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Issue Brief

ASEAN–India Summit 2021: Outcomes and Prospects

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S*ummary*

The 18th ASEAN–India Summit was held on 28 October 2021 virtually with Prime Minister Modi representing India to assess the progress of India–ASEAN strategic partnership and the direction it needs to take. It was held soon after the East Asia Summit at a time when the spotlight is as much on the Indo-Pacific as it is on the strength of the India–ASEAN relationship as it approaches its 30th anniversary. India and ASEAN interact in some 30 dialogue mechanisms and each of these are responsible for strengthening ASEAN's three pillars—political security, economic and socio-cultural. India's initiative of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) harmonise India's Act East Policy with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). But with India seeking a review of the ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement and opting to remain out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), similar creativity may be needed from the two sides to reconcile their economic objectives.

The ASEAN–India Summit is an important annual event in ASEAN’s calendar. Held via videoconferencing on 28 October 2021, the 18th ASEAN–India Summit was the ninth such summit attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which in itself shows India’s commitment to ASEAN centrality. Chaired by Brunei, the theme of this year’s summit was “We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper”, which is relevant at a time when the resilience of the ASEAN community has been called into question and the strength of India–ASEAN relationship is being tested too.

This issue brief intends to focus on questions like: What have been the outcomes of the 18th ASEAN–India Summit and how do they impact India and the ASEAN? How do these meetings impact ASEAN’s other Dialogue Partners, in particular China? The broad outcomes cover the economic and strategic arenas. India’s cooperative stance as regard the three pillars of the ASEAN Community—the ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio–Cultural Community (ASCC)—is well established. A look at some of the important documents like the Joint Statement, the Chairman’s Statement at the 18th ASEAN–India Summit, the Chairman’s Statement at the 16th East Asia Summit and PM Modi’s own address at the ASEAN–India Summit meeting, would help us understand not just the outcome but also the prospects for the future.

The Backdrop

When ASEAN was founded in 1967, the region was faced with a set of challenges which were very different from what it confronts today. Today the challenge for the region and the world is not only about how to deal with the pandemic but how to redefine the global order which not only has rising powers like China, but also middle powers including Australia, Japan and India, each with its own aspirations. Third, the US–China rivalry adds complexity to the region’s economic woes with the disruption of regional and global value chains (although Vietnam and India also gained from a shift in investment destination towards them). Fourth, China’s rise presents both an economic and strategic challenge. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) moves were closely followed by serious concerns of debt entrapment by nations who had initially welcomed BRI investments. China’s assertion has posed a challenge to Vietnam on the maritime front in South China Sea and India on its land border. It is feared that the Sino-US rivalry could deepen the fault-lines within ASEAN as nations are nudged into choosing sides. In July 2012, at an ASEAN meeting in Phnom Penh, for the first time in its 45-year-old history, ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement because of Cambodia’s insistence on not allowing any mention of the South China Sea in it. Many of the ASEAN countries had been hedging their bets “because of dependence on China for trade and an ambivalent stance of the United States”. To fulfil the ambitious targets under the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (requiring an annual investment of over US\$ 100 billion for infrastructural development), it was natural for ASEAN to look towards the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank (AIIB). After its formation by China all the ASEAN Member States joined it.¹ But, some countries like Cambodia, Laos and to an extent Myanmar, who only see economic opportunity in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, could weaken ASEAN’s unity. Similarly the Philippines squandered a golden opportunity to galvanise the nation when the international arbitration panel in The Hague gave a ruling on the South China Sea in favour of the Philippines and against China. Fifth, some would say the emergence of new minilateral groupings like The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) and the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) security pact has queered the pitch for pre-existing multilateral mechanisms that ASEAN provided.² While some say that ASEAN centrality is under threat, others maintain that ASEAN can co-exist with Quad and AUKUS. The recent joint statement of Quad leaders³ was “somewhat reassuring”⁴ as it reposed faith in ASEAN’s unity and centrality. ASEAN centrality means that ASEAN must be in the driver’s seat, and must formulate a common vision and also implement it. The ASEAN Charter⁵ formulated in 2007 and the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025⁶ could serve as important guides.

The ASEAN meetings that concluded recently were thus held in the backdrop of a tumultuous new situation requiring fresh answers, based on the collective experience of this region.

Politico-Security Outcomes

India contributes to influencing, if not shaping, the regional security agenda. Besides the ASEAN–India Summit Meeting, India participates in several ASEAN-led dialogue mechanisms like the Post-Ministerial Conference with India (PMC+1), East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ADMM Plus and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). India is Co-Chair of the ADMM Plus Experts’ Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) for the cycle of 2021–2024. India and ASEAN collaborate on countering terrorism through the ASEAN Plan of

¹ Udai Bhanu Singh, “India and the Indo-Pacific”, in Leszek Buszynski and Do Thanh Hai, eds, *Maritime Issues and Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific*, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2021, pp. 211–231.

² Thitinan Pongsudhirak, [“Aukus Poses Challenges to Other Powers”](#), *Bangkok Post*, 15 October 2021.

