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Fostering Future ASEAN-India Collaboration: A Strategic Five-Pronged Agenda

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Abstract: ASEAN and India share strong political, institutional, cultural and economic relations. Over the last three decades, diplomatic relations between two regions have rapidly grown from sectoral dialogue partnership to comprehensive strategic partnership. However, given the common interests and shared prospective, there continues to be a great scope to further strengthen the ties. This commentary proposes five-pronged strategy - gearing partnership in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing sub-regional multilateralism, engaging in non-traditional security cooperation, embracing diaspora & expats, and connecting leisure & tourism for boosting ASEAN-India Relations.

South East Asia and India share strong cultural and civilization ties which goes back to thousands of years. However, the meaningful engagement between ASEAN and India began in the post-Cold war era only. Between 1967 (the year in which ASEAN was established) and early 1990s (when the Cold War ended), there was little interaction between ASEAN and India at the multilateral level. This was primarily a result of the prevailing international political system, different views on Cold War politics, domestic conflicts and regional tensions. Fortunately, after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the new beginning of India-ASEAN relationship commenced. Though changes in international structure and the demise of the bipolar world paved the way for closer relations between ASEAN and India, economic liberalization and expansion of ASEAN also played a vital role in it. The emphasis

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on trade as a key element of economic development strategy, driven by economic liberalization in both India and ASEAN countries, strengthened the willingness of these nations to forge closer connections with each other. In the late 1990s, ASEAN also took a front-seat in the Southeast Asian geopolitical affairs when Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar became its members. Geographically this completed ASEAN as an organization representing Southeast Asia at the regional and global level. This new embrace of the ASEAN brought dramatic changes in India's interactions with the organization, and New Delhi began to see it as a genuine representative of Southeast Asia. On this account, India's perception towards ASEAN became 'a pivot in Indian Grand strategy', 'a zone of economic opportunity', and 'a region of cultural and civilizational confluence', that led to further and concrete interaction between two regions. ASEAN-India leveraged its official relations to summit level in 2002, demonstrating a high level of interaction under a multilateral framework.

In 2012, the collaboration between the two regions evolved into a strategic partnership, fostering deeper cooperation across various sectors, including agriculture, environment, forestry, science and technology, trade and commerce, tourism, new and renewable energy, IT, space, and small and medium enterprises. At this juncture, diplomatic ties have reached ambassadorial levels, with India appointing its ambassador to ASEAN's headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2013. Furthermore, India's shift from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy in 2014 underscores the heightened importance accorded to ASEAN in India's foreign policy. Notably, in 2022, after 30 years of diplomatic dialogue, ASEAN and India elevated their relationship to the status of a comprehensive strategic partnership. The established political and institutional engagement between the two regions have prepared a robust ground for future collaborations. This strong foundation sets the stage for the implementation of a five-pronged strategy, signaling a promising avenue for continued cooperation between ASEAN and India.

Gearing Partnership in the Indo Pacific

Primarily, the evolving Indo-Pacific strategy, embraced with enthusiasm by both India and ASEAN, will play a crucial role in shaping their collaborative efforts to connect the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in the years ahead. While India holds a pivotal role in the Indian Ocean, there is a concerted effort to enhance its presence in the Pacific region. Situated strategically between the Indian and Pacific oceans, ASEAN has already formulated the ASEAN Outlook of the Indo Pacific (AOIP) as a visionary framework for regional engagement. Additionally, India and select ASEAN member states have adopted and

partnered in the Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to bolster economic cooperation in these two vital oceans. In this context, India and ASEAN share common interests in fostering cooperation in the Indian and Pacific oceans, actively engaging in regional development. The Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiatives (IPOI) by India and the ASEAN Outlook of the Indo Pacific present significant potential for substantial cooperation between the two regions.

Enhancing Sub-regional Multilateralism

Sub-regional multilateralism is one way of interactions and connectivity between India and ASEAN. For example, The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) includes South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, particularly India, and two ASEAN members; Thailand and Myanmar. BIMSTEC platform provides an excellent opportunity for expanding cooperation on Trade, Investment and Development, Environment and Climate Change, Security, Agriculture and Food Security, People-to-People Contact, Science, Technology, and Innovation, and Connectivity.

India is also connected with some ASEAN members in the mainland Southeast Asia (namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand) through the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC). The MGC will be another mechanism for India and the Lower Mekong region to enhance cooperation in tourism, culture, education, and transport & communication. To be precise, in 2025, MGC will be completing 25 years of its establishment. The occasion could be an important milestone for India and the Mekong countries to pursue further strategic engagements especially in terms of human resource development and to enrich its strong civilizational and cultural connectivity.

Engaging in Non-Traditional Security Cooperation

Amidst the contemporary uncertainties in the world, non-traditional security issues have become a matter of serious concern. Both India and ASEAN have been facing multiple non-traditional securities challenges such as food security, economic security, maritime safety & security etc. To cope with these challenges and attain sustainable development goals (SDGs), India and ASEAN, as Global South partners, could share experiences, transfer knowledge and technology. For this, people to people interactions via training, short courses, and field visits need to be enhanced for the people from ASEAN and India.

Embracing Diaspora and Expats

India boasts a considerable diaspora spread across the globe, with overseas Indians residing in various regions. The Indian diaspora and expatriates, living and working in diverse parts of the world, have not only attained economic success but have also played a pivotal role in fostering connections between India and their host countries. Their robust economic engagement and professionalism, particularly in Southeast Asia, including ASEAN member countries, are poised to serve as crucial mechanisms in advancing collaboration between India and ASEAN.

Connecting Leisure and Tourism

Tourism and leisure activities have emerged as a growing trend among visitors from both India and ASEAN. The working generation and family tourists from both sides are increasingly exploring the rich and captivating cultures and attractions in India and ASEAN countries. The shared elements and commonalities in ways of life, including food, music, arts, and more, create a sense of familiarity and comfort for visitors, facilitating their seamless adaptation to local cultures when traveling to India and Southeast Asia. At this juncture, there is an opportunity for ASEAN and India to further develop comprehensive data and information on tourist packages, travel destinations, and introduce innovative travel patterns such as well-being tourism and yoga retreats. This collaborative effort can enhance the tourism experience and promote new avenues for exploration in both regions.

Conclusion

ASEAN and India have strong diplomatic, political, economic and cultural ties. Over three decades of diplomatic relations between both regions have grown phenomenally. However, the two neighbors share common interests and perspectives to further enhance intra-regional cooperation. To strengthen future collaboration, the five-pronged directions, Gearing partnership in the Indo-Pacific, Enhancing Sub-regional Multilateralism, Engaging Non-Traditional Security Cooperation, Embracing Diaspora and Expats, and Connecting Leisure and Tourism will be helpful and effective. In summary, these five prongs provide a comprehensive framework for ASEAN and India to deepen their collaboration across various dimensions, ensuring a multifaceted and mutually beneficial partnership for years to come.

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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