

Less nationalism, more connectivity: ASEAN leader

Motto is integration: Chutintorn Sam Gongsakdi. V.V. Krishnan

Connectivity projects can grow in the region only if there is a “political atmosphere”, and “nationalist rhetoric” is reduced, Chutintorn Sam Gongsakdi, Thailand’s Ambassador to India and a key official convening the ASEAN-India summit this week here, says in reference to the challenges of free trade negotiations, border trade logistics and the infrastructure in the northeastern States.

“Connectivity is important, but we are also at a point across the region when nationalism and populism are on the rise. To have connectivity work to its full potential, it is necessary to dial down the nationalistic rhetoric,” Mr. Gongsakdi told *The Hindu* in an interview ahead of the summit, which will see all 10 leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations assemble in Delhi for the 25-year commemorative summit on January 25 and as chief guests of the Republic Day parade.

On Monday, an ASEAN-India Business and Investment Meet and Expo brought Trade and Economy Ministers along with business delegations from ASEAN including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. Several officials will travel to Assam and other northeastern States to inspect the possibilities for industry and trade, which would connect to Southeast Asia through projects in the pipeline like the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and the Kaladan multi-modal transport corridor expected to be completed in the next few years.

However, Mr. Gongsakdi warned that unless India and ASEAN work out their reservations on free trade, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, they would not benefit from the infrastructure.

Looking at the long term

“Building of roads, that just needs engineering and money. But the other part, convincing all the parties that there will be more costs is the difficult one. In the end, regional integration and liberalisation can be good for your country, and make the leadership more popular, but people need to have patience to see the long-term benefits,” he said.

India’s worry

Over the past few years, the RCEP negotiations have floundered largely over Indian concerns on unfettered Chinese entry into Indian markets through free trade with the ASEAN countries.

Countries in the negotiations, which also include Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan and South Korea, besides those of ASEAN and India, are now calling for a hard deadline to end talks by the end of 2018.

The failure to forge an agreement could also cost bilateral trade between ASEAN countries and India, which is at present \$76 billion, well short of a projected \$200 billion, and is likely to be a major issue for discussion during the Summit on Thursday.

“We have to find a solution to India’s concerns about [the RCEP opening the door for] China trade as well ... we have to stop the lip service to ASEAN India ties and actually negotiate this through,” Mr. Gongsakdi said.

Maritime security, terrorism and cybersecurity will be highlighted in the joint statement, along with the “3Cs” of commerce, connectivity and culture, officials said.

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