India and ASEAN Data Sharing Ecosystem: A Necessity

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The technological advancement of today's world has made data sharing one of the most important facets of any country's security— both national and regional. Data sharing can be defined as a means whereby any country's intelligence master database is shared with its neighbouring countries and organisations for enhanced security purposes. Such an ecosystem will pave way for digital financial inclusiveness as well as provide a platform for open data network, which would enhance the national and defence relations between the associated countries. Finally, such an ecosystem will result in the formation of a digital data governance framework in the long-term. This increased need to create a data sharing ecosystem has given rise to demands for artificial intelligence and augmented realities. However, at the same time, the possible challenges of accessibility, reliability and convergence of high-quality data, cannot be ruled out. India has been

Key Points

- Data Sharing Ecosystem cooperation must be created between India and ASEAN countries, which is vital for regional data security and military partnership.
- India can help the ASEAN countries by supporting them in the creation of a MSME Technology Platform, ASEAN Digital Financial Inclusion Framework, ASEAN Open Data Network and ASEAN Digital Data Governance Framework as part of the data sharing ecosystem.
- Greater Defence Partnership could be promoted by creating a Defence Manufacturing cum Industrial Corridor, working on different kinds of emerging technologies including the handling of disruptive technologies through the use of data and create a 'Defence owned' data sharing ecosystem which would bring about the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Armed Forces, accompanied with Internet of Defence Things and the Internet of Warfare Things.

working towards a national 'Artificial Intelligence' strategy termed as 'AIForAll'— focusing on the leveraging of AI for inclusive growth. The Southeast Asian nations are of vital importance for India, in this regard, as they are the strategic centres of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, it is imperative for India to work towards creating a data sharing ecosystem with the ASEAN countries. This requires to create an ecosystem of AI development, aiming for a 'creation of data trusts' in order to work towards a digital connectivity infrastructure like the 5G or full fibre networks, common supercomputing facilities, fiscal incentives for the promotion of digital economies, information sharing of strategic and defence relations. This article aims to highlight the significance of creating a data sharing ecosystem cooperation between India and the ASEAN countries, as well as to draw up the possibilities in the realm of regional data security and defence partnership.

Data Sharing Ecosystem Cooperation

According to the Master Action Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025(MPAC 2025), ASEAN countries will strive to achieve the potential of US$625 billion Digital Technologies by 2030, through increased efficiency, new products and services. If this is taken seriously, then there is a need to establish a regulatory framework which will work towards new digital services like data management and digital financial services and also aim for the formation of an open data forum, that will function on the basis of sharing of best practices along with equipping the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) with new technologies.[1]

The Southeast Asian Nations are considered to be the 'geostrategic heart' of the world, by virtue of their geostrategic location —at the confluence of trading centres accompanied with excellent water based communication systems. If this region is adequately digitalised, then it will have the potential to create a whole new dimension of digital cooperation and technologies in the realm of Data Protection, Data Management, Data Security and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will pave the way for a Data Sharing Ecosystem in Southeast Asia.

India: What It Needs To Do?

For India, a Digital cum Data Cooperation is an important step especially for the 'Digital **India'** flagship programme — which aims to transform India into a digitally empowered country and knowledge - economy. If India takes up this initiative to launch and spearhead the **'Digital ASEAN'** programme, then this will be a step closer towards the formation of a data sharing ecosystem regionally, which will ultimately lead to the creation of **a Regional Data Sharing Ecosystem** between India and ASEAN countries.
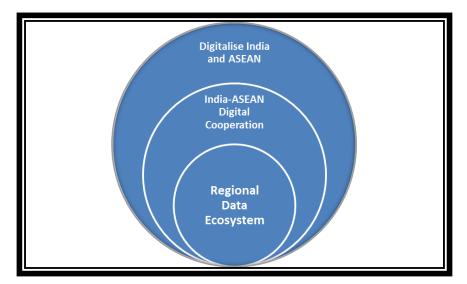
Figure 1: The Ripple Effect- Synthesis of Regional Data Sharing Ecosystem

Source: Annotated by Author

In September 2020, the Master Action Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025) was launched which highlighted five strategic areas, and digital innovation was one of them.[2] MPAC 2025 aims to work towards digital innovation through the following parameters:

- Support the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to adopt technology so as to enhance the **MSME Technology Platform**.

- Use digital technologies in financial matters and thereafter develop an **ASEAN Digital Financial Inclusion Framework**.

- Improve the open data use among ASEAN countries to establish an ASEAN Open Data Network. To cooperate with the ASEAN countries and establish an **ASEAN Open Data Network**.

- Enhance data management among ASEAN countries and therefore, establish an **ASEAN Digital Data Governance Framework**.
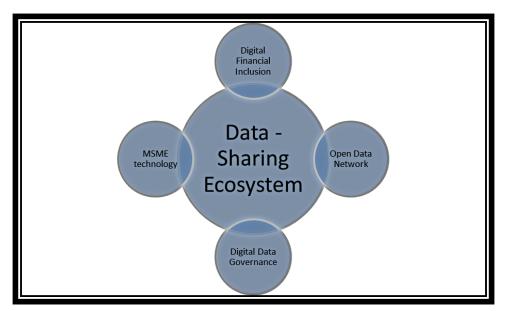
Figure 2: Data Sharing Ecosystem and its subsystems

Source: Annotated by Author

There is a need for India to take cue from MPAC 2025 and work around the four parameters mentioned above. India's support to the ASEAN countries is of immense significance both for achieving the digital innovation and finally the overall goal of working towards a Data Sharing Ecosystem Cooperation. Also, if India and the ASEAN countries support each other in MSME technology platform, then it could give rise to the possibility of a greater exchange of technologically advanced skills ,that would pave the way for an 'uniquely designed' India-ASEAN MSME Technology Platform.

India is already adept to the use of digital technologies for financial growth and if, India shares its expertise and the knowledge of how to set up the ASEAN Digital Financial Inclusion Framework, then India and ASEAN together can work towards a Joint Collaboration on Digital Financial Inclusion which would be extremely beneficial for India-ASEAN trade and commerce relations and would also increase the inflow of international money into their respective economies , which in turn would increase the GDP of both the nations. Also, this may pave a way for an India-ASEAN Bank based on Digital Financial Inclusion.

India can also help in improving the open data use among the ASEAN countries and establish an ASEAN Open Data Network, as India already has a well-oiled machinery in the form of the Open Government Data (OGD) Platform[3] which was set up by the National Informatics Centre (NIC) all in compliance with the Open Data Policy (NDSAP) of India. One of the most salient feature of this OGD Platform is to provide a proactive access to the 'Government owned shareable data' along with using the information in the open or

machine-readable format across the country. This has been developed using the Open Source Stack which falls under the heading of 'Information for All' of the Digital India Initiative. Since, India already has this OGD Forum, therefore, it should take the initiative and help the ASEAN countries to set up a similar Open Data Network and also the ASEAN Digital Data Governance Framework.

Possible Outcomes of the India-ASEAN Data Sharing Ecosystem

It is important to understand that this Data Sharing Ecosystem between India and ASEAN would give rise to opportunities that would further strengthen the ties between India and ASEAN countries. The following are the suggestive outcomes.

- It would benefit India and ASEAN countries in matters of connectivity and greater productivity; digital economies which would deal with the competitive markets, improvement and inventions in health and well-being along with opening of multiple telemedicine methods, convenience and transparency in public services. All this data will open the market for data-enabled products, which would generate convenience and further enhance the serving units with AI, that would in turn pave the way for the formation of a **single market between India and ASEAN.**

- With the Data sharing ecosystem in place, the production systems will also expand, since the formation of a single market between India and ASEAN   would establish   manufacturing links that would further **develop business and production linkages** with Bharuch, Ludhiana, Pimpri, Kochi, Chennai, Jamshedpur and Vishakhapatnam, and this would help the service sector to thrive by means of introducing multiple services economy.

