

Go beyond Bollywood and Buddhism

India must strengthen its ties with Asean nations further and create public awareness about its stake in the relationship

Rajiv Bhatia

The recent commemorative summit of leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (Asean) member-states and India in New Delhi was a rare opportunity for both to look back and look ahead. This relationship linking India with Southeast Asia is imbued with a glorious past, but in contemporary times it is only two decades old. Although the first decade (1992-2002) witnessed limited progress, the second decade (2003-2012) has proved to be far more productive, paving the way for optimism regarding the future.

It is claimed that 'a new paradigm' has been framed for India-Asean relations with their elevation to 'a strategic partnership'. In today's lexicon of diplomacy, the word 'strategic' is probably the most over-used one. What it probably conveys is that both sides consider their relationship important, enduring, and encompassing most sectors of nation-to-nation interaction. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed that "the breadth and intensity" of India's engagement with Southeast Asia is "unmatched by any of our other regional relationships."

The summit became 'a historic moment'

because it adopted a vision statement and coincided with the conclusion of negotiations for the long-delayed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in services and investments. But for the pressures of the summit's deadline, negotiations might have dragged on indefinitely. This agreement, along with the one in goods signed in 2009, should help achieve the target of \$100 billion for two-way trade by 2015.

Focusing on the future, the summit presents a roadmap for enhanced cooperation in five areas: political and security, economic, socio-cultural and the development sector, connectivity and regional architecture. Two points are of significance in this regard. First, the stress is on moving towards a 'peaceful, prosperous and resurgent Asia.' A vital element in this project is to strengthen cooperation for maritime security, freedom of navigation, and safety of sea lanes of communication as well as to promote maritime

cooperation to tackle common challenges such as piracy. Whether this generalised approach goes far enough to afford satisfaction to Vietnam and the Philippines, the two countries pursuing their maritime and territorial claims against China, is unclear.

When external affairs minister Salman Khurshid was asked if India had a role in resolving the conflict between China and Asean countries, he first turned philosophical reminding one of a former Indian PM ('... doing something about conflict includes not doing something about conflict')

before stating clearly that these were 'fundamental issues which do not require India's intervention.'

The second point relates to the buzz word — 'connectivity.' Almost every leader at the summit spoke about it, the mission to widen links not only by road, sea, air and digital means, but also through ideas,

institutions and exchanges among stakeholders. The impact of connectivity was showcased by *INS Sudarshini*, currently on a six-month expedition to nine countries, and the car rally. The latter, in particular, became a tool for many to notice the golden threads connecting Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Wat Phu in Lao, and Sukhothai in Thailand with the magnificent heritage of India.

However, now that the summit is over, the authorities concerned may consider demonstrating their credibility. They can do so by starting with speedy implementation of the trilateral highway project linking India, Myanmar and Thailand.

At an interaction with the visiting Asean editors, I heard one of them saying that (for him) the image of India was 'non-existent', whereas others referred to 'Bollywood' and 'Buddhism' — in that order — as the living links with India. Much scope exists for improving public awareness about stakes in the relationship. Hence the Eminent Persons Group has recommended establishing multi-faceted relations at the people level, especially among the youth. Now it is up to the senior officials, who are expected to meet soon, to devise a specific programme. Their endeavours, in conjunction with business, media and civil society, may determine the evolution and efficacy of India's Look East Policy in its third decade.

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The views expressed by the author are personal



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