



AIC COMMENTARY

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Harnessing India-ASEAN Synergies in the Indo-Pacific **Avinash Godbole***

ASEAN has accepted the idea of Indo-Pacific that can help strengthen ASEAN centrality. The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was a great start and the pandemic has given impetus to expand the cooperation in areas like human security in general and healthcare in particular. The Quad cooperation also focuses on non-traditional security areas alongside the priority given to establishing a rules-based order in the region. Sustainability, prosperity and stability can be the three cornerstones of regional cooperation between ASEAN and India in the Indo-Pacific region. This commentary discusses the scope and opportunities to harness the ASEAN-India synergies in Indo-Pacific.

The term Indo-Pacific in its current manifestation has completed a decade and a half now.¹ It was emphatically endorsed as a vision statement in the speech at the Indian Parliament by the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August 2007.² In early days, considerable time was spent in arguing as to how to operationalize the Indo-Pacific concept. However, the last decade has been volatile, to say the least, and several incidents and developments have reaffirmed the utility of the concept of Indo-Pacific and have given it enough impetus to make it a robust, viable and a pragmatic construct for cooperation.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) collectively and its member states individually have generally been apprehensive about the concept and until recently had been wary of its implications on the region. Regional volatility and hegemony have made ASEAN leadership relook at its approach to the concept of Indo-Pacific and now its approach appears to be more reconciliatory and amicable than previous times as seen in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) released in June 2019.³

ASEAN would have also noticed that India is the only country to have consistently spoken about an “inclusive” Indo-Pacific in addition to goals of it being “free and open”.⁴ The idea of inclusive is a natural follow up of the objective of establishing a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

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Moreover, one can expect more warming of relation in the post-Covid period since the Covid-19 has exposed the gaps in globalization in many unprecedented and surprising ways. It would be useful to see why this gap of perceptions existed and what can be done next to narrow the gap of perceptions.

ASEAN Unity and Centrality

ASEAN is driven by two principles of ASEAN unity and centrality. ASEAN unity is the consensus principle, and it has worked well for ASEAN to develop internal trust, cooperation and to solve issues without the interference of external actors. However, when it comes to three categories of issues, the unity principle has been stretched to its limits. First, the problems emerging with ASEAN member states that external implications like the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and the subsequent humanitarian issues of human rights violations and the refugee crisis which caused regional tensions. The second is about the maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea and China's unwillingness to discuss those in a multilateral manner. Finally, China's investments, as well as interference in member states' internal affairs, have had an impact on their voting behavior in ASEAN. As a result, ASEAN has struggled to pass its resolutions on a few occasions within the last decade because of member vetoes.⁵

Similarly, ASEAN centrality has unfortunately begun to look like a myth because of China's rise and its efforts to crack the ASEAN unity. The biggest shock for ASEAN centrality was China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. ASEAN centrality has been important and has worked because it takes collective interests to keep ASEAN in the driver's seat. However, if the driving force for the developments in the region is in the hegemony of the rising power, who is in the driver's seat becomes irrelevant. As Professor Amitav Acharya argues, "the principle of ASEAN centrality had both strategic and normative purposes".⁶ The breakdown of unity on strategic matters would have consequences for the normative role of ASEAN. Therefore, for the sake of the rules-based order, openness may be necessary more than ever in the past. This openness can be achieved through harmonisation of opportunities, dialogue on the common concerns and achieving shared global interests. In the recent past, India has put in a lot of effort explaining that cooperation in the Indo-Pacific can in fact restore ASEAN centrality, and several meetings, statements and documents have highlighted this fact.

Quad and the ASEAN Outlook

The other reason why ASEAN may be more assured about the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue/Forum (Quad) is that the earlier perspectives were based on the fears that Quad would lead to some kind of a supra regional architecture which may subsume ASEAN. While Quad has been elevated in stature to have the Leaders Summit in September 2021, it has also agreed to work on a lot of issues and areas that are priorities for ASEAN.⁷ The issues and areas discussed in this summit meeting include cooperation on healthcare, infrastructure

vision and development, climate concerns including marine ecology, green shipping, pollution abatement and recycling measures, enhancing climate adaptation, resilience and preparedness, people to people cooperation and training and exchanges at experts' levels. This greatly matches the AOIP.

India-ASEAN Cooperation on Indo-Pacific

The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region of October 2021 can be considered as a template for the joint cooperation between India and ASEAN and for the seamlessness of concerns and values shared.⁸ In that sense, ASEAN's Indo-Pacific cooperation is a natural outcome for developing norms and building capacity for member states on pressing issues of maritime commons.

