

India-ASEAN

Going Beyond Delhi Dialogue VI

The Delhi Dialogue VI, under the theme “Realising the ASEAN-India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity”, took place on March 6-7. **Vannarith Chheang** highlights ways to enhance economic, security, strategic and socio-cultural cooperation that can realise this vision.



Senior officials, academicians and businessmen from ASEAN and India met at the Delhi Dialogue VI on 6-7 March in New Delhi, to exchange ideas and ways to translate the ASEAN-India vision statement into practical cooperation. The vision statement was adopted by the leaders of ASEAN and India at their Commemorative Summit in December 2012 in New Delhi.

India's rise as a global power in the next two decades depends on its ability to maintain high economic performance, social inclusiveness, national unity and security. To realise that vision, India needs to have a proactive and

ASEAN is a strategic pathway for India to expand her economic interests and strategic outreach to the Asia-Pacific

flexible foreign policy with a new level of earnest engagement with major powers, neighbouring countries, and regional and global institutions. ASEAN is a strategic pathway for India to expand her economic interests and strategic outreach to the Asia-Pacific.

Partnership Scaling New Heights

Strategically and security-wise, India is saddled with domestic issues and a complicated relationship with the neighbour to the West. However, being aware of the increasing strategic and economic importance of East Asia, India launched its strategic and economic diversification by connecting and integrating with her neighbours in the East. India initiated the 'Look East Policy' in 1991 with the objectives to build trust

and bridge with East Asian countries, especially mainland Southeast Asia.

In 1992, India became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN and ten years later in 2002, the first India-ASEAN Summit was inaugurated in Phnom Penh.

India-ASEAN relations have been advancing at a remarkable pace. At the Commemorative Summit in December 2012, the leaders agreed to elevate their partnership to a strategic level and discussed a wide range of issues in order to serve long-term common strategic and economic interests. In the joint statement of the 11th India-ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, in October 2013, the ASEAN leaders welcomed and acknowledged the significant role played by India in assisting ASEAN to implement its community building blueprints (political security, economic and socio-cultural.) India has also helped ASEAN strengthen its central role in constructing a stable, open, inclusive security and economic architecture in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region.

Creating a Comprehensive Cooperation Framework

In its plan of action 2010-2015, India and ASEAN have set out a comprehensive cooperation framework covering political and security cooperation, and economic and socio-cultural cooperation. It also requests establishing an ASEAN round table discussion comprising think tanks, policy makers, parliamentarians, scholars, media, business and youth representatives to provide policy inputs on future areas of cooperation. The Delhi Dialogue inaugurated in 2009 has become one of the key venues where policy makers, think tanks, representatives from the civil society groups and the private sector, come together to exchange ideas and visions to implement the action plan as well as to generate new areas of cooperation and focus.

Delhi Dialogue VI

The Delhi Dialogue VI, under the theme 'Realising the ASEAN-India Vision for Partnership and Prosperity', took place on March 6-7. The dialogue focused on three main aspects:

- Translating the 'Vision Statement';
- The role of North East India in India's 'Look East Policy' and the roles of India and ASEAN in shaping the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific; and,
- The issues of financing infrastructure connectivity, the promotion of trade and investment, maritime security cooperation, technology cooperation, capacity building, and people-to-people contacts were among the priority areas of cooperation and implementation.

Economic Cooperation

After the signing of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement in 2009, bilateral trade between the two regions has improved tremendously. In 2013, the trade volume between India and ASEAN reached more than \$75 billion; it is projected the volume will increase to \$100 billion by 2015. India-ASEAN trade and investment flows are lower compared to other ASEAN dialogue partners such as China, Japan, and the United States. However, it can be increased if there is improvement in infrastructure connectivity and regional production networks.

Political commitment and consensus are high on connecting India with ASEAN by investing in infrastructure development along the north-eastern part of India with Myanmar and Thailand. The Mekong-India Economic Corridor, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project, and the Thailand-Myanmar-India Trilateral Highway are under construction. The completion of these physical infrastructure connectivity projects will significantly enhance the flows of trade, investment and people.

The uphill struggle, however, is to get efficient financial resources to fund such ambitious infrastructure development and connectivity projects. It may require multi-partnerships involving national governments, private companies, and international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB). The establishment of a common pool of financial resources among ASEAN member states and India can be considered.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have evolved to be the core

agents connecting the East Asian region. India and ASEAN should work together to outline some of the barriers and opportunities for SMEs in entering into regional production networks. The newly created ASEAN-India Centre and the ASEAN-India Investment and Trade Centre should incorporate SMEs support programmes in their missions and activities. India and ASEAN need to continue to work together to implement programmes related to capacity building (i.e. English language training and management training), information sharing (i.e. transfer of best practices, knowledge institutionalisation), and social capital development (i.e. networks among the entrepreneurs and educators).

Strategic and Security Cooperation

India contributes to building a dynamic strategic equilibrium and power equation in the Asia-Pacific region through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. India has played its role in strengthening regional norms, institutions, and international laws. The ambition to build ASEAN-centric security architecture (i.e. East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus) would be impossible without the support and active participation and engagement of all major powers including India. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) have been cultivated and developed; and now it is moving to concretise the principles and action plans of preventive diplomacy (PD). India and ASEAN should work together to find common possible approaches to conflict management and resolutions based on the principles of international laws.

India and ASEAN need to strengthen maritime security cooperation focusing on non-traditional security issues such as natural disaster relief operation, search and rescue, piracy and oil spill. The regional cooperation and collaboration in finding the missing Malaysia Airline Flight MH370 provides a starting

India has also helped ASEAN strengthen its central role in constructing a stable, open, inclusive security and economic architecture in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region

point that needs further deepening and institutionalisation. India and ASEAN should explore new areas of security cooperation such as security sector reform and security sector governance, and climate change-food-water-energy security nexus.

Socio-Cultural Cooperation

India and ASEAN have worked together to promote human resources development and educational exchanges, science and technology cooperation, information technology, SMEs development, tourism and other cultural activities. Moreover, India has contributed to narrowing the developmental gaps in ASEAN by supporting the capacity building programmes in the CLMV countries namely the creation of the Entrepreneurship Development Centres (EDC) and the Centres for the English Language Training (CELT) in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.

In addition to the existing cooperation areas, India and ASEAN need to pay more attention to mass media cooperation and exchanges of journalists and news editors. To implement these initiatives it needs financial and technical resources. It is therefore necessary to expand the pool of the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund and the ASEAN Development Fund.



Vannarith Chheang is Senior Fellow at Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace