



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

Act East Diplomacy: The ASEAN- India, EAS and ARF Ministerial Meetings

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Cover Photographs:

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar seen with Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan at the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh. Source: Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar seen at the venue of the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Source: Khmer Times.

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Introduction

ASEAN Foreign Ministers engaged with 30 countries in a series of meetings held in Phnom Penh from August 2-5, 2022. India participated in the annual ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AIFMM), the 12th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' meeting and the 29th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial meeting.

ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting

External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Cambodia from August 3-5, 2022 to attend the annual ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AIFMM) on August 4, 2022. The Meeting was co-chaired by Dr. S. Jaishankar and Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, the Foreign Minister of Singapore. Earlier this year, Dr. S. Jaishankar had hosted the Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi on June 16-17, 2022.



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar seen with Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan at the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh. Source: Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The AIFMM deliberated on ways to enhance ASEAN-India cooperation in the post-pandemic era in diverse fields¹ including smart agriculture, healthcare, new and renewable energy, digital inclusivity and fintech.

The Ministers also shared views on important regional and international issues of mutual interest and discussed preparations for the upcoming India-ASEAN Summit in November this year.



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar seen at the venue of the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Source: Khmer Times.

In his remarks, EAM expressed appreciation for Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEAN for the current year, under the theme "ASEAN ACT: Addressing Challenges Together." Dr. S. Jaishankar highlighted the importance India places on ASEAN as a pillar of the regional, multilateral and global order. He reiterated India's support for ASEAN unity and centrality in a free, open, inclusive and rules based Indo-Pacific. Noting the strong convergence

¹ (August 5 2022) ASEAN-India Foreign Minister's Meeting and Related Meetings. Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35631/ASEANIndia_Foreign_Ministers_Meeting_and_other_related_meetings



between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative", he called for greater cooperation between India and the ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers appreciated India's consistent support to ASEAN and affirmed that they looked forward to working together to strengthen India-ASEAN relations.

The 12th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting

India was represented at the 12th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers meeting by Mr. Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs.

The 12th EAS FMM discussed ways and means to strengthen the Leaders-led EAS platform to make it more responsive to emerging challenges. Ministers also exchanged views on current regional and international developments and geo-political challenges, and reviewed preparations for a new "EAS Plan of Action". Preparations for the upcoming 17th EAS Summit scheduled in November, 2022 were also discussed.

The key issues of concern² impacting regional peace and security identified at the EAS FMs' meeting were the recent surge in the DPRK's ICBM testing and ballistic missile launches, the situation in the South China Sea, recent cross strait developments that threaten to destabilize the region, the lack of progress on the timely implementation by Myanmar of ASEAN's "Five Point Consensus", and the threat from extremist violence and radicalization. On Ukraine the meeting reaffirmed the need to respect sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, the UN Charter and international law, but refrained from calling out Russia by name.

The EAS meeting took place in an atmosphere of palpable tension as the principal actors sought to inject some drama into the proceedings in order to emphasize their point of view. Secretary Blinken entered the EAS meeting room after Wang Yi and Lavrov were seated and sat down without making eye contact with them; the Russian delegation spokesman observed that "there was contact with everyone who was not hiding".

² (August 5 2022) Chairman's Statement of the 12th EAS.

<https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-12th-east-asia-summit-eas-foreign-ministers-meeting/>



Chinese FM Wang Yi, departs the ASEAN Gala Dinner within minutes of arriving at the Chroy Changvar International Convention and Exhibition Center in Phnom Penh. Source: Reuters

On August 5, the Chinese and Russian Foreign Ministers walked out when it was their Japanese counterpart's turn to speak³. This was apparently in response to Japan's criticism of Beijing's military exercises held following US House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. China also abruptly cancelled a meeting between Japanese FM Yoshimasa Hayashi and Chinese FM Wang Yi in response to the G-7 statement criticizing China's response to the Pelosi visit to Taiwan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stormed out of the EAS gala dinner without giving any reason. The EAS meeting demonstrated the growing rift and tensions between China and the United States, and the United States and Russia. These developments do not augur well for the EAS's future as a leading forum for high level dialogue on strategic issues.

³ (August 5, 2022) China Russia Walk Out of ASEAN Meet. Mainichi
<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220805/p2g/00m/0in/037000c>



Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi (left), South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin (center) and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended an ASEAN-plus-three meeting in Phnom Penh on August 5, 2022. At the EAS Meeting held on August 5, 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi walked out when the Japanese Foreign Minister began to speak. Source: Japanese Foreign Ministry/ Kyodo News

The 29th ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial meeting

Mr. Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, represented India at the 29th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial meeting which saw an exchange of views on international and regional issues, as well as the future direction of the ARF. The meeting adopted two Statements, namely the "ARF Statement on Promoting Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region through Preventive Measures" and the "ARF Statement on Supporting the Preservation of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ)". As part of India's engagement with the ARF, India had co-chaired the 13th ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security on May 12, 2022 and will co-chair the workshop series on "International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code)" during the year 2022 - 2023.

Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers Meeting

On June 16-17, 2022, at a meeting of Foreign Ministers of India and ASEAN in New Delhi⁴ hosted by Dr. S. Jaishankar, the two sides had held discussions on

⁴ ASEAN (June 16, 2022) ASEAN-India Commit to Strengthen Cooperation. <https://asean.org/asean-india-committed-to-strengthen-cooperation/>



the commemoration of 30 years of ASEAN-India dialogue relations and the 10th anniversary of India's Strategic Partnership⁵ with the ASEAN. EAM Dr. Jaishankar and Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Singapore, ASEAN's Country Coordinator for India, co-chaired the meeting. The ASEAN Secretary General also participated in the SAIFMM. The year 2022 has been designated as the "ASEAN-India Friendship Year".

India and ASEAN agreed to strengthen their Strategic Partnership across the spectrum of political, security, economic, socio-cultural and development cooperation. They reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism, international law and ASEAN Centrality. India and ASEAN will cooperate in the areas of maritime security, disaster risk management, search and rescue, environmental protection and maritime safety. India will strengthen its commitment to promoting regional connectivity. ASEAN and India will work together in countering terrorism and the rise of radicalism. Both sides will explore synergies in working together in regional frameworks like BIMSTEC, IORA, MGC and BMP-EAGA.

The meeting agreed that India and ASEAN would cooperate in promotion of smart agriculture, renewable energy, trade, better utilization of the ASEAN-India FTA, strengthening regional connectivity, the use of digital platforms for improved access to healthcare, education and finance; enhance cooperation on science and technology, innovation, vaccine production and distribution, cooperation and research on generic and traditional medicines, strengthening response to public health emergencies and the response to the pandemic; and promoting people to people connectivity through education, tourism, women's empowerment and youth exchange. ASEAN and India will also cooperate in narrowing the development gap in ASEAN through the implementation of the IAI Work Plan IV (2021-25)

The Meeting emphasized the need for the early completion and operationalization of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and looked forward to its eastward extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam.

ASEAN-India dialogue relations started with the establishment of a sectoral partnership in 1992, which graduated to a full dialogue partnership in December 1995, a Summit level Partnership in 2002, and a Strategic partnership

⁵ Co-Chairs Statement on the Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations
https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35416/CoChairs_Statement_on_the_Special_ASEANIndia_Foreign_Ministers_Meeting_in_Celebration_of_the_30th_Anniversary_of_the_ASEANIndia_Dialogue_Relations

in 2012. Today, the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership stands on a strong foundation. ASEAN is central to India's Act East Policy and its vision for the wider Indo-Pacific. This multi-faceted partnership encompasses many sectoral dialogue mechanisms and working groups that meet regularly at various levels and include annual summits, Ministerial and Senior Officials' meetings. The ongoing India-ASEAN collaboration is guided by the "Plan of Action 2021-2025", which was adopted in 2020.

While the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM), hosted by the ASEAN Chair, is an annual event, the SAIFMM was the first ASEAN-India FMM to be hosted by India in New Delhi.

Bilateral Meetings of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar

EAM Dr. Jaishankar called upon the Prime Minister of the host country, Cambodia, and had bilateral meetings with the Foreign Ministers of the US, Australia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in a bilateral meeting with US Secretary of State Anthony J Blinken on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meetings in Phnom Penh (August 4, 2022) Source: rediff.com

EAM Dr. Jaishankar met with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken⁶ on the sidelines of the ARF meeting on August 4, 2022. Blinken referred to "Russia's

⁶ (August 4, 2022) Secretary Blinken's meeting with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar.



Brutal aggression in Ukraine and its implications for food security around the world." The two Foreign Ministers agreed to support the people of Sri Lanka and their aspirations for a return to economic and political stability through democratic and constitutional processes. Blinken condemned the Myanmar junta for its execution of democracy activists. They discussed collective efforts to put Myanmar on the path to democracy.

Blinken further said that India and the US are both strong proponents of ASEAN centrality. He added, "We have a shared vision together for a free and open Indo-Pacific that we work on in so many different ways every single day." The US Secretary of State said that New Delhi and Washington have some immediate challenges that both the countries are concerned with, including the situation in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar) and other hotspots.

EAM Dr. Jaishankar also met his Australian counterpart Penny Wong in Cambodia, with the two ministers taking positive note of the progress in bilateral relations and exchanging perspectives on regional and global issues.

