



AIC COMMENTARY

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Toward ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership **Chintamani Mahapatra ***

It has taken almost three decades for India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to aspire to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership that can enhance economic, political, cultural and even strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN and also contribute towards maintaining a rules-based order, peace and stability in the larger Indo-Pacific region. This commentary discusses the current contour of the relations and presents a set of recommendations to strengthen the comprehensive partnership between ASEAN and India.

Introduction

It has taken almost three decades for India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to aspire to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership that can enhance economic, political, cultural and even strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN and also contribute towards maintaining a rules-based order, peace and stability in the larger Indo-Pacific region.

India's relations with the ASEAN has grown rather slowly from almost a zero base, as ASEAN took birth amidst the Vietnam War and there was a belief that it was nothing but an initiative to check further expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. The fear of communism was palpable in Southeast Asia in the backdrop of China's civil war that ended with the rise of Communism, three years long Korean War, where Communist North Korea clashed with South Korea and then came the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, America's entry to Indo-China conflict and then, of course, the ravaging war between Communist North Vietnam and non-Communist South Vietnam militarily backed by the United States.

While the five Southeast Asian countries that signed the Bangkok Declaration and established the ASEAN did not have a stated anti-communism policy goal, they were all supportive of

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the US efforts to contain the fast spread of communism and formed the association to cooperate with one another to bolster political, cultural and economic ties among them.

ASEAN itself took decades to evolve as a viable regional cooperative mechanism and it assumed new significance after the end of the Vietnam War, unification of Vietnam, emergence of Sino-US détente and increased economic dynamism in some of the ASEAN member countries. ASEAN turned out to be closer to the United States and China at a time India had deeper strategic partnership with the former Soviet Union. There was a clear Cold War type divide between India and the ASEAN countries.

India's Engagement with ASEAN

The end of the Cold War led to a strategic re-think in ASEAN, India took proactive steps by announcing a “Look East Policy” and rising geopolitical political congruence made way for expanded cooperation and understanding between India and ASEAN. Yet unprecedented economic growth in China, establishment of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Forum), Japan's rising economic engagements in the region and faster and deeper multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific somehow stole the show and India stood behind all those developments and actors in raising the profile of ASEAN.

India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN only after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1992. It took another four years for India to become a Full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1996 and further six years to acquire summit level partnership with ASEAN member countries in 2002. Ten years after India-ASEAN inaugural summit, a “strategic partnership” between the two was announced in 2012. And now in 2022 India and ASEAN have the stated goal of establishing comprehensive strategic partnership.

Building Bridges

The trust level between India and ASEAN has increased by the years particularly in the new context of the post-Cold War era, geopolitical changes in the wake of global war on terror, emerging contradictions between the United States and China, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequential repercussions.

However, stronger bridges have to be constructed, economic engagements need to be elevated, defence and security tie-ups are required to be enhanced not in frequent dialogues and optics but on the ground to realise the comprehensive strategic partnership. It is true that India and ASEAN have signed Free Trade Agreement. But has it taken off the ground? It is true that trade between India and ASEAN has crossed US\$ 100 billion in 2021-22. But is it optimal? It is true mutual foreign investments have increased. Are they adequate and balanced? It must be noted that cumulative ASEAN investments in India between 2000 and 2021 was a little more than US\$ 117 billion. But, Singapore alone accounts for US\$ 115 billion out of this total investment. It is also a spectacular achievement that Indian

investments in ASEAN between April 2019 and March 2022 are about US\$ 55 billion. But more than US\$ 51 billion of Indian investments are concentrated in Singapore. This is lopsided economic engagements and requires attention and appropriate action. In other words, India's trade and investment ties with nine other ASEAN countries may be enhanced and potential areas of trade and investment can be explored. It will not only increase India-ASEAN economic engagements but also would mean that India's trade and investment relations are not just Singapore-centric.

