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AIC
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AIC COMMENTARY

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ASEAN Summits 2021: Major Takeaways

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Under the Chairmanship of Brunei Darussalam, the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits and related summits took place in the fourth week of October 2021 in virtual format. These summits focused on sustainable economic development of the ASEAN region, digital transformation of 4IR, restoration of stability and democracy and Indo-Pacific construct. In the light of these developments, this commentary highlights the major takeaways for India from the Summit statements and declarations. This also underlines the importance of ASEAN-India partnership in the emerging geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

1. Introduction

The October 2021 was a remarkable month in the history of ASEAN-India relationship with several numbers of meetings, dialogues and summits. Most important among all of those were the 18th ASEAN-India Summit, held on 28 October 2021, and, the 16th East Asia Summit, conducted on 27 October 2021. These were in parallel to the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits and related events based on the theme of “We Care, We Prepare and We Prosper”, chaired by Brunei Darussalam. Table 1 presents the set of summits took place in October 2021 and Appendix 1 represents the major statements and declarations issued by ASEAN and its partner countries/organizations at the 38th and 39th Summit.

India’s dialogue partnership and relations with ASEAN are set to reach new heights in 2022 with completion of 30 years celebrating the ASEAN-India Year of Friendship. Throughout 2021, both the sides have designed the shape of the ASEAN-India partnership in a futuristic way through discussions and dialogues.

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The ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS, in collaboration with the India EXIM Bank; Vietnam Institute of India and Southwest Asian Studies (VIISAS), Hanoi; ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC), Jakarta; and few other institutions, either from India or from the ASEAN region, organised, coordinated and assisted in few such dialogues to discuss issues in supply and value chains, challenges and opportunities in connectivity projects and potential for future avenues of partnerships. Conducted in the third and fourth weeks of October 2021, these events highlighted the increasing importance of resilient supply and value chains in the post Covid-19 period, inclusion of Northeast India in connectivity projects not as a gateway but as hub of networking and connectivity linking Indo-Pacific countries, enhancing people-to-people contacts to accommodate the local interests and utilizing legacies from the past in the contemporary models of human development.

Taking ASEAN partners alongside, India has expressed its desire to continue its work in the Indo-Pacific region in the fields of 4th Industrial Revolution and digital transformation, sustainable development, care economy, “connecting the connectivities”, and, Strategic and Holistic Initiative to Link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters (ASEAN SHIELD) while maintaining ASEAN centrality and their vision of ASEAN Community post-2025 based on Strategic Policy Framework on Promoting Adaptive ASEAN Community.

Table 1: ASEAN Summit, 2021

Particulars	Summit
ASEAN	38 th and 39 th Summits
ASEAN-India	18 th Summit
ASEAN-Australia	1 st Summit
ASEAN-China	24 th Summit
ASEAN-Korea	22 nd Summit
ASEAN-US	9 th Summit
ASEAN-Japan	24 th Summit
ASEAN Plus Three	24 th Summit
ASEAN-Russia	4 th Summit

Source: Authors' own

2. Major Highlights from the Summit Statements

(i) Indo-Pacific

Much in line with ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region and the Chair's statement post the latest edition of ASEAN-India Summit, the run-up events emphasized on an optimistic way to nourish India's potential in bridging the geographic, mental, infrastructural and

developmental gaps in the Indo-Pacific in a soft and smart way and not in an assertive way. The countries in the Indo-Pacific are diverse in their levels of development and their approach towards international relations and affairs; however, many of their global and regional challenges are common in nature. Therefore, the foundation of the Indo-Pacific attributes to addressing those common challenges together and not in silo.

India, being one of the oldest civilizations in the world, has inherited the mantra of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (the world is one family) and friendliness from its ancient makers. India is positioned well geopolitically and geo-strategically to support the modern-day vision of Indo-Pacific embracing partnership, trust and cooperation for each other. To achieve those great ambitions, however, India needs to fulfill its commitments in projects and policies, to the least. India’s recent endeavors like Sagarmala, Gati-Shakti, International Solar Alliance, Digital India, Skill India, Make-in-India, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), etc. are some initiatives right in the direction of connecting the missing dots and demonstrate its willingness to be a smart power in the Indo-Pacific. Convergence of domestic interests with the external and international backdrops will empower India and ensure win-win for all.

