVOA is both a logical and welcome next step in the development of India's ties with Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, despite the apparent convenience of having the TVOA scheme, some bottlenecks remain that may eventually scupper the potential for increased people-to-people interactions. The TVOA provides for a single entry trip into India for a maximum of 30 days and is issued at the major Indian airports in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.¹¹ However, to prevent misuse of tourist visas by people staying long term in India and going on visa-runs to neighbouring countries, the Government has also introduced some measures that water down the benefits of the TVOA scheme.

First, there has to be a gap of at least two months between two visits to India (this applies to all tourist visas, including multiple entry visas) and second, a maximum of two TVOAs are to be issued within a year to any individual.¹² Also, for tourists planning on using India as a base to visit neighbouring countries as well, the Indian government has allowed for up to three entries into India within a year – provided that the said tourist can provide adequate documentation in the form of plane or train tickets, hotel bookings and 'detailed itinerary' at the nearest Indian mission or at the immigration check posts.¹³ Thus, it becomes very important for all potential visitors to India to ensure they have detailed travel plans even before they enter the country to avoid any problems.

Under some circumstances the Government has also allowed for the relaxation of the two-month gap rule. Unfortunately, the requirement for that is not only stringent, but the procedure may also

⁷ 'India-Cambodia Relations', *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India* (February 2011), <http://meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/foreignrelation/cambodia.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ 'India-Philippines Bilateral Relations', *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India* (December 2010), <http://meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/foreignrelation/philippines.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

¹⁰ 'India-Vietnam Relations', *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India* (February 2011), <http://meaindia.nic.in/meaxpsite/foreignrelation/vietnam.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

¹¹ 'Tourist Visa On Arrival (T-VoA) Scheme', *Ministry of Tourism, Government of India* (not dated), <http://tourism.gov.in/events/visa.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ 'Frequently Asked Questions Relating To Tourist Visa', *Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India* (not dated), <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/FAQ-TVVisa280710.pdf>. Accessed on 1 March 2011.

prove too involved for it to be useful. According to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, a tourist may re-enter India within two months of a previous visit ‘only in emergent situations like death/serious illness in the family, non-availability of flights to return to his/her country of origin or travel to another country or any other exigent situation which can be duly justified with proper documentation to the satisfaction of the Mission/Post granting the permission.’¹⁴ Additionally, those tourists that are granted permission to enter India within two months must “register himself with the FRRO/FRO (Foreigner Regional Registration Offices) within 14 days of arrival...preferably at the first place of entry’.¹⁵

While the need for safeguards is understandable given India’s concern with visa-abuse, these particular convolutions largely undermine the convenience of the TVOA, as most travellers may prefer to obtain their visas in their countries of origin to avoid any complications. The processes associated with circumventing the two-month gap requirement are also far from hassle free. Finally, the limit on the number of TVOAs to be issued to an individual is also likely to discourage potential visitors from travelling into India frequently.

Thus, while the provision of TVOAs may be a giant step forward for India, the fine print attached may well prove to be two (medium) steps back. Clearly, there is a need to retool the tourist visa policies to ensure greater understanding and ease for legitimate travellers, while devising ways to discourage visa-abuse. After all, the point of the TVOA is to encourage people to visit India, not to confound them into giving up on it.

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¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*