

# INDIA AND ASEAN @25

by Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group



### Introduction

2017 marked 25 years of the India-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership. To commemorate the anniversary, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted 10 ASEAN Heads of State/ Government for an India-ASEAN Summit on January 25, 2018. In an unprecedented gesture, the ASEAN Leaders were also invited as Chief Guests on the occasion of India's Republic Day on January 26, 2018.

This article traces the development of India-ASEAN dialogue relations and evaluates major achievements over the past 25 years.



ASEAN Leaders at Rashtrapati Bhavan during the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit 2018. Source: Ministry of External Affairs.

### The outcomes of the India-ASEAN Summit

Addressing ASEAN leaders during the opening plenary of the Commemorative Summit held on January 25, 2018, Prime Minister Modi referred to the shared vision of peace and prosperity, a rules based order for the oceans and seas, respect for international law and UNCLOS as well as a shared commitment to maritime cooperation.

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**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh**  
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In his address Prime Minister Modi underlined India's commitment to (1) ASEAN-India cooperation on ICT, digital and rural connectivity in CLMV countries, (2) training programs in telecom, networking, regulation and technology development; (3) a dialogue on financial inclusion, investment promotion and infrastructure; (4) declaring 2019 as the ASEAN-India year of Tourism; and (5) providing 1000 Youth Fellowships to ASEAN students.



PM Modi addresses the opening session of the India-ASEAN Summit 2018 held in New Delhi. Source: ANI Photo

The *Delhi Declaration* emanating from the Summit underlined the importance that India and the ASEAN countries attached to strengthening strategic ties across “the whole spectrum of political security, economic, socio-cultural and development cooperation.” The leaders committed themselves to enhancing high-level engagement and cooperation within the existing framework of the India-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership and ASEAN led mechanisms.

They reaffirmed their commitment to work closely on common regional and international security issues including a transparent and rules based regional architecture through existing ASEAN led Frameworks. They reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace, stability maritime safety and security, the freedom of navigation and over-flights, unimpeded lawful maritime commerce and the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the principles of the UNCLOS. They agreed to strengthen maritime cooperation through the ‘Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum’ and to work together to prevent and manage incidents at sea. *The Delhi Declaration* also called for cooperation in combatting terrorism, de-radicalization, money laundering.

A number of cooperation areas were stressed, including MSMEs, food and energy security, science and technology, space, economic relations, private sector engagement, cultural exchanges, healthcare, education, empowerment of women, protection of rights of children, youth exchanges, tourism, physical and digital connectivity, cyber security capacity

building environmental management, climate change, biodiversity protection and conservation of marine resources.

The *Delhi Declaration* called for strengthening dialogue across ASEAN centric and ASEAN led dialogue platforms. It further envisages the establishment of closer maritime and aviation links and cooperation between India and the ASEAN.



A tableaux depicting the ASEAN at the Republic Day Parade 2018. Source: Economic Times

### From ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’

On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of India-ASEAN dialogue relations, it may be pertinent to begin by tracing the evolution of India's policy towards the region.

India looked to deepen relations with Southeast Asian countries in the immediate aftermath of adopting economic reforms in 1991. As India opened its economy to foreign investment and focused on export led growth, it was but natural that it would look towards a region that had experienced an “economic miracle” and high growth rates after pursuing similar policies.

The ‘Look East’ Policy initiated in 1992 manifested itself in developing closer relations with ASEAN countries bilaterally, and within ASEAN led institutions. After Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014, he pursued India's relations with ASEAN countries with renewed vigor and renamed the initiative as the ‘Act East’ Policy. India's ‘Act East’ Policy is more intense than its predecessor and expansive in geographical scope, bringing within its ambit not only the ASEAN but also other regional powers including Japan, Australia and

South Korea. It has focused on enhancing connectivity, commerce, culture and security linkages with partners in the region, both bilaterally and through regional groupings like the ASEAN, EAS, IORA, BIMSTEC and the MGC.

### The Progress of the India-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership

The India-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership has progressed steadily over the years. It has manifested itself in visibly closer political, security and economic cooperation. Significant achievements of the Partnership include closer security cooperation particularly through cooperation and dialogue in ASEAN centric security architecture, maritime security, counter-terrorism, HADR, trade liberalization through the ASEAN India FTA in goods which came into force in 2009 and through steadily growing people to people links and connectivity.



*Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with ASEAN leaders during the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi on December 20, 2012. Photo: AFP.*

An India-ASEAN Special Commemorative Summit was held in December 2012 in New Delhi to mark 20 years of the Dialogue Partnership. During that Summit the leaders adopted the 'Vision Statement' prepared by the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group and elevated the relations between India and ASEAN to a Strategic Partnership. Amidst growing tensions between China and ASEAN countries over territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea the leaders stressed the need for cooperation in the area of maritime security through greater security cooperation, information sharing and high level security dialogue.

### India and ASEAN@ 25: Political and Security Cooperation

How should we evaluate the development of India's political and security relations with the ASEAN? India's relations with ASEAN have grown exponentially since India became a sectoral partner of the ASEAN in 1992. India became a full dialogue partner in 1995. The first India-ASEAN Summit was held in 2002

and Summits have been held annually ever since. At the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in December 2012, held in New Delhi, it was decided to elevate the relationship to a 'Strategic Partnership'.

As a Full Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN, India participates in a number of dialogue mechanisms including the annual summits, ARF, PMC+1, East Asia Summit, ADMM+, SOMs and meetings of experts. As a precondition of participating in the East Asia Summit as a founding member in 2005, India signed the Treaty on Amity and Cooperation<sup>1</sup> in 2003 at the second India-ASEAN Summit. During that Summit, India and ASEAN countries also concluded a "Joint Declaration on Combating International Terrorism."

At the third India-ASEAN Summit in 2004, India and the ASEAN countries signed the 'Partnership for Peace Progress and Shared Prosperity', which laid down the agreed roadmap for the India-ASEAN Partnership. This was later elaborated in 'Plans of Action'.

When the ASEAN Charter came into force in 2008, India accredited an Ambassador to the ASEAN (2009). India announced the accreditation of a resident Ambassador to ASEAN at the 10<sup>th</sup> India-ASEAN Summit in Brunei in 2013.

Pursuant to a decision taken at the India-ASEAN PMC in Hanoi in July 2010, the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group was established to review the progress of dialogue relations over the previous twenty years and to suggest ways to strengthen these relations. The AIEPG report was submitted to the 10<sup>th</sup> India-ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in 2012.

### India's Defense Cooperation with ASEAN countries

India has regularly participated in discussions on non-traditional and hard security issues in the ARF, EAS and the ADMM+. The India Navy has also participated in the ARF DIREx series of maritime exercises focused on disaster management.

India has also strengthened bilateral defense and security cooperation with Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia at a time when these countries are seeing rising tensions and territorial disputes with China. India's bilateral defense cooperation with individual ASEAN countries has been institutionalized through the signing of bilateral defense Cooperation Agreements or



MOUs. Three forms of cooperation have gained momentum – cooperation between Navies, the maintenance and supply of equipment and assistance for training.

An outstanding example of India's efforts to build closer ties with regional navies are the MILAN exercises that have been held biennially since 1995 at Port Blair in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.



*A scene of the drill of search, rescue and firefighting between Vietnamese and Indian Coast Guard forces off the Southern Vietnamese city of Vung Tau on August 30, 2015. Source: Ministry of Defence*

The Indian Navy has been conducting Joint Coordinated Patrols with the Navies of Indonesia and Thailand since 2003 and 2005 respectively. Similarly, the Coast Guards of India and Vietnam have been conducting annual exercises since 1999.

India has consistently attached great importance to HADR cooperation and was the first responder in the aftermath of the Tsunami that struck Indonesia in 2004.

Training and capacity building assistance has been extended to all ASEAN countries. India currently offers 400 training slots every year to ASEAN defense personnel in Indian defense training institutions, many of them on a gratis basis, under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme.

India has extended a line of credit of \$ 500 million to Vietnam for the import of defense equipment from India. In the past, defense assistance to Vietnam has included the refurbishment of military aircraft and transfer of naval spares. India's capacity building programs have included submarine training for Vietnam and pilot training for Vietnam and Malaysia. The Indian army has cleared 18000 mines in mine clearing operations in Cambodia in the 1990s and set up a training center for demining operations there.

India has an agreement with Singapore for the use of artillery and armor ranges and airbases in India for training purposes. On November 29, 2017, India and Singapore signed the 'India-Singapore Bilateral Agreement for Naval Cooperation' during the Second Defense Ministers Dialogue held in New Delhi. The Agreement will enable increased cooperation in maritime security, joint exercises, temporary deployment from each other's naval facilities and mutual logistics support. The agreement will increase the operational radius of the Indian Navy from the maritime domain near Singapore and the same option will be available to the Singapore Navy in the Bay of Bengal.



Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her Singaporean counterpart Ng Eng Hen

<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/india-singapore-naval-agreement-significance-beyond-the-bilateral/>

India places major emphasis on maritime domain awareness and would like to enter into *White Shipping Agreements* with ASEAN countries. This will develop a common operating picture to assist Southeast Asian states and India to deal with both traditional and non-traditional security threats and NTS issues in the Bay of Bengal, the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea. It would also reduce the vast asymmetry that exists between the capabilities of individual ASEAN countries and major powers in the region.

The modes of capacity building assistance found most effective by India have included MOD training courses and programs at military training establishments, provision of loaned service personnel, short term training teams, civilian and military advisers seconded to foreign governments for extended periods, joint coordinated patrols and joint exercises. Capacity

building has been accompanied by effective communication at different levels including inward and outward visits of Defense Ministers, military and civilian leaders and visits by ships, aircraft and other military units, staff talks, conferences and seminars to improve mutual understanding and to create interoperability and habits of cooperation and working together.

### How ASEAN became the hub of FTAs in Asia

With the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, ASEAN became the hub of free trade agreement networks in East Asia, thus taking the “drivers seat” in the economic integration of the region. The main goals of the AFTA were reflective of the ASEAN’s character as a FDI dependent and export-oriented region. The AFTA aimed to increase ASEAN’s competitive edge as a production base for the world market through the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers and to attract more FDI into the region. The ASEAN region soon became the heart of ‘Factory Asia’, wherein corporations set up their production networks in their search for new markets and desire to cut operating costs. This in turn helped ASEAN become the focal point of regional FTAs with regional powers.

### India and ASEAN@25: The India-ASEAN Economic Partnership

Both India and the ASEAN have converging strategic visions and India’s economic engagement with the ASEAN underpins its strategic partnership with the ASEAN. India’s journey from a planned economy to a liberalized one was undertaken in parallel with its developing a strategic partnership with the ASEAN. India signed Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements with Singapore (2005), ASEAN (2009), and Malaysia (2011). India has also signed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Korea (2009) and Japan (2011).

The FTAs were a useful strategic instrument for deepening the economic engagement with the ASEAN and for forcing economic liberalization at home. However, because India had higher tariffs on goods to begin with India conceded more ground on goods even while failing to secure reciprocal concessions from ASEAN countries for the services sector. To compound matters further, even though the India-ASEAN FTA in services was signed in 2012, it still has not come into force pending ratification by all ASEAN countries.

A number of issues need to be addressed in the context of trade between India and ASEAN countries. These include non-tariff barriers, inefficient customs procedures, dumping and business visas. India also needs greater market access for services.

A closer examination of FTAs and their outcomes reveals a mixed picture. Though trade with the ASEAN has grown from \$ 5 billions in 1992 to US \$ 70 billion in 2016-17, India’s rising trade deficit remains a matter of concern – US \$ 11 billion in 2016-17. It is worth noting however, that while India’s trade with the ASEAN is of the same order as its trade with China its deficit with the ASEAN is relatively small when compared to the trade deficit with China.



*Ready to sail Cars parked at the Chennai port waiting to be loaded onto a vessel. Source: Hindu Business Line*

The pace of India’s integration into global value chains has also been slow. Even so India’s export of processed goods and components to the ASEAN has varied between 20% to 30% of India’s exports to ASEAN. The automobile component industry is one area where India is entering global and regional value chains in a significant way.

There is a low utilization of the India-ASEAN FTA. This is indeed is a significant failure of outcomes in our search for closer economic integration with the ASEAN.

A number of initiatives have been planned or are under discussion. The *RCEP* is under negotiation. When and if the RCEP negotiations come to fruition, they will create a seamless FTA in the East Asian region. Within the RCEP, India seeks greater access for its services and has major concerns about China’s mercantilist trade practices and lack of market access and non-tariff barriers faced by Indian exports.

The *ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Agreement* is under negotiation and the target time frame for signing the agreement is 2018. An *ASEAN-India Air Transport Agreement* has been proposed.



This photograph shows the Myanmar-India trade route near Tamu - a border town. Road transportation between India and Myanmar got a boost when the Indian cabinet approved in December 2015, the construction of 69 bridges including approach roads on the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa (TKK) road section of the trilateral highway in Myanmar. Source: Hong Sar/Mizzima

India's *Connectivity Vision* is reinforcing the push towards economic integration with the ASEAN. India presently has three broad policies addressing the theme of connectivity on its periphery: a Domestic Policy with a focus on the North East and Frontier Areas, the 'Act East' Policy and the 'Neighborhood First' Policy. In terms of projects, these policies have a substantial overlap with each other. A number of connectivity initiatives are under implementation or under consideration. These include:

1. The *India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway* and the *Kaladan Multimodal Transport Agreement* in Myanmar.
2. The proposed *India Thailand Myanmar Trilateral MVA*.
3. The *ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement* which is under negotiation.
4. The *ASEAN-India Civil Aviation Task Force* which has been established to improve air connectivity.