(ii) Digital Transformation and IR 4.0

ASEAN Digital Master Plan 2025 is the primary document adopted by ASEAN and endorsed by all of its partner organizations that visualizes the region to be a digital society and digital economy by 2025. It means a society where everyone in ASEAN will use digital technology to enhance their every-day lives; an ASEAN economy where each and every business will be able to interact digitally and will use technologies to improve their skills and transactions; a larger economic space where all ASEAN member states will expand their business interaction to ensure accessibility and availability for the consumers, and finally, a digital society and economy which will help the region in its Comprehensive Recovery Framework post the pandemic, Covid-19. In the 38th and 39th Summits, ASEAN has put priorities on digital transformation of the region and has sought for cooperation from all partners.

Table 2 presents further details on this. Like most other partner countries, India has committed to assist ASEAN through capacity building measures, sharing of best practices for MSMEs, healthcare, start-ups, youth empowerment, etc.

Table 2: Mention of Digital Economy in Statements Issued by ASEAN and Its Partner Countries in 2021 Summits

China	Japan	South Korea	USA	India	Australia
Action Plan on Implementing the ASEAN-China Partnership on Digital Economy Cooperation (2021-2025).	ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive project.	ASEAN-ROK Financial Cooperation Center Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish the ASEAN-Korea Industrial Innovation Centre ASEAN-Korea Standardization Joint Research Centre ASEAN-ROK Science and Technology Cooperation Centre.	ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence.	Line of Credit of USD 1 billion for supporting physical and digital connectivity projects	ASEAN-Australia cooperation on digital economy and digital standards through the extended AUD 5 million ASEAN-Australia Digital Standards Initiative

Source: Authors' own

(iii) Connecting the Connectivities and Sub-regionalism

From the perspectives of ASEAN, the region would like to see India playing a more responsible role in Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific. Completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway would be a necessary step towards that direction. To “connect the connectivities”, ASEAN also expects India to cooperate in sustainable infrastructure, capacity building activities, ensuring a business environment suited for more investments, and, digital infrastructure (Table 3). ASEAN and India are in discussion for quite some time on ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Agreement and ASEAN-India Air Transport Agreement. These agreements are required to be completed. The importance of the sub-regional and inter-regional groupings was mentioned in the joint statement as well indicating priorities for the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Mekong sub-regional cooperation frameworks including Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and so on. The fact is that projects under these groupings will benefit the entire regional connectivity architecture and help ASEAN in building the ASEAN Community. In the Chair’s statement, India’s continued

cooperation in sub-regional development, including through the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and India's commitment to align sub-regional growth with the comprehensive development of ASEAN has been acknowledged.

Connectivity does not only reflect through physical and digital connectivity but also through people-to-people contacts. Showing their promptness in improving the P2P contacts in the region, both India and ASEAN have been working relentlessly. Hence, the next significant aspect in ASEAN-India relations is augmenting people's involvement through dialogues including Delhi Dialogue, ASEAN-India Youth Summit, ASEAN-India Student Exchange Programmes, programmes conducted by Nalanda University, ASEAN-India Media Exchange Programmes and so on. India is also supporting ASEAN in ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ACHL) 'to designate tangible and intangible cultural heritage assets of outstanding regional value, which exemplify the rich and diverse heritage of ASEAN'. Involvement of common people in programmes upholding the shared heritages and cultural cooperation is set to raise awareness about the region, its unique features and identities.