³ [“Joint Statement from Quad Leaders”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 September 2021.

⁴ Kavi Chongkittavorn, [“Asean can Live with Quad and Aukus”](#), *Bangkok Post*, 5 October 2021.

⁵ [“The ASEAN Charter”](#), Association of Southeast Nations.

⁶ [“ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025”](#), Association of Southeast Nations, March 2016.

Action in Combating Transnational Crime (2016–2025)⁷ and counter terrorism through the Bali Work Plan (2019–2025). In addition, there are second-track institutions like the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP).

The Joint Statement that was issued after the ASEAN–India Summit this year reaffirmed commitment to shared values and norms that underlie ASEAN–India Dialogue relationship that started in 1992. India remains committed to the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation besides several instruments and agreements it is party to along with ASEAN. India and ASEAN decided to: “Commit to supporting ASEAN Community building and strengthening the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership across the whole spectrum of political-security, economic, socio-cultural, and development cooperation by utilising relevant existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and fora, including the ASEAN–India Summit...”.⁸

Prime Minister Modi’s remarks at the 18th India-ASEAN Summit were brief and to the point. At the very outset, he mentioned the challenges posed by COVID-19 and how “this challenging time in a way was also the test of India–ASEAN friendship”.⁹

He also referred to:

- The Shared Values and History of India and Southeast Asia
- The unity and centrality of ASEAN
- India’s Act East Policy (AEP) and its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policy.
- The convergence between India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and ASEAN’s Outlook for the Indo-Pacific.

India has been a passionate advocate of freedom of navigation from the beginning. However, the references made by the PM in his speech can be traced back to earlier pronouncements, including SAGAR and the Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI). The seeds of SAGAR doctrine can be traced back to PM Modi’s speech in 2015.¹⁰ As Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla explained that SAGAR “depends on securing end-to-end supply chains in the region; no disproportionate dependence on

⁷ [“ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime \(2016-2025\)”](#), Adopted by 11th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), 20 September 2017.

⁸ [“ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 28 October 2021.

⁹ [“Remarks by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 18th India-ASEAN Summit”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 28 October 2021.

¹⁰ [“Text of the PM’s Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda”](#), PMINDIA, 12 March 2015.

a single country; and ensuring prosperity for all stakeholder nations”.¹¹ The Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI) was introduced in the following year’s East Asia Summit (2019) with its seven pillars: Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building and Resource Sharing, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.¹² India and ASEAN agreed to strengthen their strategic partnership by utilising the potential convergences between the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India’s IPOI using the AOIP’s four areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals and economic and other areas of cooperation. Thus, India has been an advocate of freedom of navigation. It has consistently raised issues of international concern (especially with regard to South China Sea developments, and terrorism) and the need to adhere to international law, in particular UNCLOS and ensure freedom of navigation.

The ASEAN–India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region, in its concluding paragraph highlights India–ASEAN convergence on: Maritime cooperation, including maritime security, efforts to counter piracy and armed robbery against ships, maritime safety and search and rescue (SAR) operations, and information sharing, through appropriate mechanisms under the ASEAN–India framework and other appropriate ASEAN-led mechanisms.¹³

The ASEAN–India Summit cannot be seen in isolation from the East Asia Summit, and takes place along with a series of other important meetings. The Indian Prime Minister attended the 18th East Asia Summit (EAS) virtually on 27 October 2021, which the Sultan of Brunei hosted and presided over. The East Asia Summit is a leaders-led forum which brings the collective weight of the global population, economy and military strength which is so critical for peace and stability in our part of the world. India is a founding member of the EAS and wants to strengthen it.

Economic Outcomes

India and ASEAN agreed on the following points.

- To narrow the development gap and strengthen economic relations. An important part of this is social infrastructure development (including vaccine and pharmaceutical research) and people-to-people connectivity.

¹¹ [“Foreign Secretary’s Introductory Remarks at the India-France-Japan Workshop on the Indo-Pacific”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 January 2021.

¹² [“Prime Minister’s Speech at the East Asia Summit, 04 November 2019”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 4 November 2019.

¹³ No. 8.

- The two sides also agreed to link the various forums such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Mekong sub-regional cooperation frameworks, including Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS).
- Capacity building for MSMEs.
- Cooperation for energy security and environment protection.
- Development of agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors.
- Sustainable management of marine resources (blue economy).
- Biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and management.¹⁴

Last year, on 12 November 2020, PM Modi in his virtual address at the 17th ASEAN–India Summit, at the invitation of the Vietnamese PM, had emphasised that ASEAN is central to India’s Indo-Pacific Vision and mentioned India’s contribution of US\$ 1million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. He stressed on the importance of connectivity, and announced an offer of US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit to support ASEAN’s goal of physical and digital connectivity. He noted the importance of resilience of supply chains for economic recovery.

On its part, ASEAN welcomed the adoption of the ASEAN–India Plan of Action for the period 2021–2025.