#### *Widening scope of India-ASEAN Economic Cooperation*

Over time India has widened its economic engagement with the ASEAN to cover a range of sectors including tourism, agriculture, forestry, food security, environment, renewable energy, telecom, science and technology and IT. India and the ASEAN have also worked on enhancing private sector engagement.

To facilitate progress and concrete achievements in these areas a number of ministerial dialogue platforms have been established between India and the ASEAN. These include meetings of Transport, Tourism, Agriculture and Forestry Ministers. Other institutional dialogue mechanisms include the *Ministerial Group on Connectivity*.

#### *Growing Private Sector Engagement*

India and the ASEAN are working together to enhance private sector participation through re-activating the Joint Business Councils and organizing the ASEAN-India Business Summit and India-ASEAN Business Fairs.

#### *What are the Prospects for the future?*

The importance of India's economic engagement with the ASEAN cannot be overstated. It remains an important foundation of strategic ties with countries of the region. Substantial progress has been made over the past two decades and a number of significant initiatives are in the pipeline. And yet clearly much remains to be done to achieve the true potential of our economic partnership.

#### **India and ASEAN@25: Socio-Cultural Cooperation**

As part of their Dialogue Partnership, India and the ASEAN have cooperated in the areas of human resource development, health, transport, infrastructure, SMEs, Tourism, ICT, agriculture and energy. Ongoing annual training programs for ASEAN officials in India include the Special Course for ASEAN diplomats, the ASEAN-India Students Exchange Program, The ASEAN-India Delhi Dialogue, the ASEAN-India Young Farmers Exchange Program and the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks.

India has also made a significant commitment to assisting the *Initiative for ASEAN Integration* that aims to narrow the development gap between the relatively more developed maritime ASEAN and the less developed continental ASEAN countries, also referred to as the CLMV. Indeed, human resource training, whether in India under the ITEC program or through specialised institutions set up in CLMV countries, has been our strength in our overseas assistance programs.

To fund these programs, India has established the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund, the ASEAN India Green Fund and the ASEAN India S&T Development Fund. To encourage cooperation in connectivity, India has set up a US\$ 1 billion special facility to assist projects in physical and digital connectivity. India has also contributed US \$ 77 million to develop manufacturing hubs in CLMV countries.



## Evaluating ASEAN Centrality in the Regional Architecture

India recognizes the centrality of ASEAN in the regional security architecture in East Asia. However, the ASEAN-centric regional security architecture has so far failed to meaningfully address the hard security issues in the region. The consensus-based decision-making in the ASEAN and the collapse of ASEAN cohesion has also contributed to its failure.



*Mischief Reef in mid-November 2016, with the highlighted defensive systems. The reef has since been militarized by the PLA. Source: CSIS/AMTI/DigitalGlobe*

<https://qz.com/863811/mischief-reef-how-a-fishermens-shelter-on-stilts-became-a-chinese-military-base-in-the-south-china-sea/>

In the face of pressure from China on the South China Sea issue, ASEAN unity has largely broken down since 2012. Current efforts to negotiate a DOC with China will in all likelihood end in a toothless outcome which will have little impact on the situation on the ground. For the present China's territorial assertions, land reclamation activities and militarization of reefs have thrown the region into turmoil and undermined ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture. The United States and regional powers – India, Japan and Australia are turning to mini-laterals, including tri-laterals and the Quad to help restore the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

### ***What we may ask, is the strategic significance of the coming together of ten ASEAN Heads of State/Government and Prime Minister Modi on this occasion?***

The imperative of bringing in India, to balance the overwhelming weight of China, in regional affairs, has been a significant strand of strategic thinking amongst some ASEAN countries. It was no surprise therefore, that way back in 2005, on the eve of India's participation in the inaugural East Asia Summit, Singapore Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had spoken of India and China as two wings of a 'mega jumbo jet' whose fuselage was the ASEAN<sup>2</sup>

"I like to think of new Asia as a mega jumbo jet that is being constructed. Northeast Asia, comprising China, Japan and South Korea, forms one wing with a powerful engine. India, the second wing, will also have a powerful engine. The Southeast Asian countries form the fuselage. Even if we lack a powerful engine for growth among the 10 countries, we will be lifted by the two wings."

The presence of the 10 ASEAN Heads of State/Government as Chief Guests at the Republic Day celebrations was therefore, reflective both of the importance India attached to its Dialogue Partnership with the ASEAN, and the importance ASEAN nations have begun to attach to relations with India in their search for balancing China's aggressive behavior and territorial assertions in the South China Sea.

