



AIC COMMENTARY

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ASEAN-India Cooperation in the Next 30: Towards Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

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The rise in popularity of the Indo-Pacific as a geo-strategic construct has put both ASEAN and India in prime position as important actors in the region. Despite the gaps between their expectations, along with the differences in their approaches and priorities in dealing with common security challenges, the existence of good foundation of relations and real strategic drivers between ASEAN and India can only mean that the potential to advance relations exist with full vigour. Investing more on solving regional security issues where both are stakeholders, whilst upscaling their defence diplomacy interactions and practical cooperation can be the way forward. In this given background, this commentary seeks to present the perspectives of ASEAN and India on security and defence partnerships in the Indo-Pacific in the form of a debated narrative.

ASEAN's Perspectives

(1) The rise in popularity of the Indo-Pacific term as a geo-strategic construct has put both ASEAN and India in prime position as important actors of the region. Inside the minds of policymakers and modern analysts of global politics now lies an imagined region that pictured the dynamics in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (in the minimal sense of the term) not as separate, but as an interconnected junction – a confluence. Between China's less than benign rise, a returning US keen on re-establishing ties among old allies to compete, Australia's reassertion of its geopolitical sphere in the Pacific, as well as dynamics in the Korean Peninsula, East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean, and many others, ASEAN and India are geographically positioned as two regional anchors, whose policy choices and behaviours can help define the future of the regional order.

(2) For ASEAN, regions such as the Indian Ocean, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea constitute as areas where great power competition can drag them into commitments they yet can afford (read: arms race). Recent dynamics, from the policy and strategy declarations on the Indo-Pacific, the establishment or rekindling of minilaterals, and all the developments or security initiatives declared in competition against one another, are primary sources of worry for ASEAN.¹ The small and middle powers are worried to becoming pawns at the hands of the major and big powers in these competitions. For Southeast Asians, the concern is to “keep” the proliferation of security initiatives around their immediate backyard from turning into sources of security dilemma between their major power partners.

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(3) Amidst the grand dynamic, the framing of our cooperation and initiatives are particularly important for Southeast Asia. Straight alliance-seeking, as can be seen in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian War, can also lead to further insecurities and aggressive behaviours. ASEAN, for better and for worse, has strived to frame their collaboration with dialogue partners based on principles of openness, practicality, and inclusivity. ASEAN's conventional way of doing this is to pull these initiatives into collaborative cooperation under an ASEAN framework. The value of an ASEAN framework, despite understandable criticism against its efficiency, performance, etc., is in the way it tempers down the framing of security cooperation and initiatives. For instance, ASEAN usually deliberately frames its security collaboration using the term "capacity building." The use of the term can be repetitive for some, but it has its values in the way it tries to prevent a perception from any nation that an armament or an aggressive plot is conducted against them.

(4) ASEAN and India have enjoyed three decades of dialogue relations. From India becoming an ASEAN Sectoral Partner in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1995, a Summit-level partner in 2002, and a Strategic Partner since 2012, ASEAN and India have taken time to build security relations gradually, starting from practical cooperation on issues of common interests. Since their first summit in 2002, ASEAN and India moderately expanded their priority areas of security cooperation, from the early attention on transnational crimes such as terrorism, as well as smuggling and trafficking, to recognition of other areas like maritime security and safety (since at least 2007), energy security (since at least 2010), and cyber security (since at least 2016). Most of India's progressive security relations with Southeast Asia, though, have been in its bilateral relations, especially with countries like Singapore and those that are closer to its land borders, like Myanmar.

(5) Overall, some challenges may exist when it comes to elevating ASEAN-India security relations. The relationship, for instance, may suffer from lack of sustained high-profile diplomatic interactions, as well as possible resource constraints in institutions and agencies that could define the relationship, which could be barriers in forming more ground-breaking collaborations. From the ASEAN side, India is seen as occupied with its relations in South Asia, with closer partners like Russia, and with development cooperation, putting security cooperation with ASEAN a bit down the list. At the same time, indeed ASEAN is also busy with its relations with China and its eyes towards dynamics on the Pacific Ocean. India is also seen as more interested in bilateral security relations with Southeast Asian nations, such as on arms trade, rather than with ASEAN as an organization.

