

The ASEAN outreach

The Philippines has been the centre of attraction for the last few days with Manila hosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India and East Asia summits as well as special celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) leaders' meeting and the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit. [Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined these meetings](#), underscoring India's commitment to deepening ties with the ASEAN member states and the wider Indo-Pacific region as part of the 'Act East' policy.

Centre of global politics

The Indo-Pacific region is now central to global politics and economics and recent days have merely reinforced the trends that have been emerging for some time. China is the most important player in the region, and as Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear in his speech at the recent Communist Party Congress, Beijing is now more confident than ever of projecting regional and global power. In this, China has had the good fortune of having an administration in the U.S. that lacks seriousness of purpose and is unable to communicate effectively its priorities for the region. This makes this period of transition very significant for countries like India that have a stake in the long-term stability of the region.

Addressing the 15th ASEAN-India Summit, Mr. Modi said India's relationship with ASEAN is a key pillar of its foreign policy. Referring to India's Act East Policy, he underlined that "its centrality in the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region is evident." [He focused on terrorism](#) as well, suggesting, "It is time that we jointly address this challenge by intensifying cooperation in this crucial area." In a symbolic move, all 10 ASEAN heads of state have been invited to be guests of honour for next year's Republic Day function. Targeting China, Mr. Modi also assured ASEAN of "steady support towards achieving a rules-based regional security architecture that best attests to the region's interests and its peaceful development."

Eastern promise

The East Asia Summit, which includes India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. and Russia apart from the 10 ASEAN member states, also gave Mr. Modi another opportunity to underline ASEAN's credentials: "ASEAN began in times of a great global divide, but today as it celebrates its golden jubilee, it shines as a beacon of hope; a symbol of peace and prosperity."

As China's profile grows, and the U.S. continues to be unsure of its security commitments, there is a new opportunity for India in the region. U.S. President Donald Trump gave mixed signals during his Asia trip where his 'America First' policy was on full display.

For a balance of power

Meanwhile, China has actually managed to emerge as a beacon of open and free global trade order. This has resulted in the regional powers taking it upon themselves to shape the regional economic and security order. On the one hand, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is being resurrected without the U.S., and on the other, the idea of an Indo-Pacific quadrilateral involving Japan, Australia, India and the U.S. is back. Unlike in the past, New Delhi is no longer diffident about engaging with other regional players if it helps to further Indian interests in maintaining a stable balance of power in region.

The ASEAN members and India together consist one of the largest economic regions with a total population of about 1.8 billion. ASEAN is currently India's fourth largest trading partner, accounting for 10.2% of India's total trade. India is ASEAN's seventh largest trading partner. India's service-oriented economy perfectly complements the manufacturing-based economies of ASEAN countries. There is, however, considerable scope for further growth. Formidable security challenges remain, and the two sides must think strategically to increase cooperation for a favourable balance of power that would ensure regional stability.

India needs to do a more convincing job as a beneficial strategic partner of ASEAN by boosting its domestic economic reforms agenda, enhancing connectivity within the region, and increasing its presence in regional institutions. The ASEAN nations should be clearer and more specific in their expectations from New Delhi and nudge India for a deeper, more broad-based engagement. There is much at stake for both sides.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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