

## The arc to Southeast Asia

This week India will host heads of state or government of all 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the Republic Day celebrations in a dramatic declaration of intent by New Delhi to boost India's ties with Southeast Asia. The year 2017 was an important landmark as India and the ASEAN commemorated 25 years of their partnership, 15 years of summit-level interaction, and five years of strategic partnership. The challenge now is to map out next steps in the India-ASEAN partnership at this time of unprecedented geopolitical flux in the wider Indo-Pacific.

There has been a sense of disillusionment on both sides about the present state of play in the relationship. While the ASEAN member states have been disappointed that India continues to punch below its weight in the region, New Delhi's expectations regarding a more robust support for its regional outreach too have not been met. India's capacity to provide development assistance, market access and security guarantees remains limited and ASEAN's inclination to harness New Delhi for regional stability remains circumscribed by its sensitivities to other powers. The interests and expectations of the two sides remain far from aligned, preventing them from having candid conversations and realistic assessments.

Though the Modi government's 'Act East' policy is aimed at enhancing India's strategic profile in East and Southeast Asia, New Delhi's main focus remains on South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. There has been a shift in emphasis, of course, with India moving away from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and asserting its centrality in the evolving geography of the Indo-Pacific. But it is no match for China's regional profile which is largely about viewing Southeast Asia as its backyard. India's economic focus too is not in tune with other regional powers which view ASEAN as an important market for exports and investments. India's export sector remains weak and the government's focus has shifted to boosting manufacturing domestically.

India's interest in ASEAN as a multilateral forum remains lacklustre as it continues to privilege bilateral partnerships to further its own interests. As New Delhi's gaze shifts to the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar and Thailand have emerged as key players in its southeastern outreach. The hope is to use these nations as a bridge to ASEAN. The temptation to prioritise these countries over others in ASEAN may also prevent others from looking at India as a regional stakeholder. New Delhi is signalling, perhaps inadvertently, that it is more interested in becoming a member of various regional organisations because of global power credentials even when its substantive engagement with such platforms remains limited.

It is important for India and ASEAN to chart out a more operational, though modest, agenda for future cooperation. The three Cs of commerce, connectivity and culture have been highlighted but a more granular perspective is needed in terms of a forging a forward-looking approach. There is no getting away from enhancing trade and economic linkages between India and ASEAN. They also need to focus on areas such as digital technologies. India, as a fast emerging major player, has significant comparative advantages. As Chinese giants begin to dominate the digital space in Southeast Asia and concerns rise about their ability to own data, the Indian IT sector may take some advantage of the seeming reluctance of ASEAN states to put all their eggs in the Chinese basket. India as a facilitator of the ASEAN-wide digital economy would not only challenge China but also emerge as an economic guarantor of its own.

Instead of talking about ASEAN-wide connectivity projects, New Delhi now needs to focus on more effective delivery of projects it is already committed to. In this context, prompt completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which will run from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, is key. The plan is to extend this highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in an attempt to project India's role in the emerging transportation architecture. With China having three times more commercial flights than India to Southeast Asia, improving air connectivity between India and ASEAN countries should also be high on the agenda. Besides, the Bay of Bengal can be used as an exploratory ground for the development of an India-ASEAN maritime framework.

Finally, the cultural connect between the two needs strengthening. While India offers scholarships to students from ASEAN states to study at Nalanda University, this initiative should be extended to the IITs and the IIMs. Tourism too can be further encouraged between India and the ASEAN with some creative branding by the two sides.

While India and the ASEAN have been very ambitious in articulating the potential of their partnership, they have been much less effective in operationalising their ideas. The need now is to focus on functional cooperation and make the idea of an India-ASEAN partnership more exciting.

*Harsh V. Pant is Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and Professor at King's College London*

Receive the best of The Hindu delivered to your inbox everyday!

Please enter a valid email address.

Marriage is a civil contract — adultery or divorce should have only civil consequences

END

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)

© **Zuccess App** by [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)