

INDIA CAN DO MUCH MORE IN ASEAN

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With Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Singapore for the Asean-India and East Asia Summits and bilateral meetings with leaders of several countries, South East Asian nations are looking at India to take on a greater role for the economic integration of the region and for ensuring an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Mr Modi's interactions with US vice-president, Mike Pence, and the premiers of Singapore, Thailand and Australia were opportunities to take a closer look at pressing issues in bilateral relations and the overall security and economic situation in India's extended neighbourhood. Many of the ten members of the Association of South East Asian Nations perceive India as a much-needed counterbalance to China, though their leaders are unlikely to say so in public, given the large Chinese presence in the economies of several Asean states. It is in this context that the Asean states have been pushing India to conclude negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which aims to create the world's largest free trade area with more than a third of the global GDP and commerce. Key players in Asean such as Singapore, in fact, took the lead in engaging India on economic and security issues more than two decades ago and, subsequently, getting India to join the East Asia Summit.

India, too, has shown it realises the centrality of Asean in its extended neighbourhood, as was reflected in the unprecedented decision to invite the heads of all ten states in the grouping as the chief guests for this year's Republic Day celebrations, which coincided with the Asean-India Commemorative Summit. India wants its concerns regarding market access and services, especially the movement of its professionals, to be addressed before signing on for the RCEP. Clearly, more negotiations are needed to find a solution that satisfies all sides. India also has to balance all moves for stronger strategic relations with Asean states with the recent improvement of its ties with China, especially after the nadir represented by the Doklam standoff of last year.

India could take a page out of China's playbook by speeding up work on long-gestating connectivity projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, and building new trade and transport linkages with all the Asean states. Stronger strategic and security relations that are underpinned by equally strong economic ties will create greater inter-dependence between India and the Asean members and serve as an effective counter to China's growing clout in the region.

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