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**AIC**  
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

# AIC COMMENTARY

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## India-ASEAN Relations: Need for Deeper Engagement

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**Abstract:** *ASEAN-India relations have matured over the years. However, the true potential is yet to be realised. Identifying the constraints and adopting remedies, expanding and deepening the areas of cooperation already in place are necessary for the benefits of both the parties. This commentary looks in to the evolution of India ASEAN relations and suggest specific measures to further boost the partnership.*

India's Look East Policy for the first time articulated the need for India to expand its relations with the member countries of Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. The Cold War prevented India and ASEAN to forge cooperation in view of political differences over a number of regional issues and the Post-Cold War developments made it imperative for both ASEAN and India to begin a new era of cooperative relationship.

It was a relatively leisurely process. Part of the reasons was China's unprecedented ascension as a regional power in what was known then as the Asia-Pacific region. India's economic reforms came much later than that of China and ASEAN found it easier to do business with China than with India. Moreover, China also quietly worked against India's entry into regional mini-laterals that had become an important aspect of Asia-Pacific dynamism. China was a sectoral dialogue partner, full dialogue partner, regular participant in all ASEAN activities before India could become one. China's economic miracles attracted ASEAN members and some of them still entertained suspicion about India's rise and strategic motivations.

Things rapidly changed with India's economic growth story, which was accompanied by growing Chinese assertiveness in regional affairs. Compared to China, India's economic growth was much slower. But India over the years came

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to be perceived as a counterweight to Chinese influence in the region. Most ASEAN countries were tight-lipped about China's muscular naval activities and unlawful territorial claims in South China Sea, but rise of India's profile was quietly appreciated in the region, though not openly stated for fear of antagonizing China.

Then came the Act East Policy when Narendra Modi government assumed power and adopted a much more intense and expansive approach to India's relations with ASEAN. While the ACT East Policy encompassed a region much beyond ASEAN, the core of India's new initiatives centred around ASEAN. With the emergence of Indo-Pacific as a newer regional concept, India continued to believe in ASEAN centrality as the right way to promote peace, stability and growth in the region.

Initially, ASEAN's discomfort over the Indo-Pacific concept was palpable. There was fear that this new regional construct would make ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum dysfunctional or irrelevant. The revival of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue consisting of the United States, India, Japan and Australia further heightened ASEAN's apprehensions. The formation of AUKUS added to ASEAN's anxieties. As India and the United States stayed away from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, did not join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), did not support Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN members felt that ASEAN would no longer be in the driver's seat for steering regional economic and strategic affairs.

However, as and when India, the US, Japan and Australia supported ASEAN centrality in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, there appears to be a smoothening influence over ASEAN. The initial hesitation to embrace the Indo-Pacific construct gave a way to release of an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN also realised that Indo-Pacific regional construct both in terms of growth prospect and strategic considerations has come to stay, even as the European Union, France, Germany, UK, Italy and other countries have also realised the importance of the Indo-Pacific and have come up with their Indo-Pacific Strategy Reports.

The Modi government has done a lot to engage the ASEAN by inviting all ASEAN Heads of State to its Republic Day celebrations, by signing free trade agreements, by seeking to enhance two way trade and investment relations, by holding naval exercises with some ASEAN member countries, and by selling weapons to some ASEAN countries. There is a recognisable convergence between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.

However, the potentials of cooperation between India and ASEAN are huge and the performances are too little. Identifying the constraints and adopting remedies, expanding and deepening the areas of cooperation already in place are necessary

for the benefits of both the parties. The following are a few suggestions that are worth considering:

First, ASEAN community should be sensitized about India's ability to assist in the area of disaster management. India's success stories as a first responder to disasters, such as earthquake in Nepal, water crisis in Maldives, Tsunami in South and Southeast Asia should be showcased through public diplomacy, thus going beyond the seminar rooms.

Second, the concerns and worries over the slow implementation of connectivity initiatives of India need to be addressed. ASEAN leaders should be made aware of negative consequences of Chinese BRI, which often receives kudos for its surface attractiveness. The Chinese connectivity initiatives are in the form of hub and spoke where the capital, raw materials, engineers are provided by Beijing and the Chinese government is the sole decision maker and the recipient countries are the takers. That the Chinese projects have led to debt crisis in many recipient countries and some of the projects are opaque and environment unfriendly are increasingly known but not properly disseminated.

Third, India's initiatives should not appear to be in competition with China. It should be discernibly stand alone Indian initiatives to promote India-ASEAN relations. When newspaper articles and social media description always bring in a comparison with China, it does have negative repercussions in ASEAN countries. Some ASEAN members are already facing strategic dilemmas due to US-China emerging rivalry. On many areas of India-ASEAN collaborations, there is no need to make a public picture India vs. China. The narrative of India's engagement with ASEAN should be positive and here the role of public diplomacy is really crucial.

Fourth, Indian analysts should bring out the fact to the fore that ASEAN is a grouping that takes decision on the basis of consensus and ASEAN often finds it difficult to come up with a group position and that includes disputes related to South China Sea. Diplomacy should proceed accordingly without expecting the entire ASEAN community to take positions on certain issues and moving ahead with select ASEAN member countries to promote cooperative ties on case-by-case basis.

Fifth, India's trade and investment relations are largely centred on just one member country-- Singapore disproportionately dominates the trade and investment figures. India should seek to expand trade and investment ties with other members in the ten member regional grouping, which is soon going to be ASEAN-11. Without that, India's engagement with ASEAN will remain only knee-deep.

## 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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