



## Navigating a World in Transition: Agenda for the ASEAN-India Partnership<sup>1</sup>

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The world is always in transition and nations are perpetually navigating that. But seriously, both terms are relative in their intent. A usage today of transition actually highlights the rate of change, rather than change itself. And navigation is perhaps more a description of compulsions rather than only of skills.

The last quarter century has seen many inflection points. Understandably, we focus particularly on major events in big nations. But the more consequential actually are the ones that are more universal. And to my mind, three of them stand out. The first is China's entry into the WTO in 2001 that had profound consequences for globalization. Second, is the financial crisis of 2008 which heralded a new era of rebalancing. And third, is the Covid pandemic of 2020 that exposed many of our socio-economic vulnerabilities and capacity constraints so starkly. The three are obviously closely interrelated.

Some other things have also happened in this period. Europe, for example, witnessed Brexit. The United States has reset terms vis-à-vis the world over multiple Administrations, in terms of engagement vis-à-vis the world across multiple administrations. A conflict in Ukraine has shaken Eurasia out of its strategic complacency. West Asia/Middle East is seeing longstanding issues and fissures exploding beyond expectations. In our own continent, territorial disputes and challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Based on speech made at 8th AINTT roundtable held in Singapore

to international law have become a significant recurring source of instability. The world has responded in different ways to different challenges in different geographies. In our own, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific and the maturing of the Quad are noteworthy for promoting global good.

Even growth and progress have shown a double-edged character. On the one hand, they have created prosperity on an unprecedented scale, bringing into being new forces of production, demonstrating the promise of technology and spurring the proliferation of connectivity. At the same time, we have also seen a leveraging of market shares and economic dependency, the weaponization of international economics and the strategization of connectivity. Data privacy and cyber security have become overriding concerns. The Covid experience in many ways, was the moment of truth. Since then, the quest for more resilient supply chains, trusted partners and diversified production have become the crucial agenda.

Whether it is challenges or indeed opportunities, the world today is clearly headed for re-globalization, not de-globalization. That is the transition that we – ASEAN and India – separately and together, have to navigate. The quality of our partnership will be influenced by the extent of convergence on all these domains. In the last three decades, we have built up a solid track record of cooperation that has served us both well. To take it to the next level, however, we must utilize the changing global situation to our advantage, rather than bemoan it as a departure from a norm with which we were all so comfortable. Let me offer some thoughts in that regard.

Global manufacturing and supply chains have started to transition. It could be even more so in emerging and critical technologies and the digital chain. Considerations beyond the efficiency of logistics and costs of products are coming into play. In India, we are seeing both the proliferation of Global Capability Centres and the expansion of manufacturing. To accelerate these trends, the Modi Government has announced the establishment of 12 new industrial parks. It has also doubled down on the infrastructure building that has made so much progress already in the last decade. Along with that, there is a deepening focus on enhancing the quality of India's talents and skills through vocational training, internships and expanding the education sector. Each of these could be opportunities for partnership between ASEAN and India.

In visualizing areas of cooperation, we are also targeting new domains and technologies that hold such visible potential. Both India and ASEAN are today more focused on realizing the value of green hydrogen and green ammonia. We are preparing for an era of electric mobility, green shipping and green steel. Our businesses will have to adjust accordingly. The digital world also opens up new possibilities as we all seek to collaborate to establish more payment platforms, data centres and semiconductor facilities.

The international economy is also contemplating changes that go beyond just technology. The unevenness of the spread of talent and availability of skills is today actually a very significant factor. It will be felt even more as we enter deeper into the knowledge economy and the requirements of AI. The solutions lie in devising greater mobility, both of human resources and of enterprises themselves. These understandably have socio-political consequences but will be key to remaining competitive. The increase of Global Capability Centres – already nearing 2000 in India – will be a continuing trend. Such mobility can be optimized only if we also invest in the training and preparation of skills. This will be increasingly important for our partnership.

Connectivity is another domain that merits attention. The post 1945 economic growth centers have naturally created new logistical demands. They are also correcting the distortions and disruptions of the colonial era. Recent conflicts and extreme climate events have only underlined the case for new connectivity initiatives. Where India is concerned, the Trilateral Highway to the East and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are major commitments. Understanding their implications is key to exploiting the opportunities they present. Digital and energy connectivity have also been the subject of recent conversations, especially between India and ASEAN. At the end of the day, collaborative connectivity will always be used better and regarded more positively than unilateral ventures.

India and ASEAN are major demographics whose emerging demands can not only support each other but become larger productive forces in the international economy. After all, together, we account for more than a quarter of world's population. Our GDP is similar and you are among our USD 100 billion plus trade accounts. Our consumer demands and life style choices are themselves major economic drivers. They will also shape the scale of services and connectivity. As we promote trade, tourism, mobility and education, the magnitude of our endeavours has a resonance far beyond the immediate domain. Our collaboration can also be crucial in addressing contemporary challenges. In an era of extreme climate events, ensuring food security is a major concern. Similarly, with the experience of global pandemics, preparing for health security is no less vital. There are lessons even from the recent past on both accounts.

There are, and there will be political challenges in our shared region that we will also have to address together. A prime example today is the situation in Myanmar. The interest, and I daresay perspective of those who are proximate will always be different. We do not have the luxury of distance or indeed of time. This is increasingly the case for HADR situations as well, as also of maritime safety and security. A stronger culture of self-help will only arise by putting our heads and our hands together.

The bonding between India and ASEAN is rooted in a deep cultural and civilizational connect. Nurturing that has a value in itself. In recent times, India has contributed to heritage restoration and conservation of art forms. Taking that forward is helpful in promoting deeper people-to-people understanding.

The India-ASEAN partnership, now in its fourth decade, holds immense possibilities. We have been an enthusiastic participant in all ASEAN-led forums. Additionally, our bilateral and trilateral engagements have contributed to our closeness. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) are making their impact felt as well. As the Indo-Pacific evolves, India has been expressive in its support for ASEAN's centrality and cohesion. We see it as an indispensable partner as well as a meeting ground. We have been equally clear about respect for international law, rules and norms. Both in approach and substance, our convergences have only grown over these last four decades. As we look ahead, this is a foundation from which we can aspire to higher ambitions.

## 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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