

ASEAN rising — on India-Southeast Asia cooperation

As leaders of the 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations gathered in New Delhi this week, India's ties with ASEAN got a dose of both symbolism and substance. [The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit](#), followed by their attendance at the [Republic Day](#) parade as joint chief guests, underlined the new consensus on the need for Southeast Asia and India to boost cooperation. First, as the demand for goods in Western economies comes down, the region needs to look deeper within to grow markets and increase trade. Second, continuing tensions between the "great powers" — between the U.S. and Russia, or the U.S. and China — are forcing the unaligned countries of ASEAN and India to forge a common understanding. China's moves in particular, both its naval forays in the Indo-Pacific and its Belt and Road Initiative connectivity project, have the potential to change equations in the region. Third, as Singapore's Prime Minister and the Chairman of ASEAN, Lee Hsien Loong, reminded the world in an editorial, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his speech at the summit, India's cultural and trade ties with Southeast Asia go back 2,000 years — and with Southeast Asia having come out of the overhang of Cold War divisions, India and ASEAN have a unique opportunity to reap the potential of their geographic proximity. The Delhi Declaration they signed articulated their urgent concerns as ASEAN and India called for measures to deepen security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation, and connectivity. These include joint mechanisms for maritime transport, trade and a "code of conduct" for the South China Sea.

But it must not be forgotten that when ASEAN-India leaders last gathered together in New Delhi in 2012 to mark the 20th anniversary of the dialogue partnership, they had made a similar commitment to trade and maritime security, and several promises are yet to be realised. With trade with ASEAN at \$76 billion, India ranks lower than not just the U.S. and China, but also South Korea, Japan and Australia. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations launched in 2012 have been held up, largely because of Indian concerns over unfettered access to Chinese goods and ASEAN resistance to movement of Indian services and labour. The other big unfulfilled promise is on connectivity, between ASEAN countries and India, as well as India's connectivity through its Northeast to Myanmar and beyond. Work on the extension of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan multimodal highway, and Tamu-Kalay rail link to Myanmar has lagged behind deadlines. Border trade posts and infrastructure in the Northeast need much improvement to attract investment in the region. India and the ASEAN countries have much to gain from each other — but heavy-lifting is required to integrate India into the ASEAN equation. Else, shared history and culture and political leaderships in sync may only yield rousing summitry.

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