

# Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 412 | February 13, 2018

## India's Relations with ASEAN: Posture Versus Reality

BY VIBHANSHU SHEKHAR

India-ASEAN relations reached a new level of euphoria during the last week of January, 2018 when leaders from the ASEAN countries marched to New Delhi to commemorate the silver jubilee (25 years) of the India-ASEAN partnership, and witness India's republic day celebrations on January 26, 2018. For the first time in independent India's history, New Delhi celebrated its republic day ceremony with the leaders of ten ASEAN states (as opposed to normal tradition of one head of state). India's Ministry of External Affairs hailed the commemorative summit as "absolutely historic," "unprecedented," and filled with an "air of festivity." Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the commemorative summit "an unprecedented gesture of goodwill from ASEAN nations," a "historic milestone in a remarkable journey," and a "deepening partnership of great promise." The Indian and ASEAN media called the summit "the ASEAN embrace," "an epic bond," "the most significant exposition" of India's 'Act East' policy, and India and ASEAN were "lost in each other's eyes,". The year of 2017 marked 25 years of India-ASEAN relations, 15 years of summit partnership with ASEAN, and five years of strategic partnership.

The India-ASEAN commemorative summit adopted a Delhi Declaration that was conspicuous for two reasons. First, it drew international attention as India identified itself with ASEAN by reiterating a common position on the South China Sea and maritime security. The declaration asserted freedom of navigation and overflight in the region; peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute as per the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Seas; the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC); and an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). The declaration also underlined the willingness of India and ASEAN in strengthening cooperation in the two niche sectors of space and cybersecurity. New Delhi has already set up space telemetry, tracking, and command stations in some of the ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia.

Indian positions were largely in keeping with the country's newly-conceived role as a leading power and a net security provider in the region. India's former Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar, declared in Singapore in July 2015 that India was no longer a balancer, but rather a leading power. For him, it meant "shouldering greater global responsibilities" as India did in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in Yemen and Nepal. Towards the end of the same year, the Indian government unveiled a new role for India as a 'net security provider' in the region in the non-traditional security sector. These two roles are ambitious, status-consistent for India, require deployment of considerable resources and diplomacy, and carry enough diplomatic firepower for India's rising power posture in the region.

The second noteworthy aspect of the declaration was its listing of incomplete agendas and over-delayed projects. India and ASEAN had agreed at the 2015 Cybersecurity Conference to convene an India-ASEAN Cyber Dialogue at an inter-governmental level in 2016. The declaration has now set 2018 for the dialogue. Similarly, the revival of Nalanda University remains a disappointment. Though the university has begun some courses, the accommodations and medical facilities remain, at best, very basic. The rudimentary nature of the construction work on the actual site of the university indicates that it might take another decade for India to respectfully claim that it has revived the famed Nalanda University.

**Vibhanshu Shekhar,**  
Former Visiting Fellow at the  
East-West Center in  
Washington, explains that  
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The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye  
APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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To showcase India-ASEAN physical connectivity, cars from India and ASEAN countries, for the third time, traversed across India, Myanmar, and Thailand. India held similar car rallies in 2004 and 2012. However, this point was proven in 2004 by the first India-ASEAN car rally, and New Delhi needs to concentrate on building the real infrastructure if it is serious about connecting with ASEAN. Notwithstanding the announcement of various ambitious projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Delhi-Hanoi rail link, the Kaladan Multi-modal project in Myanmar, the only tangible outcome during the last 25 years has been India-Myanmar Friendship road. The deadlines for these projects have been frequently renewed leading to cost escalation and project stagnation. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project was announced in 2003. Similarly, though some progress has been achieved on the Kaladan Multi-modal project, it is yet to be completed. These incomplete projects highlight a fundamental difference between the posture and reality and raise questions over India’s ability to deliver results.

Moreover, Delhi’s agendas of connecting Northeast India with Southeast Asia and ‘Develop Northeast’ as a part of the Look East/Act East policy remain non-starters since the Northeast itself is poorly connected. Much of the provincial and national highways in the Northeast region remain in bad shape. The border customs stations remain rudimentary and cross-border trade continues to deal with a limited and government-approved list of goods. The main obstacle lies in the security-centric mindset of the government that continues to fret over the idea of exposing the troubled region to outside commerce. Though various Thai companies had shown interest in developing various agro-business sectors in 2007-08 as a part of the convergence between India’s Look East and Thailand’s Look West policies, they could not make much headway beyond the signing of bilateral Memorandums of Understanding.

Ten years later, Japan has shown an active interest in assisting India in infrastructure development in India’s Northeast region. India and Japan have set up an Act East Forum that would oversee infrastructure development and connectivity projects in the Northeast. Japan has agreed to extend a loan of \$350 million to renovate the two critical but troubled arterial networks – national highways 40 and 54. Japan has also sent feelers regarding the potential of India-Japan collaboration in engaging in infrastructure projects in Myanmar. While these are welcome trends, they also reflect negatively on aspiring India’s limited delivery capabilities.

The commemorative summit underlined growing adamancy in India and ASEAN’s position on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a framework for a free trade agreement among the 16 original members of the East Asia Summit (EAS). Though the India-ASEAN Delhi Declaration called upon the partners to ‘intensify efforts in 2018 toward the swift conclusion of the RCEP, it also maintained that it should be ‘mutually beneficial.’ Prime Minister Modi insisted in his op-ed piece on a ‘balanced and fair agreement’ reiterating the Indian position for reciprocal concessions in the services sector. Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, which is also the current ASEAN Chair, highlighted trade and connectivity — two critical roadblocks in India-ASEAN relations. India’s total trade with ASEAN remains a paltry 2.6% of ASEAN’s total trade.

It is overdue for India to put its money where its mouth is by delivering on its commitments. As India propels its leading power posture to the broader Indo-Pacific region, its ability to deliver is going to be continuously tested, especially by the smaller ASEAN countries. The carryover of the long-standing trademark of Indian politics – unfulfilled promises – into the foreign policy domain may end up causing self-inflicted damage to India’s international standing and rising power posture.

*Vibhanshu Shekhar* is a former Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington. He can be contacted at [Vibesjnu@gmail.com](mailto:Vibesjnu@gmail.com).