- This manufacturing and production linkage can further be extended to Defence Manufacturing and Procurement that would provide a boost to India's flagship 'Make in India' project. Also, the sub theme of DefExpo 2020 was focused on the **Digital Transformation of Defence**─ which is in alliance with the future battlefields. It is also essential to understand that, the use of MSMEs, along with an innovative ecosystem, would be the way ahead and all this can be achieved with digital transformation of defence technologies which would be inclusive of the disruptive technologies. India should also facilitate the setting up of a **Defence Manufacturing cum Industrial Corridor,** similar to its Defence Industrial Corridor (in Uttar Pradesh), in the ASEAN countries. This corridor would provide an opportunity for the the ASEAN countries to become centres of defence manufacturing.

- The military personnels, on the other hand, are to be trained in handling the different kinds of emerging technologies, including the handling of disruptive technologies through the use of data and thereafter, create a '**Defence owned' data sharing ecosystem**— this would pave the way for the **Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Armed forces**. This would also lead the way for the **Internet of Defence Things** and the **Internet of Warfare Things** within the broader framework of Defence. India could support the ASEAN countries by providing cutting edge technologies —these would result in   **greater defence partnership**.

- An **India-ASEAN Data Maritime connectivity** can be created; the data so collected can further be used, to provide **logistical support** to the navies of India-ASEAN for security of the seas in general and to monitor China's movements in particular. In the long-term, this would lead India and ASEAN to maintain a certain amount of exclusivity in the southern parts of the Indian Ocean and use the data sharing ecosystem to boost the **blue economy**.

- Effective functioning of the data sharing ecosystem would require a fully-functional and efficient offline control system that would require manual workforce. Therefore, such an ecosystem would generate **employment opportunities,** as many engineers would be required for technical matters.

Challenges Posed

Some of the challenges that may arise in the long- term are:

- One of the major challenges would be the **geo-economic issue** with respect to generation of the initial costs. India must invite like-minded countries like Japan to be investors in the data sharing ecosystem. This way there will be no Chinese involvement and its dominance will, to some extent, be contained. This idea of a data sharing ecosystem must be initiated as early as possible.

- **Geopolitical issue** would be the next challenge, as some of the ASEAN countries' leaders are politically inclined towards China. Therefore, due to this heavy political dependence on China, China may get an upper hand in all the political decisions made by such ASEAN leaders which actually might be detrimental to the efforts made by India. Also, China could use its influence and stop this project for its own benefit.

- Southeast Asian nations are far from India and the only shortest route from India passes through India's Northeast, where the full potential of **'digitalisation'** is yet to be explored. Therefore, this geostrategic restriction is to be dealt with in a productive manner. Alternatively, China's towering presence in India's

neighbourhood needs to be dealt with and the digital systems are to be protected from possible cyber attacks from India's adversaries— both north and west.

- **Regulating the uniform infrastructure** would be a major task along with applying for physical place like setting up of training centres, offices and maintenance of these Data Centres.

- **Enhancement of the workforce with skilled engineers, technicians and staff, would** need large scale educational reforms along with technological advancement.

- **Environment friendly** steps must be taken so as to ensure that the digitalisation process does not damage any environmental space. There is also a need to establish 'least wastage centres' that would be in sync with the anti-dumping procedure of electronic goods.

- For the successful functioning of the data sharing ecosystem, several Ministries from India and the Nodal Heads of the ASEAN countries needs to sign a formal MoU. **The procedure of issuing required licenses to the** companies, who are willing to set up the interconnected centres for the formation of the data sharing ecosystem, must be fastracked, and the licenses are to be handed over seamlessly to the companies, as otherwise, even one single slowdown would cause unnecessary delay in the functioning of the data sharing mechanism.

Conclusion

The creation of this data sharing ecosystem would bring in a new ray of hope in emerging Asia and with its successful implementation, would be an effective step towards maintaining the security of India and its regional neighbourhood.

End Notes

[1] Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, *The ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta*. Available at https://asean.org/storage/2016/09/Master-Plan-on-ASEAN-Connectivity-20251.pdf Accessed on 01 December 2020.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India-An Overview. Available at https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/OGD_Overview%20v_2.pdf. Accessed on 01 December 2020.

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