The end of the Cold War, the hub and spokes US alliance system and the dominant presence of the United States had enabled ASEAN to be placed at the center of the Regional Security Architecture in East Asia. ASEAN led institutions including the ARF, PMC+1, ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, EAS and the ADMM+ were intended to mediate relations between regional powers on their periphery, while the United States guaranteed and underpinned the regional order.

The Global Financial crisis of 2007-08 altered this scenario. First, there was an acceleration in the relative decline of US power in Asia as the US was preoccupied with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Second, Obama's 'rhetorical' pivot to Asia was a case of 'too little and too late'. China made its territorial grab through land reclamation and militarization of features in the South China Sea.

Third, under relentless Chinese pressure, ASEAN unity on the South China Sea has remained broken since 2012. ASEAN was no longer able to provide an effective platform to mediate issues and address hard security issues between ASEAN states and major regional powers on its periphery.

It is tempting to ask the question whether in light of these developments there is a renewed interest amongst ASEAN countries in India and a desire to have India playing a major security role in the Indo-Pacific?

ASEAN capitals had hitherto been skeptical of India's capacity to deliver on its promises and India was perceived as a reluctant trade liberalizer. Chinese assertiveness, the renewed vigor of India's 'Act East' policy under Prime Minister Modi and the strategic shift of India's ties closer to the United States may have changed that presumption.

### What challenges do we face in our Economic Partnership with the ASEAN as we move ahead?

First, a complicating factor is the pushback against globalization and the potential for the rise of protectionism. As India and the ASEAN work to further trade liberalization under the RCEP and through the implementation of the bilateral FTA for services we must contend with the fact other nations including the United States are becoming increasingly protectionist. These attitudes are spawning hostility towards further trade liberalization through the WTO and arrangements like the TPP.

Second, there is also a view in the United States that China has not played by the rules, unfairly denied market access and violated IPR protections. Many other countries, which have been the victims of China's mercantilist and predatory behavior – like India – would agree that a major stumbling block on the path to further liberalization is China's protectionist attitude towards trade, investment and connectivity. This becomes a stumbling block for India in regional trade negotiations like the RCEP, and this explains India's reluctance to give China market access under the RCEP.

Third, while ASEAN centrality and the considerable achievements of the grouping are well recognized it is an undeniable fact that ASEAN unity on the South China Sea issue has crumbled since 2012. The failure of ASEAN to present a united front in the face of challenges to the territorial integrity of some of its members challenges the idea that ASEAN is central to the Regional Security Architecture in East Asia. As individual ASEAN countries take sides in the emerging great game in East Asia, this also puts efforts at regional integration at risk in the future.

### How should India pursue the economic pillar of its Strategic Partnership with the ASEAN?

The answer should be, that if India seeks a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific it must, as it has done in the past, approach the RCEP negotiations from a strategic perspective. India cannot project its influence as a regional power in the ASEAN unless it becomes a dominant economic presence in the region.

### What can India do to meet the expectations of the ASEAN in the realm of Security?

First, we must focus on developing our comprehensive national power. A rapidly growing Indian economy narrowing the gap between itself and Asia's largest economy would go a long way in instilling hope amongst ASEAN countries.

Second, we must strengthen bilateral security ties with ASEAN countries particularly in the maritime domain. We must move beyond token patrols and exercises to activities that promote interoperability and simulate potential threats to maritime security at sea. India's successful pursuit of military modernization and particularly naval modernization would go a long way in encouraging our partners in the ASEAN. We also need to focus on maritime domain awareness and conclude *White Shipping Agreements* with major ASEAN countries.

Third, we must strengthen security coordination with the ASEAN in platforms like the ARF, EAS and the ADMM+. Here we need to move beyond Non Traditional Security issues like HADR to hard security issues like combating terrorism, piracy, crime and smuggling.

Fourth we must engage the larger ASEAN countries like Indonesia and Vietnam in mini-laterals or tri-laterals to promote coordination and joint activities including joint exercises and training. Mini-laterals have the potential of aggregating the hard power of participating countries and of working towards the restoration of the balance of power in the region.

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#### Endnote:

<sup>1</sup> The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation is a Peace Treaty amongst Southeast Asian countries signed in 1976 that lays down certain principles governing relations between signatory countries including non interference in each other's affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes and the renunciation of the use and threat of use of force.

<sup>2</sup> Keynote address by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong of the Republic of Singapore at the Singapore Conference, London, 15 March 2005.

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