



AIC COMMENTARY

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Ways to Strengthen ASEAN-India Relations at Its 30th Anniversary Gurjit Singh*

ASEAN and India complete 30 years of their dialogue relations in 2022, which coincides with India's 75th year of Independence. The 30th Anniversary is a good time to deepen the partnership. The dynamic change in global and regional strategic and economic complexities requires closer and more frequent collaboration. This commentary discusses the current contour of the relations and presents a set of recommendations to strengthen the ASEAN-India partnership.

Introduction

The year 2022 is designated as the ASEAN-India Friendship year. It is the completion of 30 years of the dialogue relations and coincides with India's 75th year of Independence. At the 18th ASEAN-India virtual summit, held on 28 October 2021, Indian Prime Minister indicated that both India and ASEAN will celebrate this landmark.

With the pandemic better controlled, a plethora of activities are anticipated. Singapore is the country coordinator for India. The ASEAN chairman for this year 2022 is Cambodia, whose president Hun Sen is well known to India ever since he was elected. An imaginative celebration of this special year is thus anticipated. Invoking contemporary ideas and refreshing the ambience means avoiding repetition of past anniversaries. As both ASEAN and India have youthful populations, it merits focus on new areas relating to them.

Current Geopolitics and Implications on ASEAN and India

Both India and ASEAN have focused on the Indo-Pacific in the backdrop of current global uncertainties. There is a special role for ASEAN in India's Act East Policy (AEP), the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Along with the ASEAN's Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), these are the frameworks for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN is aware that India remains supportive of the Quadrilateral Security Forum (QUAD) and also has a focus on ASEAN

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centrality and its functional collaboration with Quad countries, all of whom are Dialogue Partners of ASEAN.

The pandemic, the economic downturn and the Ukraine crisis have challenged the traditional positions that both India and ASEAN had taken earlier on global affairs. ASEAN has tried to act cohesively on these issues, but found that it is not always easy to do so. India and ASEAN have a common view of the Indo-Pacific for instance; but the both sides have taken extraordinary precautions in criticizing any assertiveness on part of the People's Republic of China. For ASEAN, it is easier to seek bilateral cooperation with the QUAD members rather than encouraging the alignment as a group. This is evident as both India and ASEAN avoid naming China in their official statements.

Similarly, the Ukraine crisis has created more rifts within ASEAN. The concerns were common, but the manner of voting in the UNGA was diverse, with two ASEAN countries supporting the expulsion of Russia, two said no and six abstaining, largely on the same grounds as India did.

India and ASEAN both want a clear focus on dealing with economic recovery, post-pandemic public health and modern and critical technologies. Despite the cracks in the world order, India and ASEAN have much to gain by cooperating together. One of these areas is the maintenance of the open and inclusive international order. Like India, most ASEAN countries grasped the opportunities of globalisation and expanded their FTAs and trade arrangements. They also built the ASEAN Economic Community. Now, with sanctions being imposed, first on China and now on Russia, it disrupts the patterns of globalisation that countries like India and in ASEAN assiduously worked with. Therefore, having a multipolar world, in the case of Asia meant keeping China on a better leash, but for Europe, it means Russia. However, both India and ASEAN have demonstrated that their foreign policies and external relations are free of the preferences and choices expressed by the west and they enjoy unique positions of strategic autonomy, irrespective of their relations with the global players.

A Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region was adopted at the 18th Summit 2021 by India and ASEAN. It builds on the Delhi Declaration of January 2018, declared on the occasion of 25 years of dialogue partnership, 15 years of summit diplomacy and 5 years of strategic partnership. This reaffirms that ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity and UNCLOS would all remain as significant aspects of partnership. All ASEAN members appreciated and welcomed this assertion.

The Statement accepted four areas from the AOIP: maritime cooperation, connectivity, SDGs and economic cooperation. In all, 21 paragraphs identified multiple areas of cooperation, including sub-regional cooperation, human capital development, green infrastructure, agriculture and the utilisation of complementarities. Strengthening this partnership remains the goal of the dialogue partnership between India and ASEAN.

Various ideas were discussed to strengthen the partnership. Some significant ideas which deserve our attention are as follows.