On the other hand, Quad must also be cognizant of the fact that it is not possible for most of the ASEAN member states to endorse or even recognize Quad or Indo-Pacific formally due to their high level of trade dependence on China. However, the same countries want a clearer implementation of the rules-based order and some would even like a conversation on the mutual understanding of the norms as well as the red-lines for what is to be considered an acceptable conduct at sea.

Indian Prime Minister attended the 2018 *Shangri La Dialogue* and delivered the Keynote Address.⁹ In that address, he listed several areas of cooperation between India and ASEAN. Inclusive Indo-Pacific was the first point of his speech on how to establish a democratic and rules-based order.

Counter-terrorism cooperation was the second point and cyber security the third. India already has a robust counter terrorism dialogue with the ASEAN and with most of the member states. The two sides have had a common experience of externally instigated and funded terrorism.

Prime Minister in his speech also envisioned that maritime cooperation and rules-based order will help achieve peace and prosperity and address concerns like preventing maritime crimes, preserving marine ecology, protecting against disasters and implementation of blue economy. There is a lot that the two sides can work on to develop capacity in the fields of science and technology policy, development education, etc. The Covid-19 has necessitated the need for healthcare cooperation and the two sides can expand dialogues on joint development for medicines and vaccines including the Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) as well as healthcare equipment at all levels.

Exchanges of best practices between India and ASEAN on governance and accountability, transparency and digitization would be highly useful. Training for government staffs engaged in public front to discuss and exchange best practices can be initiated. Clean energy and renewable energy cooperation is another issue area with vast opportunities. International

Solar Alliance (ISA) can play its role as well in this sector. Disaster management, Solid waste management and sustainable recycling development can be an area of cooperation. Marine ecology and pollution is another area. The two sides can jointly develop norms for regulating and reducing it. India and ASEAN can also develop consultations and shape norms and guidelines about the Blue Dot Network (BDN) concept and discuss its viability and utility and to harness its benefit for trade and interaction.

Some of this onus is with India as the momentum of India-ASEAN cooperation did slowdown after India opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2019. On top of that the Covid-19 pandemic has had its impact after trade slowed down and travel and tourism came to grinding halts. Deglobalization is a shared concern as well and in that sense, one might think that there will be some competition between India and ASEAN. However, there are more common concerns than areas of competition.

Concluding Remarks

It would be stating the obvious, but it is well understood in India and among the Indo-Pacific region that peace and prosperity ought to be the equal pillars of the –Indo-Pacific initiative. If prosperity is not assured, the idea of Indo-Pacific as a strategy of peace would not be effective. That is one of the reasons why ASEAN has doubted the utility of the idea of Indo-Pacific. Creating jobs, increasing manufacturing and expanding middle-class bases of their societies is a common concern in Asia. If there can be a shared solution to this problem and if it can be achieved through the Indo-Pacific cooperation initiative, it would deepen economic interactions and create prosperity in the region.

End Notes

¹ It was first imagined in an academic piece by Gurpreet Khurana in January 2007. Refer, Gurpreet Khurana, “Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India–Japan Cooperation”, *Strategic Analysis*, 31 (1), pp. 139-153.

² Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas", 22 August 2007, at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (accessed 28 March 2022).

³ ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, 23 June 2019, at: https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf (accessed 28 March 2022).

⁴ Shinzo Abe, Refer Note 2.

⁵ This happened for the first time in 2012 at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Summit in Cambodia in reference to the Scarborough Shoal standoff between China and the Philippines and in 2016 when the statement was retracted during the period of tensions being at its peak due to the UNCLOS ruling on the disputes in the South China Sea. For more see, Ankit Panda, “ASEAN Foreign Ministers Issue, Then Retract Communique Referencing South China Sea”, 15 June 2016, *The Diplomat*, at: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/asean-foreign-ministers-issue-then-retract-communicue-referencing-south-china-sea/> (accessed 4 April 2022).

⁶ Amitav Acharya, “The Myth of ASEAN Centrality”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, August 2017, 39 (2), p. 275.

⁷ The White House, “Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Summit”, 24 September 2021, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/> (accessed 26 March 2022).

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, “ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region”, 28 October 2021. At <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34425/ASEANIndia+Joint+Statement+on+Cooperation+on+the+ASEAN+Outlook+on+the+IndoPacific+for+Peace+Stability+and+Prosperity+in+the+Region> accessed 27 March 2022.

⁹ Narendra Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, 1 June 2018, at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018> (accessed 27 March 2022).

About AIC



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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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