

Eastern challenge

The presence of the 10 leaders of the Association of South East Asian Nations ([ASEAN](#)) at the Republic Day celebrations this year is a testimony to the importance that Delhi attaches to relations with the region and the warmth of ASEAN political elites towards India. But that should not make anyone oblivious to the growing gap between the pace of change in the South East Asian strategic environment and India's capacity to respond. If Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) does not raise Delhi's game in the region, his much vaunted "Act East" policy could end up as further confirmation of independent India's underwhelming performance in Asia. From the very first Asian Relations Conference in 1947 to the recent annual summits with ASEAN leaders, India's delivery has fallen well below his promise. If India's claims for leadership of Asia were found wanting in the 1950s, Delhi turned its back on the region in the 1960s.

When India returned to Asia with its Look East Policy in the early 1990s, the region welcomed it with open arms. Although much progress has been made since, India's economic and political tentativeness surprised the ASEAN. The election of Modi and his decision to replace the "Look East policy" with the "Act East policy" has raised expectations of a more purposeful India in the region. The rise of China and its muscular approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea has increased the region's need for greater balance even as America's Asian trajectory turned uncertain under President [Barack Obama](#). His successor, Donald Trump, has queered the pitch by abandoning American leadership on economic globalisation. This has made the economic and security partnership, especially in the maritime domain with India, all the more important for the ASEAN.

For India, it is not a question of competing with China, which is not really possible given China's geographical advantages. The real challenge is meeting India's own targets. On trade, it is nowhere near reaching the goal of \$200 billion by 2020 set five years ago. Connectivity projects with the ASEAN, like the trilateral highway to Thailand via Myanmar, are years behind schedule. Delhi has struggled to meet the demand for wider and deeper maritime and defence partnerships in the region. All the three issues are at the top of the PM's talks with ASEAN leaders. Meeting India's declared objectives at the summit will need a decisive push from the PM to overcome bureaucratic and policy inertia.

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