



India-ASEAN Relations Enter a new Discourse

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India-ASEAN relations reached a new high on 20-21 December 2012 during the commemorative summit celebrating twenty years of dialogue partnership and ten years of summit partnership. The summit ended with the conclusion of an economic agreement, an impressive India-ASEAN car rally, an emphasis on achievement of multi-pronged connectivity between the two regions, and determination to work together towards building a stable and peaceful regional order. Themed on its path-breaking announcement of 2004 – India-ASEAN Partnership for Peace and Shared Prosperity – the commemorative summit marked a qualitative jump in the tone and tenor of India-ASEAN relations.

The commemorative summit adopted a Vision Statement that elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership, an intent that found space, for the first time, in 2004 when India and ASEAN agreed to develop a ‘long-term cooperative partnership.’ Two important components of this partnership can be identified. First, it emphasises on the principal character of India and ASEAN as maritime nations and therefore security of maritime space becomes paramount. The inclusion of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ that connotes an integrated space of two oceanic systems (the Indian and Pacific) in the Indian Prime Minister’s opening statement at the plenary session of the commemorative summit, reinforces the necessity of maritime nature of India-ASEAN strategic engagement. Second, regional peace and stability is incumbent upon (a) close strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN, (b) ASEAN-centrality in the regional security discourse,

and (c) ASEAN's role as 'the driving force of both economic and security structures and institutions currently emerging in the region.'

Today, India-ASEAN relations are marked by a new buoyancy and energy as they move towards greater economic integration not only at India-ASEAN level but also at the pan-regional level. While referring to the successful conclusion of the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in Services and Investment, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh characterised India-ASEAN relations at an 'exciting stage' with the possibility of their bilateral trade going upto US\$200 billion in a decade. India and ASEAN have set the bilateral trade target of US\$100 billion by the end of 2015 with key stimulus coming from an expanded canvas of economic cooperation.

Moreover, India is also part of ASEAN's fresh initiative for negotiation for a pan-Indo-Pacific economic integration involving sixteen founding members of the East Asia Summit (ten ASEAN states and six dialogue partners – Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand), known as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The RCEP would weave India into a much broader web of economic integration, an opportunity it has been looking for, ever since its unaccepted candidature for the membership of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) during the 1990s.

The India-ASEAN commemorative summit underscored that any meaningful integration and strategic partnership is untenable without multi-pronged connectivity involving physical, people-to-people, businesses and institutions. Moreover, India-ASEAN connectivity no longer remains mere an Indian priority rather ASEAN's priority as well with the assurance of investment coming from some of the ASEAN countries as well as third parties. India and ASEAN agreed in November 2012 at Phnom Penh to develop a new India-Myanmar-Laos-Viet Nam-Cambodia Highway, and extend the much-delayed India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to Laos and Cambodia. The 26-day India-ASEAN Car rally that was flagged down in New Delhi on 21st December after a trip of approximately 8000 kilometres and the voyage of INS Sudarshini further highlighted the indispensability of India-ASEAN connectivity for any meaningful integration. It was also brought to the notice that an early agreement on the Open-Skies would give a fillip to India-ASEAN business relations.

There is growing acknowledgement on the part of ASEAN that India has a much larger responsibility and much greater role to play in Southeast Asia in the second decade of the 21st century. New Delhi's role is becoming critical in shaping the regional strategic discourse that has been drifting towards uncertainty, multi-layered rivalry and multipolarity. While both Manila and Hanoi called for New Delhi's active participation in the regional security discourses, such as resolution of the South China Sea issue, Phnom Penh requested India for the financial assistance of US\$57 million. This trend gained traction during the proceedings of the Delhi Dialogue III at the track-II level in March 2011 when demands for India's active role in the region were sought by the experts and leaders in the backdrop of China's growing assertion in the South China Sea since May 2010.

New Delhi can not shy away from its responsibilities as a regional stakeholder. Perhaps, the most important contribution from India can come in the form of (a) acting as a positive force for regional peace and stability, (b) rallying its strength – material, diplomatic, and normative – behind the ASEAN cooperative architectures, and (c) engaging in capacity-building in the CLMV countries. India has also agreed to 'support and cooperate closely with ASEAN to realise the ASEAN Community in 2015.'

India must match its new-found profile either in terms of economic or strategic role by its tangible actions on the ground and ameliorate ASEAN's precarious position of strategic uncertainty and instability. It is time for New Delhi to come true on promises and start implementing the policy pronouncements. Perhaps, the early implementation of the setting up of Nalanda University and an ASEAN-India Centre can set in motion the wheel of an integrated India-ASEAN community.

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