

ASEAN promises still to keep

India celebrated its 69th [Republic Day](#) with fanfare and a lot of international attention. Inviting the heads of state of the [ASEAN](#) was a remarkable feat, especially on the logistics and security side. India has not invited so many heads of state ever for the Republic Day.

Twenty-five years ago, in the post-Cold War world, when India was left somewhat marginalised, it looked towards the ASEAN with hope and expectation to re-socialise and reintegrate with the regional dynamism of Asia. It was also the time when India was not a part of a single Asian economic, politico-security dialogue mechanism. True to its spirit, the ASEAN embraced India as a partner, motivating Delhi to launch the Look East policy in 1992.

Now, when doubts have been cast about the efficacy of the ASEAN in dealing with hard-nosed strategic issues and keeping the flock together, India has returned the favour and embraced the ASEAN as the “driver of Asian regionalism”. The decision was also driven by the fact that in 2018, India and the ASEAN have entered the 26th year of their relationship — 2017 marked 25 years of their dialogue partnership, 15 years of summit-level, and five years of strategic partnership.

A major outcome of the summit is the Delhi Declaration. The declaration underscores the need for full and effective implementation of “Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea” and an early conclusion of the “Code of Conduct in the South China Sea”, thereby showing Delhi’s support to the ASEAN’s position on the dispute that also involves China. Another of India’s concerns at the multilateral forum lately has been terrorism. Emphasis on terrorism in the declaration demonstrates India’s attempts to muster greater support for its efforts in fighting terrorism through multilateral channels.

Even when the debates are on on polarising tendencies in the region with some even questioning the role of the “Quad” involving India, Japan, US, and Australia, Delhi has reiterated that the Quad could play a significant role in ensuring security in the Indo-Pacific region, including the ASEAN. Seemingly, the Quad is not likely to be an “exclusive club” in the long run, and would involve the ASEAN countries as well. The Delhi Declaration clearly signals that India is unlikely to embrace the Quad at the peril of the ASEAN.

The India-ASEAN dialogue partnership has come a long way in the past quarter century. From being a sectoral partner in 1992 to full dialogue partner in 1995, India and ASEAN are strategic partners today. With the ASEAN-India Summit, East Asia Summit, seven ministerial-level interactions including the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) Plus etc., and 30 sectoral dialogue mechanisms, it is evident that India has substantially engaged the ASEAN over the years.

However, several questions remain unanswered, and several aspirations are yet to be met. For one, while it is fine to celebrate India-ASEAN ties in isolation, a comparison with how other Asian powers have fared during this period is important. In the past 25 years, China has arguably emerged as the biggest stakeholder in the region, followed by Japan. Interestingly, in 1992, China was on a weaker footing vis-à-vis India in terms of relations with the ASEAN. With China’s launching of OBOR, and the Trump administration preoccupied elsewhere, the strategic and economic milieu of the region is swiftly changing. Countries, which are otherwise against China dominating the region, are also welcoming OBOR albeit with certain conditions.

India’s connectivity efforts, on the contrary, have been marred by procedural delays. While China is working on regional and inter-regional connectivity with projects such as cross-country railway networks with the ASEAN, India is still unable to complete projects initiated more than a decade

back. Deadlines for both Kaladan and India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have been repeatedly postponed for factors within and beyond India's control. It is important to expeditiously improve upon the under-utilised aspects of the physical, digital and transport connectivity.

In the declaration, the two sides agreed to "intensify efforts toward the swift conclusion of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement". Agreement on RCEP, however, is more difficult than it seems, and the biggest elephant in the room is China. India's trade imbalance with China further complicates the situation. Nevertheless, India's RCEP tightrope walk will be aimed at assuaging the concerns of domestic industry while also showing RCEP partners that India is an active partner in Asian regionalism. India's share of the ASEAN's external trade is currently less than three per cent. It urgently needs to improve stakes in ASEAN economies and regional supply-chain networks.

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