

New Delhi brims with 'Look East' vibes

Aung San Suu Kyi with Narendra Modi, and Vietnam PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc arriving in New Delhi. Sandeep Saxena & AFP

Symbolism and ceremony will mark the 25th year commemorative summit of the ASEAN-India dialogue partnership on Thursday, but officials say security issues in the Indo-Pacific will be the focus of discussions among the 10 leaders of the Association of South East Asian Nations and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Maritime Cooperation & Security", the theme during the Leaders' Retreat, will find "prominent mention" in the joint statements, said officials involved in the planning. It is understood that Vietnam, which is tasked with drafting the statement, and India have both been keen on cooperation on Freedom of Navigation, access to waterways and countering piracy on the high seas as a key part of the Delhi Declaration, which would be seen as a strong message to China.

The 10 leaders of the ASEAN countries began arriving on Wednesday beginning with the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Phuc, and then followed by the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Laos, the President of the Philippines, Myanmar State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Sultan of Brunei, Darussalam. The last to arrive will be Indonesian President Joko Widodo on Thursday, after which the leaders will be hosted at the Rashtrapati Bhavan for lunch, followed by the traditional "Retreat" where leaders will meet informally for two hours. They will then gather for the plenary session of the ASEAN-India summit, opened by Mr. Modi, and this year's ASEAN Chair, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. On Friday, they will officiate as joint chief guests at the Republic Day parade.

Three 'C's

The ASEAN-India joint statement, on the theme of "Shared Values and Common Destiny" will focus on the "three Cs of connectivity, commerce and culture", along with the issues of maritime security, cybersecurity and cooperation on fighting terrorism, according to an official briefing ahead of the summit. Sources said other areas of divergence, that will not be in the joint statement could be taken up during the Retreat, where leaders will sit together informally in the majestic setting of the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Among them is the Rohingya issue, with the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh being delayed after many including the UN cited a lack of guarantees for their safety in Myanmar. India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh gave a statement supporting the process last week. However, the ASEAN-India grouping may find the issue too sensitive to broach in any formal way with Aung San Suu Kyi, an ASEAN envoy told *The Hindu*.

India's difficulties with the 16-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will also be on the agenda for talks, as most ASEAN countries are keen to conclude the negotiations by 2018-end.

While India is holding out over concerns of unfettered access to Chinese goods, and the lack of access for Indian services, Prime Minister Modi's address at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week, where he lashed out at protectionism, is being seen as a sign the government maybe more flexible.

Officials say India is keen to discuss its concerns over China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, this may not find as much traction.

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