(iv) Environment, Natural Disaster and ASEAN SHIELD

Environment, biodiversity, natural disasters received priorities in the bucket list of ASEAN Summits this year as usual. The regional grouping is implementing Strategic and Holistic Initiative to Link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters (ASEAN SHIELD) to enhance the region's capacity in facing any kind of disaster and manage those situations in a well-prepared way. Prevention and management of zoonoses, including supporting each other through research and studies, data sharing, information exchange and usage of technological tools are important and the joint statement mentioned about this. Being part of non-traditional security issues, environment, biodiversity, climate change and preparations for natural disaster needs comprehensive and coordinated approach not only from India and ASEAN, but from rest of the countries in the Indo-Pacific as well. ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region, therefore, has acknowledged these issues taking cues from India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). On its part, India has committed to enhance collaboration in addressing the climate change issues with ASEAN. India, in its statement, has also committed to assist ASEAN in capacity building to prepare for, respond to and recover from any damage caused by any natural disaster. India needs to cooperate with ASEAN in implementation of ASEAN SHIELD. Table 4 illustrates further details on ASEAN SHIELD.

Table 3: Mention of Connectivity Projects and Role of Different ASEAN Partners as Specified in the Respective Statements

China	Japan	South Korea	USA	India	Australia
<p>ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the MPAC 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adopted in November 2019</p> <p>ASEAN-China Air Transport Agreement (AC-ATA).</p> <p>Mekong- Lancang Cooperation (MLC) and contribution of the MLC to ASEAN’s development objectives.</p> <p>China- Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative- New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (CCI- ILSTC).</p> <p>BIMP-EAGA-China Cooperation (BECC</p> <p>China-Laos Railway</p>	<p>Japan’s Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in line with the “Connecting the Connectivities” initiative.</p> <p>ASEAN-Japan Air Services Agreement</p> <p>ASEAN-Japan Transport Partnership (AJTP) towards improved regional connectivity.</p> <p>Japan-ASEAN Connectivity Initiative (2020)</p>	<p>ASEAN-ROK Air Services Agreement (AK- ASA)</p> <p>Support the BIMP-EAGA and Mekong sub-regional frameworks</p> <p>BIMP-EAGA- ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to support sub- regional projects and developments.</p>	<p>US initiatives supporting connectivity in line with the “Connecting the Connectivities” approach</p> <p>Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP)</p>	<p>Supporting MPAC 2025 and timely completion of the India- Myanmar- Thailand Trilateral Highway as well as its extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia and VietNam</p> <p>ASEAN-India Air Transport Agreement (AI- ATA) and the ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Agreement (AI- MTA).</p> <p>proposed Line of Credit of USD 1 billion for supporting physical and digital connectivity projects</p>	<p>ASEAN- Australia Smart Cities Trust Fund.</p> <p>Support to BIMP-EAGA, ACMECS- Australia provides AU\$ 232 million for Mekong- Australia Partnership to support economic integration and development in the Mekong sub- region</p>

Source: Authors’ own

Table 4: ASEAN SHIELD and Responses of ASEAN Partner Countries

China	Japan	ROK	USA	India	Australia
ASEAN-Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) Plus China	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) Plus Japan Japan supports the implementation of AADMER Work Programme 2021-2025, ASEAN Declaration on One ASEAN One Response, AHA Centre, capacity building of the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ERAT), Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA) Project. Japan provides support through the Southeast Asia Disaster Risk Insurance Facility (SEADRIF).	ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) Plus ROK ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) Plus ROK	East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) ASEAN Plus United States of America Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC + US)	East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)	Support for the AADMER Work Programme 2021-2025 and the critical work of the AHA Centre

Source: Authors' own

(v) Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar

The other important factor for ASEAN is providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, which has experienced its latest military coup in early February 2021. ASEAN has put a restriction on political representation from Myanmar to the ASEAN Summits; but pledges to support the country on humanitarian grounds. This goes true for its dialogue and strategic partners including India. Implementation of the Five-point Consensus and providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar through AHA centre are few aspects covered in the

ASEAN-India joint statement. Both India and Myanmar have discussed the recent developments in Myanmar. India supported ASEAN's final calls for the release of the political prisoners in Myanmar, Five-Point Consensus of the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on 24 April 2021, immediate end to the violence in the conflict-ridden country. India also focused on constructive dialogue to ensure a peaceful resolution of the crisis. ASEAN has recruited a Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair to facilitate mediation of the dialogue process. This will be supported by the ASEAN Secretary General and AHA centre. India's in-kind contribution of US\$ 200,000 in medical supplies to support ASEAN's efforts in providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar was acknowledged by ASEAN. The issue of Myanmar was not mentioned in ASEAN-China joint statement indicating responsibilities being shared by other partner countries like Japan, Korea, India and Australia.