Developments on Key International Issues

Myanmar. The ASEAN meetings were preceded by the Myanmar junta's execution of four political prisoners. The Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting described the killings as "highly reprehensible" and stated that they symbolized a "gross lack of will" to implement ASEAN's "Five Point Consensus"⁷. The final Communiqué⁸ of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting was more muted in its expression of ASEAN's concerns, expressing concern over the prolonged political crisis in Myanmar (including the executions of four political activists) and the evident lack of commitment on part of the Myanmar authorities to implement ASEAN's "Five Point Consensus."

The junta's progress in monitoring the Five Point Consensus will be reviewed at the ASEAN Summit in November this year. The Communiqué⁹ states:

<https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-indian-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-6/>

⁷ (August 6, 2022) Lack of Trust Political Will Shackling Myanmar Peace Process, ASEAN Envoy Says. Channel News Asia

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/lack-trust-political-will-myanmar-peace-process-asean-envoy-2863546>

⁸ (August 5, 2022) Parsing the Content of ASEAN's Latest Joint Communiqué. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/parsing-the-content-of-aseans-latest-joint-communicue/>

⁹ ASEAN.org (August 3, 2022) Joint Arrangements of the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting.



"Towards this end, upholding the agreement of our Leaders at the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits and consistent with Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter, we recommended that the ASEAN Summit assesses the progress towards the implementation of the 'Five-Point Consensus' by the State Administration Council to guide the decision on the next steps".

Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter states that "non-compliance" or a "serious breach of the charter" can be referred to the ASEAN Summit for a response. This opens the possibility of further punitive steps against Myanmar if it fails to make progress on ASEAN's "Five Point Consensus".

Ukraine. On Ukraine, the Communiqué reaffirmed ASEAN's respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity but did not name Russia. The document states:

"We reiterated our call for compliance with international law and the United Nations Charter. The Meeting underlined the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities and the creation of an enabling environment for the peaceful resolution of conflict."

None of the ASEAN countries, except Singapore, have chosen to join Western sanctions against Moscow.

Taiwan. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan provoked China into conducting a series of military exercises, which were in breach of Taiwanese airspace and territorial waters. Without naming China, the ASEAN statement¹⁰ averred:

" ASEAN is concerned with the international and regional volatility... in the area adjacent to the ASEAN region"

The increasing tensions between ASEAN's major economic partner China, and its major security partner the United States, are a nightmare scenario come true¹¹. ASEAN leaders called for maximum restraint, and the upholding of the principles of the UN Charter and the TAC. ASEAN offered to facilitate peaceful

https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Joint_Communique-of-the-55th-AMM-FINAL.pdf

¹⁰ Khalik Ul Riaz (August 4, 2022) ASEAN Opposed Provocative actions in the Taiwan Straits. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/asean-opposes-provocative-actions-in-taiwan-straits/2653130>

¹¹ Thi Mai Anh Nguyen (August 5, 2022) Pelosi's visit to Taiwan Creates a Headache for ASEAN Countries. The Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/pelosis-visit-to-taiwan-creates-a-headache-for-asean-countries/>



dialogue between all parties, including through ASEAN-led dialogue mechanisms. However, ASEAN remains divided between mainland ASEAN countries - Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar - who have closer relations with China, and maritime ASEAN countries who have reservations on Chinese assertions in the South China Sea, even though all of them adhere to the “one-China policy” and do not have diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Conclusion

The following are the broad outcomes of the Foreign Ministerial meetings in Phnom Penh. First, India reaffirmed its commitment to ASEAN centrality as a pillar of the regional, multilateral and global order. Second, ASEAN reiterated its commitment to strengthening the dialogue partnership with India. Third, India and ASEAN deliberated on the commemoration of 30 years of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership and the 10th anniversary of the Strategic Partnership, and agreed to enhance cooperation in a diverse areas ranging from agriculture to fintech. Fourth, the EAS exchanged views on growing geopolitical challenges. Fifth, the ARF adopted statements on preventive diplomacy and the preservation of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Sixth, ASEAN and India agreed to work together on countering terrorism and the rise of radicalism and in exploring synergies in working together within regional frameworks.

International issues, notably Ukraine, Myanmar and the crisis in the Taiwan Strait, dominated attention. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting set the stage for ramping up the pressure on Myanmar at the ASEAN summit in November.

