

**'India-ASEAN to focus on freedom of navigation'**

The statement on the maritime mechanism is significant as it is the first time that India has taken up forming of a special maritime mechanism with all the ASEAN heads of states at a single summit.

Maritime security and freedom of navigation featured prominently in the 'Delhi Declaration,' a joint statement that was issued after the plenary session of the Commemorative Summit.

The declaration indicated at common concern regarding the South China Sea and reaffirmed the "importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, and other lawful uses of the seas and unimpeded lawful maritime commerce."

Ms Saran also said that an agreement on maritime transport is under discussion as The Hindu had reported earlier. "A maritime transport MoU is being discussed and hope it will be finalised (in due course)," she said to the media.

The maritime domain has been in the centre of India's Act East diplomacy which aims to firm up India's position in the ASEAN and Asia Pacific region.

In recent public statements, the government of PM Narendra Modi has expressed support to 'rule of law' in the maritime sphere hinting at the growing military footprint of China in the South China Sea. Welcoming the heads of states at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, President Ram Nath Kovind also urged for upholding rule of law.

**END**

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