(vi) South China Sea

As China continues with its assertive approach in the South China Sea, tension in the region escalated. In the recent past, China faced standoffs with Malaysia and Indonesia, whereas two Vietnamese boats were sunk by the Chinese. In response, China has faced backlash from the USA. India too has, on numerous occasions, reminded the world about the importance of UNCLOS and maintenance of freedom of navigation on the seas and oceans. Not only ASEAN, but Australia and Japan have also maintained the stand as South China Sea is central to the world's maritime trade and connectivity. The Chairman's statement released at the last ASEAN Summit mentioned the following on South China Sea issue;

“...the salience of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, prosperity, safety, and freedom of navigation in and overflight above the SCS, and stressed the need for peaceful resolution of disputes, without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)”

ASEAN has emphasized on non-militarized activities, reclamation of land on the islands, and avoidance of coercive behavior in the South China Sea to maintain peace and security. Full implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and finalization of the Code of Conduct (COC) were also mentioned in the Chairman's statement. There is a growing perception about looking at militarization of South China Sea as a threat not only by the extra-regional actors but also by ASEAN as evident in the latest statements and developments.

(vii) Economy, Sustainable Development and ASEAN

Economy and sustainable development have begun to play central roles in ASEAN-led multilateralism. It is often argued that middle and small powers need to depend on economic

multilateralism to benefit from the global economic system and structures. This is true in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific regions especially when economy is interconnected with sustainable development. As China and the USA, two giant economies are constantly pushing each other back geo-strategically and geo-economically, regional powers like ASEAN economies need to be pragmatic to ensure welfare for its people. The 38th and 39th ASEAN Summit statements focused on Blue Economy, Care Economy, post-pandemic economic recovery and sustainable economy to achieve its goals. In the month of November, at the APEC meeting, chaired by New Zealand on virtual mode, 21 countries’ leaders focused on pandemic recovery economic model and climate change induced economic losses as well. Discussions in these recent multilateral economic platforms are leading us to favor sustainable economic model founded on local and regional experiences and green economies. At the East Asia Summit too, the echo on the same could be heard as Covid-19 pandemic and climate change induced threats have partially jeopardized the multilateral trading system and economic governance globally. For more details, refer Table 5.

Table 5: Sustainable Development, Green Growth and ASEAN Partners

China	Japan	South Korea	USA	India	Australia
<p>Promotes sustainable and equitable development through the implementation of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan IV (2021-2025).</p> <p>ASEAN-China Year of Sustainable Development Cooperation till 2022.</p> <p>ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue</p>	<p>Strengthen cooperation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030</p>	<p>Support to promote equitable and sustainable development across the ASEAN Community by aligning sub-regional growth with the comprehensive development of ASEAN.</p>	<p>strengthen collaboration on biodiversity conservation, environment and energy, as well as promote sustainable development and green growth in the region, including through ACSDSD and ASEAN-U.S. dialogues on environment and climate change</p>	<p>Further enhancing collaboration in addressing climate change issues, conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources as well as enhancing regional and sub-regional capacities on disaster management, and promoting sustainable and equitable development.</p> <p>Both ASEAN and India to share best practices and lessons learned, to improve the coordination of existing ASEAN processes and</p>	<p>Bio-Circular-Green economy</p>

(ACSDSD)				mechanisms, with a view to facilitating the implementation ASEAN SHIELD	
Bio-Circular Green (BCG) Economy Model, and the Belt and Road Ecological and Environment Cooperation Plan				Green ASEAN Community support	