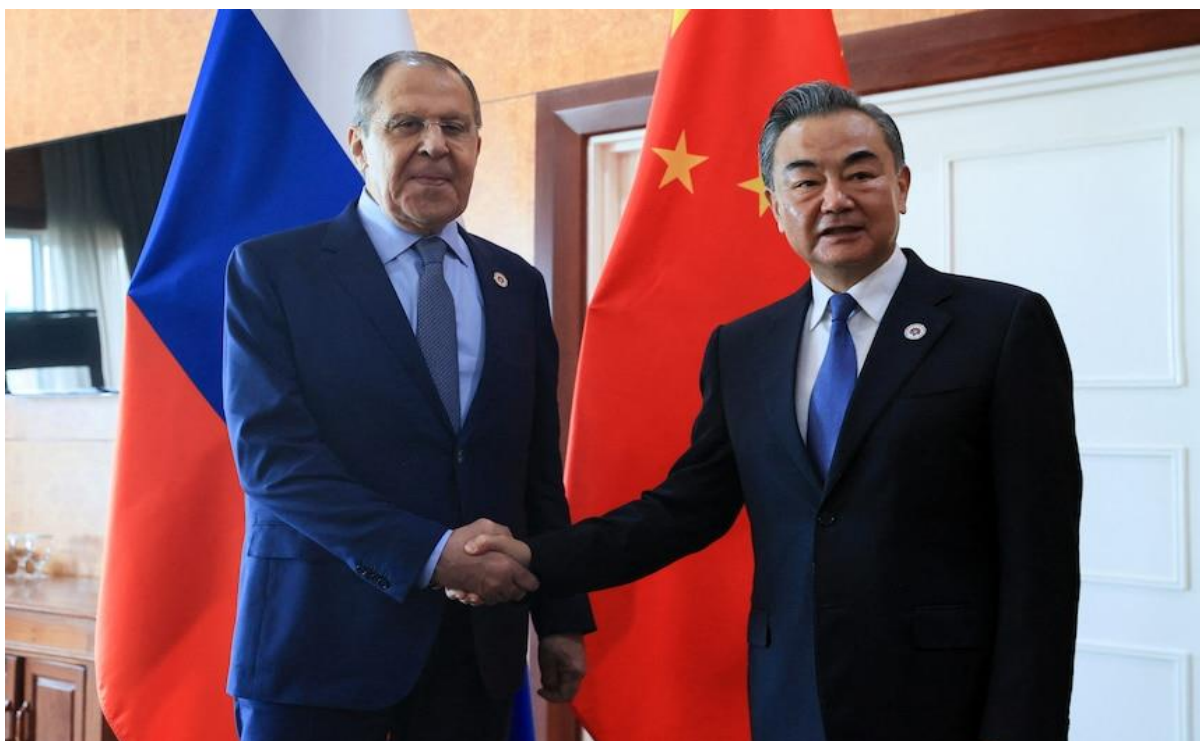
On Ukraine, the United States got little traction – the Joint Communiqué of the ASEAN FMs’ meeting called for compliance with International Law and the UN Charter and an immediate cessation of hostilities, but did not name Russia. Singapore alone in ASEAN has chosen to join Western sanctions against Russia.

The growing Taiwan crisis has caused deep concern within ASEAN. Southeast Asian countries do not want to be in a position of having to choose between China, their major trading partner, and the United States, which has been their major security partner for stability in the region.

Singapore Foreign Minister Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan,¹² speaking to the media after the conclusion of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, described

developments in the Taiwan Strait as a “profoundly dangerous moment” in international affairs and said that “polarisation” within countries, the invasion of Ukraine, the rise in energy and food prices, and the “dangerous divergence” between China and the United States, have “profound” implications for Southeast Asia and the world. Balakrishnan stressed that if the relationship between China and United States broke apart, it would mean the potential end of the period of peace and prosperity in the region.

Amidst these rising great power tensions, ASEAN is determinedly treading the middle path and has refused to name Russia as the aggressor in Ukraine while calling for adherence to international law and a cessation of hostilities. There is some congruence between the ASEAN position and that of India on this European conflict. On the cross-straits crisis, ASEAN Ministers called for maximum restraint and upholding of the principles of the UN Charter and the TAC. ASEAN offered to facilitate peaceful dialogue between all parties, including through ASEAN-led dialogue mechanisms.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seen shaking hands with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Geopolitical challenges are rapidly propelling China and Russia into a close embrace.

Source: Reuters: Russian Foreign Ministry

¹² (August 6, 2022) Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's Doorstep Interview with Singapore Media Following the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting and Related Meetings. Ministry of Foreign affairs Singapore.
https://www.einnews.com/pr_news/584743957/transcript-of-minister-for-foreign-affairs-dr-vivian-balakrishnan-s-doorstop-interview-with-singapore-media-following-the-asean-foreign-ministers#



Geopolitical challenges are rapidly propelling China and Russia into a close embrace. In order to counter this geopolitical realignment, the US will have redouble efforts to reinforce its Indo-Pacific Strategy and countervailing regional initiatives like the QUAD.



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