New Imperatives

Even then the speed with which India-ASEAN relations has improved at least since the "Look East Policy" was rechristened as "Act East Policy" is remarkable. There are several reasons that account for this. First, improving economic and security ties with ASEAN has been a flagship foreign policy agenda of the current Government for last eight years. The attention that has been given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself to deepen dialogue, diplomacy, economic and defence trade has enabled the relationship to gather considerable steam. Second, India's economic achievements, energetic role in global affairs, articulation of a clear Indo-Pacific policy emphasizing inclusivity have also injected confidence in ASEAN leadership that strengthening ties with India are in the best interest of ASEAN. Third, rise of China initially boost ASEAN-China relations and trade, and investment relations between them boomed. But China's ambition to establish a Beijing-centric hegemonic order in the region caused high anxiety in ASEAN capitals. Chinese claim of sovereignty in vast swathes of South China Sea clashed with the interest of some ASEAN member states. ASEAN began to look for a hedging strategy where India prominently figured in the minds of strategic analysts in ASEAN countries. Fourth, the relative waning of the US attention to this region in the backdrop of growing Chinese assertiveness also made India's substantive role in the region a necessity.

Thus, despite initial years of indifference, very slow improvement in relations in subsequent years, change in mutual attitude and behaviour coming only after the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical transformations of recent years have catapulted India-ASEAN ties in a more positive and dynamic direction. The Chinese wolf-warrior foreign relations, the Trump Phenomenon in the United States, the lethal COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine War, the Taiwan Strait crisis have made it imperative for India and ASEAN to fortify their defence and security cooperation and strengthen their economic collaborations. It is only logical and relevant that India and ASEAN are celebrating 30 years of closer dialogues and diplomacy and have designated 2022 as India-ASEAN Friendship Year.

India did not have much of defence and security ties with ASEAN countries, but off late a good beginning has been made by India even in the field of arms trade with some of the ASEAN member states. While joint military exercises with ASEAN members and training of military officers in Indian military institutions have been going on for years, India has come forward to fulfil the desire of some of the countries to strengthen their defence capabilities by

selling Brahmos Missiles. The Philippines was the first country to buy the state-of-the-art Brahmos missile and negotiations with Vietnam and Indonesia are reportedly taking place. Malaysia too has shown interest to buy this missile. Moreover, according to reports some ASEAN countries have also expressed interest in buying Light Combat Aircraft and Light Combat Helicopters from India. Such sales have the potential to build mutual trust, strengthen defence capabilities and contribute to regional peace and security. While India's role is still modest compared to other major powers, the future prospects of India's contribution to regional security appears optimistic.

Way Forward

Both the sides, while steering the relationship into the future, should exercise caution; and high expectations should be kept in check, so that pragmatic cooperation can get breathing space. First of all, ASEAN has to understand the rationale behind India opting out of the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) Agreement and not fully joining the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity. Secondly, India should always keep it in mind that the ASEAN is not a homogeneous body and there could be 10 different views on any issue, for instance, on the level of threat that comes from China or the best method to make China a cooperative stakeholder. Third, India needs to convince the ASEAN members that its participation in the QUAD Security Initiative is not going to undermine the ASEAN centrality and that India would give its full participation to all kinds of multilateral and unilateral exercises it sponsors in the region. Fourth, the visions enshrined in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) of India and ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) will face hurdles on the way of their implementation, but the large convergence of views reflected in these two documents need to be carefully nurtured and robustly implemented.

In the prevalent geopolitical hurly-burly in the Indo-Pacific region, India and ASEAN need one another more than ever before. Besides working towards economic growth and development in respective countries, what is required today is assuming "collective responsibility", in the words of India's Naval Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar, to confront challenges, such as terrorism, drugs trafficking, piracy, natural disasters, cybercrimes, pandemics, climate change and many more. The positive convergence of thoughts of Indian and ASEAN leaders — multipolarity, multilateralism, non-use of military threats, peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for State Sovereignty and international law, non-interference in internal affairs - can provide the real ballast to navigate the difficult waters of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean.

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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