(6) Finally, ASEAN believes that security cooperation can happen in a way that is productive to the overall peace and stability of the regional order. That way, non-traditional security issues in the region, from humanitarian issues to piracy, armed robberies at sea, trafficking and smuggling, can be addressed while also keeping the spirit of collaboration between powers alive, preventing the idea of conflict far from slipping into the minds of regional policymakers. ASEAN and India shared security interests, especially around the Indian Ocean and the mainland sub-region of Southeast Asia, added with India's nascent bilateral defence relations with Southeast Asian nations, provides foundation and room for exploration for advancing ASEAN security relations.² India is also seen as a preferred partner going forward, not only to diversify relations, but also because ASEAN's strategic calculation does not feature India as a potential strategic security problem.

India's Perspectives

(1) Indo-Pacific represents a new sphere in India's foreign policy and diplomacy. Before the recent emergence of Indo-Pacific as a powerful contour in the international geopolitics, India's foreign policy has primarily been driven by its neighbourhood, security concerns coming from China, political turmoil in extended neighbourhood and important aspects of global politics. Even though the Indian Ocean Tsunami of early 2000s had given the Indian Navy and Government of India an opportunity to demonstrate its goodwill to serve the world as a stronger maritime country, it was limited as a nation who is ready to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in the case of a necessity. Despite the fact that India is surrounded by large quantity of maritime resources, its recognition as a maritime power was constrained. The emergence of Indo-Pacific has provided India with that window to look at the world through the maritime prism and vice versa. Naturally, India will leave no stone unturned to prove its capability as a responsible maritime power within the framework of Indo-Pacific.

(2) Similar in the line with ASEAN, India too is cautious about the geopolitical rivalries in the Indo-Pacific, especially the ones between the US and China as well as the recent Russia-Ukraine war. India is well-aware of the implications of such trade war and direct warfare. India's own traumatic history of the past and related global isolation has taught India to be pragmatic and judicious in any conflicting scenario. It explains why India has taken well-calculated approach in responding to the US-China trade war and the Russia- Ukraine war. India's official statements reinforce India's position as a peace-loving country and its records in the UN peacekeeping and peace-making have testified India's will to choose the path of non-violence and prosperity for all. The recent Indian initiative like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) justifies India's position not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the entire sphere of Indo-Pacific, which is the lifeline of India's contemporary maritime narrative.

(3) India is committed in upholding and maintaining the ASEAN centrality. India's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the early period of ASEAN-India diplomatic engagements, India's membership in ASEAN-led institutional mechanisms like ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), etc. exemplifies India's respect and value for the ASEAN centrality. India believes that Southeast Asian regional affairs must be dealt by ASEAN as a leading regional organisation. India truly respects the principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries which had its foundation in the Non-alignment movement and NAM 2.0 as well. India continues to believe in that principle and tries to improve the humanitarian and developmental cooperation with its neighbours (both immediate and extended) to the maximum possible extent. ASEAN welcomes India's development partnership initiatives in Myanmar (recent example being India's involvement in Rakhine State Development Programme) and India's stakes in Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) to narrow down intra-ASEAN developmental gaps.

(4) India's defence and security partnerships with ASEAN at the multilateral level go beyond the traditional sense of security. As noted above in the ASEAN's Perspective section, ASEAN-India defence and security partnerships have a solid foundation in the arenas of non-traditional security issues. It ranges from health security to cyber-security and from water resources management to the geo-economics of the oceans. Nonetheless, one may notice

India's recent bilateral defence partnerships with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam alongside Myanmar and Singapore. These defence partnerships serve the purpose of India's interest of diversifying its defence diplomacy and defence relationships beyond specific countries like Russia, Israel, the UK, the US and Germany. Both India and its ASEAN partners take need-based calls for the defence deals and partnerships.

(5) There are certain challenges faced by both India and ASEAN. As noticed in the first section of this commentary, trans-national crimes, insurgency, environmental degradation and climate change, depletion of ocean resources, marine pollution, terrorism, etc. are just a few of those challenges. Fortunately, both ASEAN and India are on the same page as they desire to tackle those issues together. Northeast India's security concerns are directly connected to the security issues in Myanmar. As neighbours, none of the partners can deny these realities and therefore, both sides have decided to take cautious but pragmatic approach in dealing with these crises.

(6) In the recent ASEAN-India Special Foreign Ministers Meeting, held in June 2022, both sides have expressed their interest in elevating the strategic partnership to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This symbolises more effective coordination in every sphere of development and cooperation between the two sides. This also has the potential to increase the existing defence and security partnership between ASEAN and India in the next 30.

