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India-ASEAN Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

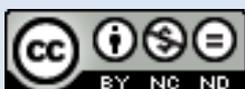
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India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have deepened their ties over time, and this year marks the 30th anniversary of India-ASEAN relations. It is also being celebrated as the 'India-ASEAN friendship' year. The 19th India-ASEAN Summit was held in November this year, in Cambodia, where both sides upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.¹ Indian Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar remarked that India places great value on ASEAN in terms of being an important pillar for regional and multilateral global order.²

India's fundamental involvement with ASEAN commenced in 1992 through India's Look-East policy under the government of Prime Minister Narsimha Rao. In 2014, PM Narendra Modi revamped the Look East policy as the Act East policy in order to focus on strategic engagements with ASEAN and extend the policy to develop closer ties with other East Asian countries too. In 2018, PM Modi laid out India's Indo-Pacific vision, wherein he focused on ASEAN's centrality in upholding an international rules-based order and maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific. It is since then that ASEAN centrality has been the main theme in India's Indo-Pacific outreach. Many ASEAN member countries, along with the US and Australia, believe that India should play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. This is largely because India's concept of the Indo-Pacific has inclusiveness, ASEAN Centrality, and openness at its core.

ASEAN has adopted the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,' which aims at enhancing ASEAN's community-building process and strengthening new momentum for already existing ASEAN-led mechanisms. The ASEAN centrality is also a major aspect of the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific as it promotes cooperation in the region through ASEAN-led mechanisms and it also seeks to cooperate with several other regional and sub-regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

However, changes in regional geopolitics such as the US-China rivalry and now the Russia-Ukraine war have affected ASEAN, as China has been a major economic partner and the US a security partner. All major powers have the Indo-Pacific with ASEAN centrality at its core, and this centrality may lose its true meaning in a region that is grappling with tensions and changing realities such as the great power competition.

In this summit, both India and ASEAN focused on their civilisational linkages and maritime connectivity and further affirmed their commitment to cooperate on enhancing the digital economy. Both sides focus on intensifying maritime cooperation, which includes anti-piracy operations, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, emergency relief, and humanitarian assistance. India and ASEAN aim to collaborate to fight against terrorism and transnational crimes such as

money laundering, human trafficking, and cybercrime. Furthermore, in this summit, both sides aim to enhance their cooperation in the space sector through the establishment of data reception and tracking. It is also important to deepen cooperation in the digital agricultural sector to ensure a resilient and sustainable food supply. India-ASEAN trade has increased manifold over time, as India's total trade with ASEAN was around US \$42.3 billion in 2021-22.³

India has been making efforts to develop its maritime security to secure the Indo-Pacific region. In 2020, India created a division to cover India's ties with the Quad, ASEAN, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Moreover, PM Modi also came up with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to enhance India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Through this mechanism, some of the ASEAN nations, like Vietnam and the Philippines, have shown their willingness to cooperate with India on the IPOI, as it seems to be similar to the vision of ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Both of these initiatives focus on maritime security, capacity building, disaster risk management, resource sharing, and trade connectivity. Recently, in June 2022, India and ASEAN decided to explore their potential cooperation between Indo-Pacific strategies in areas of connectivity, maritime security, and the blue economy amidst China's growing presence in the region.

There have been several trilateral and multilateral mechanisms and initiatives among like-minded nations for securing the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. One of the initiatives between India and Southeast Asia is the Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral, which started in 2017. This trilateral cooperation is quite similar to that of the India-Australia-France, and it focuses on developments in the Indo-Pacific, which involve development assistance programmes, maritime issues, humanitarian assistance, and development efforts. India, Indonesia, and Australia are important nations in the Indo-Pacific, and these countries have to explicitly deal with China's use of its military and force, including naval intrusion into the Exclusive Economic Zone of Indonesia at the Natuna Islands.

Countering China is India's objective in Southeast Asia. However, China may perhaps continue to dominate the economic dynamics in Southeast Asia, owing to the fact that it has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009. What is challenging for India are the divisions with the ASEAN member countries due to their internal tensions. Nevertheless, the India-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will further deepen India's maritime strategy in Southeast Asia through coordination between IPOI and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. India and Southeast Asia should design their Indo-Pacific strategy while keeping security and economic interests in mind.

India needs to fit into ASEAN's concept of the Indo-Pacific while fostering the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Both countries converge on issues of connectivity, maritime security and sustainable development which need to be further identified.

NOTES:

¹ "Deciphering the 19th ASEAN-India Summit," *Hindustan Times*, November 13, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/deciphering-the-19th-asean-india-summit-101668326275119.html>. Accessed on December 02, 2022

² Ibid

³ Rathindra Kuruwita, "India and ASEAN Upgrade Their Partnership," *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/india-and-asean-upgrade-their-partnership/>. Accessed on December 03, 2022

