

The balancing act, in India-ASEAN ties

When you stand at the peak of a mountain, you get a full view of the path travelled and the road ahead that will take you to the next peak. The principal gain of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Commemorative Summit, held in New Delhi last week, is to provide ample clarity on what their partnership has achieved and where it should move in the future.

Scope for cooperation

A good way to begin is to listen to ASEAN voices. The participation of ASEAN leaders in a second summit in Delhi in five years and their historic presence as chief guests at the Republic Day celebrations convey a clear message: India is important to ASEAN; it is viewed as a benign power; and huge scope exists to develop cooperation with it.

When a President rolled back the red carpet

“We believe,” said Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as co-chair of the summit, “that India makes a major contribution to regional affairs, helping to keep the regional architecture open, balanced and inclusive.”

Recent developments in the Indo-Pacific region have lent special significance to the summit. China’s economic progress is welcomed, with every ASEAN nation keen to derive optimal benefit from it. But Beijing’s assertive diplomacy, strategic postures and coercive action in the South China Sea have combined to sour the environment. U.S. President Donald Trump, on the other hand, gives the impression that ASEAN’s priorities and concerns are unimportant. This mix has impelled ASEAN states to expect and encourage India to enhance its role as a balancer in the region.

For India, ASEAN is of vital importance both for strategic and economic considerations. New Delhi seeks to redefine the contours of its neighbourhood. Constraints and setbacks in South Asia and opportunities in Southeast Asia have led it to blur the traditional distinction between ‘immediate neighbourhood’ and ‘extended neighbourhood’. Friendly South Asians and welcoming Southeast Asians now constitute our new neighbourhood, with an eastward tilt.

Key areas

The summit’s Delhi Declaration reflects a mutual commitment “to further deepen and strengthen” the strategic partnership. Of its 36 paragraphs, nine are devoted to political-security cooperation and socio-cultural exchanges each, while 11 paragraphs deal with economic issues. The remaining sections refer to connectivity and cooperation in narrowing the development gap. Taken together, the measures, spelt out with precision, reveal the bold path the two sides have pledged to follow.

Delhi Declaration calls for joint fight against terror

On political and security cooperation, two themes stand out. Freedom of navigation and overflight “in the region” is of the highest importance. How the two sides deepen maritime cooperation and to what extent it is extended to practical collaboration among the navies of major ASEAN states and India will be watched closely. The other theme relates to India’s support to ASEAN efforts to obtain a legally binding Code of Conduct with China in the South China Sea. An unspoken idea, which may have been covered in bilateral meetings, is how to engage nations such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore and others in the deliberations that ‘the Quad’ members — the U.S., India,

Japan and Australia — have already launched.

Consensus emerged on elevating the existing — rather limited — trade and economic cooperation to a higher level. Full utilisation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area and “the swift conclusion” of a modern, comprehensive and high quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are the next steps. Of course, the RCEP should be “mutually beneficial”, but note that the adjective “balanced”, preferred by India, is missing from the text. New Delhi does not have the option to stay out of the RCEP, but it needs ASEAN’s support to secure an acceptable bargain. Tough negotiations lie ahead.

ASEAN rising — on India-Southeast Asia cooperation

The plan to expand socio-cultural cooperation is straightforward: just scale up and diversify exchanges in the desired fields. Separately, Thailand’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Don Pramudwinai built a case for “Moral Connectivity” which places people at the centre of inter-state relations.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a significant point by wisely including Islam in the list of common bonds, together with the Ramayana and Buddhism. “Islam, in many parts of Southeast Asia,” he said, “has distinctive Indian connections going back several centuries.” The Declaration commits the parties to enhancing physical and digital connectivity. It also reflects ASEAN’s appreciation for India’s assistance in bridging the development gap between its older and newer member states. As the year of celebrations and colourful spectacles ends, it is time to begin the hard work. Diverse stakeholders, both in India and ASEAN, have a huge responsibility to shoulder.

Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, and a former Ambassador to Myanmar

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**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com