Despite ASEAN’s long experience as a regional multilateral institution, minilateral institutions have found more supporters, and therefore ASEAN needs to re-examine its relations with each of its Dialogue Partners and strengthen them, where necessary. The progress in moving towards RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) when TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership) failed could be seen as a success. But the two ASEAN Dialogue Partners India and the US dropped out. ASEAN and India may need to revisit the ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement. Also, India needs to speed up its connectivity projects like the Trilateral Highway (which will eventually reach Hanoi) to ensure that its Act East Policy boosts ASEAN centrality. Second, ASEAN as a region has a robust mechanism of regional value chain and India must play a bigger role in it. Third, the pandemic has provided us an opportunity to develop habits of cooperation in sharing our limited resources in times of need.

¹⁴ No. 8.

Way Forward

The year 2022 has been designated as the ‘ASEAN–India Friendship Year’ to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN–India relations. It is also the year when Cambodia takes over Presidency of ASEAN while Singapore assumes charge as the Country Coordinator for India. This presents a paradox and a dilemma for India as many within ASEAN itself would like to restrict the role of Cambodia (and also Laos) which is seen as an ally of China.¹⁵ On the one hand, there is an urgent need for India and ASEAN to cooperate in order to make economic recovery after the pandemic, while on the other hand, there are inherent built-in limitations within ASEAN.

Economic imperatives demand enhanced cooperation in trade and investment, energy, finance, science, technology and innovation, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), blue economy and digital economy. India continues to support ASEAN centrality, but as one writer has pointed out, India’s patience is wearing thin due to lack of responsibility of ASEAN for its own region.¹⁶ ASEAN has attempted to be a champion of international law and an honest broker, but when the Chairman’s Statement for the ASEAN–India Summit¹⁷ is compared to the one for ASEAN–China Summit¹⁸, the latter shows a greater deference to China. The latter is detailed and has 27 paragraphs, while the former has only 17. As compared to India, China brings to the table economic issues where it has been cooperating with ASEAN, and attempts to downplay the security aspects where the ASEAN States should be concerned.¹⁹

Some of the main points of the Chairman’s Statement for China–ASEAN Cooperation include:

- Working closely together “to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic”.
- Cooperation with the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA).
- Welcomed China’s early ratification of RCEP in April 2021.
- Welcomed the “early formulation of the Action Plan on Implementing the ASEAN–China Partnership on Digital Economy Cooperation (2021–2025) to explore cooperation in digital economy”.

¹⁵ Gurjit Singh, [“India and ASEAN Look to Deepen Partnership”](#), *The Tribune*, 12 November 2021.

¹⁶ Gurjit Singh, [“The ASEAN–India Summit: A New Direction Emerges”](#), *Gateway House*, 26 November 2020. .

¹⁷ [“Chairman’s Statement of the 18th ASEAN–India Summit”](#), ASEAN, 28 October 2021.

¹⁸ [“Chairman’s Statement of the 24th ASEAN–China Summit”](#), ASEAN, 26 October 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

- Appreciated “China’s support in enhancing ASEAN Connectivity and welcomed further cooperation to implement the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025”.
- Agreed to “establish a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between ASEAN and China that is meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial”.²⁰

However, a further perusal of the Chairman’s Statement shows that when it comes to South China Sea, the ASEAN voice becomes muted; the ASEAN lack of unity becomes evident for all to see when it states that “*some Leaders* [not all ASEAN members] raised issues related to several activities and serious incidents in the area, including damage to the marine environment, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the region”.²¹ Separately, China also has a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Myanmar along with a 2+2 dialogue. China had begun to develop an understanding with the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government but after the coup in February, it appears Beijing had to do some fine recalibration in their dealings with Myanmar.

In 2009 the then ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan had said: “ASEAN centrality and leaderships need to be earned”.²² It has to be seen as something coming from within. Domestic resilience must manifest itself in external resilience. ASEAN is not just a hub to connect major powers or a regional organisation for organising the largest number of meetings annually. It is much more than an event organiser. The kind of role it played in the Cambodian Peace Process in the 1980s and 1990s, needs to be played now in dealing with the two important challenges it faces today: the challenge of Chinese intrusion in the South China Sea and Myanmar’s political turmoil. ASEAN is handicapped by its insistence on sovereignty and non-interference: it is still looking for the right balance between informal mechanism and institutionalisation. Given the limitations of ASEAN, the mechanisms provided by Quad could provide an alternative solution to the security dilemma facing the region. Quad’s first in-person meeting held in the US by making emerging technologies one of the cornerstone of the grouping has proved its continuing relevance. It is undertaking initiatives in Critical Emerging Technologies; it has also undertaken to provide supply of COVID-19 vaccines, and also address issues ranging from climate change to terrorism.²³ Perhaps the key to ASEAN’s continued relevance lies in it re-inventing itself.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Amitav Acharya, “[The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?](#)”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, January 2017, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 273–279.

²³ Niranjan C. Oak, “[Evolving Idea of the Quad: Emerging Technology](#)”, MP-IDSA, 26 October 2021.

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