Source: Authors' own

Concluding Remarks

Wide-ranging political-security partnerships, economic complementarities and geo-strategic synergies have made the ASEAN-India relationship a special one. At the socio-cultural level too, the cultural and civilizational similarities between ASEAN and India are noteworthy. The Act East Policy and IPOI have brought into the sphere of ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership optimism and this will drive both the sides in exploring more vistas of cooperation. Similarly, the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific will be the guiding principle for ASEAN to navigate further and help creating a sustainable, development-oriented and peaceful region.

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Appendix 1: Important Statements and Declarations from ASEAN Summits and related Events, October 2021

Sl. No.	Title of the Statement	Involved Party	Primary aspect covered	Date of Release
1	Chairman’s Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits	ASEAN	Summit Declaration	26/10/2021
2	ASEAN Strategic Policy Framework on Promoting an Adaptive ASEAN Community of Greater Understanding, Tolerance and a Sense of Regional Agendas among the Peoples of ASEAN	ASEAN	Towards ASEAN Community Building Exercise	26/10/2021
3	Declaration on the Elimination of Bullying of Children in ASEAN	ASEAN	Social Issue Covering Young Children	26/10/2021
4	ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Cooperation in Support of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework	ASEAN	Cooperation With China	26/10/2021
5	ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Upholding Multilateralism	ASEAN	Multilateralism	26/10/2021
6	ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy	ASEAN	Economic	26/10/2021
7	ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on the Blue Economy	ASEAN	Economic	26/10/2021
8	Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the Strategic and Holistic Initiative to Link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters (ASEAN Shield)	ASEAN	Emergency Responses	26/10/2021
9	ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on the Reformulation and Production of Healthier Food and Beverage options	ASEAN	Health	26/10/2021
10	ASEAN Declaration on Promoting Competitiveness, Resilience and Agility of Workers for the Future of Work	ASEAN	Socio-Economic	26/10/2021
11	ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to the 26 th Session of the Conference of the Parties to	ASEAN	Environment, Climate Change	26/10/2021

	the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP26)			
12	Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration On The Importance Of The Family For Community Development And Nation-Building	ASEAN	Community Building	26/10/2021
13	ASEAN-China Joint Statement On Enhancing Green And Sustainable Development Cooperation	China	Cooperation With China In Sdgs	26/10/2021
14	Chairman's Statement Of The 24th ASEAN-China Summit	China	Cooperation With China	26/10/2021
15	ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Statement On Digital Development	USA	Cooperation With USA In Digital Transformation	26/10/2021
16	Chairman's Statement Of The 9th ASEAN-United States Summit	USA	Cooperation With USA	26/10/2021
17	Joint Statement Of The 22nd ASEAN-Republic Of Korea Summit On Advancing ASEAN-Republic Of Korea Cooperation For People-Centered Community Of Peace And Prosperity	ROK	Cooperation With ROK In Community Building, Peace And Prosperity	26/10/2021
18	Chairman's Statement Of The 22nd ASEAN-Republic Of Korea (Rok) Summit	ROK	Cooperation With ROK	26/10/2021
19	Chairman's Statement Of The 1st ASEAN-Australia Summit	Australia	Cooperation With Australia	27/10/2021
20	Chairman's Statement of the 24 th ASEAN Plus Three Summit	ASEAN Plus Three	APT	27/10/2021
21	Chairman's Statement of the 24th ASEAN-Japan Summit	Japan	Cooperation With Japan	27/10/2021
22	Chairman's Statement of the 16th East Asia Summit	East Asia Summit	EAS	27/10/2021

23	Chairman's Statement of the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations	Russia	Cooperation With Russia	28/10/2021
24	ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region	India	Cooperation With India On Indo-Pacific	28/10/2021
25	Chairman's Statement of the 18th ASEAN-India Summit	India	Cooperation With India	28/10/2021



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About AIC

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 is closely working with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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