Suggested Action Plan

1. Expansion of education, collaboration among universities, green economies, achieving the SDGs, startups and impact investment could be among the ideas to guide the expansion of the Indo-ASEAN partnership.
2. The Nalanda University, an EAS project, would welcome collaboration with the ASEAN. While some ASEAN countries have contributed, it is now time for ASEAN as a whole, to be a partner.
3. The offer of 1000 PhD scholarships at Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT)s needs modulation to master's level to allow greater utilisation. ASEAN countries have not utilised the PhD level scholarships adequately. The IITs are world class institutions and can help ASEAN scholars to achieve higher goals.
4. There are adequate fora and meetings already in place. They need to be result oriented and driven by achievements. All India-ASEAN activities are normally managed by funds from the Indian side as well as the ASEAN-India Fund, managed by the ASEAN Secretariat. It would be a good occasion for ASEAN to begin financial contributions to the Fund for emerging programmes. This must be a partnership, not solely funded by India.
5. India-ASEAN projects need closer attention. The welcome establishment of a project monitoring unit within the ASEAN Secretariat shows the intent to focus on implementation and achieving the goals set when these projects were undertaken. According to this unit, 85 per cent of goals listed under the AOIP cooperation agreement were already attained. This is positive news.
6. India's mission to ASEAN has undertaken the correct approach to focus on details and get each item carefully worked out through the ASEAN and Indian bureaucracies. This is evident from the outcomes in the past few years.
7. Another area of focus is the post-pandemic recovery. India has been working with ASEAN to support their facilities and provide health and medical assistance and developmental cooperation. India's contribution of US\$ 1 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund was appreciated but the requirements remain huge. With the reopening of vaccine exports, ASEAN countries would benefit. They would also benefit from the Quad vaccine initiative. Some ASEAN countries were generous in supporting India during the second wave of the pandemic. India under the Quad Vaccine Initiative has provided vaccines to several ASEAN countries. It remains unclear whether ASEAN seeks a partnership or expects preferential treatment for its public health arrangements.
8. The economic dimension of the partnership requires a review of the FTA. For ASEAN, the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) is for 'enhanced utilisation and effective implementation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA).' This is important since India is not in the RCEP. It needs the FTA to be updated, balanced and contributes to the development of resilient supply chains between India and ASEAN.

9. India-ASEAN trade has seen a drop in the last 3 years from US\$ 97 billion in 2018, to US\$ 79 billion in 2020. In the first half of 2021 it stood at only US\$ 42 billion. Its true potential is yet to be realised. ASEAN runs an annual average surplus of US\$ 20 billion. A reordering of the FTA and a better utilisation of it could lead to expanded trade particularly through new supply chains.
10. The International Solar Alliance (ISA) is not mentioned among the 21 areas in the AOIP Cooperation Statement. The USA has recently joined it to become the 101st member. Only Myanmar and Cambodia are ISA members. Nor is the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Initiative (CDRI) mentioned, with which no ASEAN member is associated. For a true partnership, mutual attention to each other's initiatives is necessary.
11. The IPOI needs ASEAN adherents. Indonesia and Singapore have stepped forward and that is the best ways to get individual ASEAN countries take ASEAN Plus approaches to IPOI.
12. There is recognition of India's contribution to narrowing the development gaps within ASEAN countries. India extended support to the CLMV countries by setting up training centres for information technology, vocational training, and English language and entrepreneurship development. ASEAN, in the spirit of partnership, could provide sustainable finance for the continuation of the centres which India has established.
13. India announced its support to the ASEANs Cultural Heritage List. This is a nascent idea built on the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage. ASEAN will create its own list of such assets. India's prompt support will see officials discuss promising areas of collaboration in preserving and maintaining cultural heritage. India has also contributed to the restoration work in temples in Siem Reap and Yogyakarta. Given the shared histories and cultural roots of many Southeast Asian civilizations, this could be impactful.

Concluding Remarks

India and ASEAN have shared values and ideas. Their relationship needs more substantive collaboration. The 30th Anniversary is a good time to deepen the partnership. Besides the diverse functional cooperation new ideas like Parliamentary exchanges, special ministerial meetings beyond EAS, ARF and ADMM+ may be initiated. If these are done every five years then they add value to a growing partnership with more political direction. The dynamic change in global and regional strategic and economic complexities requires closer and more frequent collaboration.

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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