Joint Recommendations

1. India and ASEAN may take coordinated approach in dealing with select persistent and conventional security issues where they are immediate stakeholders, particularly on the Myanmar situation, thereby earning confidence and record as a real agent of peace and security in the region. Easing of political turmoil and improved security situation in Myanmar will benefit the Indo-Pacific region.
2. India and ASEAN can augment their defence relations by elevating the intensity of their diplomatic relations, not only between their foreign policy establishments, but also with more regular interactions and visits between other agencies, such as between the chief of their armed forces or navies. Joint military exercises between India and different ASEAN countries at the bilateral and multilateral level (eg. India-Indonesia Garuda Shakti Joint Army exercise, SIMBEX between India and Singapore, CORPAT between India and Thailand, COBRA GOLD –a multilateral exercise, Samudra Shakti between the navies of India and Indonesia, IMCOR between the navies of India and Myanmar) should be conducted more regularly to uphold the spirit of coordination and cooperation. This will facilitate military-to-military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. India can elevate its use of forums like the EAS, the ADMM Plus, and the ARF as part of its promotion of seeking multilateral solutions for regional security concerns.
3. India and ASEAN should actively and effectively implement and explore the use of existing documents, such as the more recent Plan of Action of the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity or the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region. The PoA document mentioned potential cooperation on defence and intelligence.³ Convergence of interests between ASEAN and India as expressed through these documents should be available to the public as well as to the foreign diplomatic offices for creating more awareness about the role of these two

partners in the Indo-Pacific. The Co-Chairs' Statement on the Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations, released in June 2022, expressed its commitment to ASEAN and India's collaborative efforts in the areas of maritime cooperation, including maritime security, maritime connectivity, the Blue Economy, Disaster Risk Management, Search and Rescue (SAR) cooperation, marine environmental protection, and maritime safety. These are noted by AOIP of ASEAN and Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (IPOI) of India as well.

4. India and ASEAN should also continue their active collaboration in other practical areas, especially in shared strategic areas like the maritime domain Awareness (MDA) programmes. QUAD has recently initiated the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to enhance maritime security through technology and training support. This may improve information sharing, particularly during situations of duress or improving the interactions and interoperability between their maritime security agencies, departing from the traditional models of cooperation in bilateral level (such as between coast guards).
5. India and ASEAN should continue with initiatives in exploring potential future security cooperation areas like cyber security. In India, the issue has gained much light. But the interest has not spread out in ASEAN. In issues with imbalance of interest like cyber, India may need to produce sustained efforts in reaching out and understanding domestic concerns of ASEAN, before eventually coming out with concrete collaborations that works at the ASEAN level. The proposed G-2-G ASEAN-India Cyber Dialogue is definitely a welcome step.⁴
6. India and ASEAN should continue boosting their bilateral defence relations too. Southeast Asian nations currently aim for arm modernization, including through procurements. India can seek to find entries for integrating its military technologies to Southeast Asian military defence capabilities, according to their organization structures and doctrines, and thus deployments of assets.

Concluding Remarks

ASEAN and India both want to maintain their strategic autonomy in their respective foreign relations and avoid dilemmas while navigating strategic ties in the context of recent geostrategic environment. Both want the security of their shared spaces, such as the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait, and even the South China Sea. Both seem to prefer multipolar regional order. Both ASEAN's and India's visions of the Indo-Pacific value openness, inclusivity, and rules-based order. Both see that any great power competition in the region should not deter countries from addressing common issues. India has also endorsed ASEAN's centrality as the "lynchpin" of regional economic and security structures and institutions, and is actively involved in ASEAN-led mechanisms. These drivers mean that the potential is there for ASEAN and India to elevate their security relations in the next 30 years. Hence, the common challenges need to be addressed in a holistic and comprehensive manner without ignoring national and domestic interests.

Endnotes and References

¹ Latest of which, in 2022, include the US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, new developments and initiatives from the Quad, and also China's Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative.

² I note here India's bilateral relations with Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam, as well as its nascent interest in naval engagements with littoral states of the Indian Ocean, through cooperation like joint surveillance, joint and coordinated naval patrols, and joint hydrographic surveys, and intelligence sharing.

³ See details in ASEAN, "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025)" *ASEAN*, September 12, 2020, <https://asean.org/plan-action-implement-asean-india-partnership-peace-progress-shared-prosperity-2021-2025/>.

⁴ "Co-Chairs' Statement on the Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations", asean.org, June 16, 2022, at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Finalised-Co-Chairs-Statement-on-the-Special-ASEAN-India-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-in-Celebration-of-the-30th-Anniversary-of-the-ASEAN-India-Dialogue-Relations-clean.pdf>

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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