

# The future is here and now

The 20th anniversary of the Asean-India dialogue is a chance to begin the next chapter of the strategic partnership

Pisan Manawapat

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) has come a long way since its formation in Bangkok 45 years ago today. Shifting with the paradigms of the times, it has transformed from a security alliance during the Cold War into a linchpin of peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia. The 'Asean centrality' is now a much-lauded term in speeches of world leaders, whose partnership with Asean seems imperative lest they miss the Asia century train.

This year marks another milestone in the history of Asean and its relations with India. After their scheduled summit in Phnom Penh in November, all 10 Asean leaders will rejoin Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi to commemorate 20 years of the Asean-India dialogue.

The two summits will be the occasion for policymakers of both sides to take stock of how Asean-India relations have fared since the partnership began one year after former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's announcement of India's Look East policy in 1991. The Delhi summit will also offer an opportune moment to begin the next chapter of our

strategic partnership.

Over the past two decades, our common interests have expanded. The Asean-India meeting in Phnom Penh recently was a synchronisation of minds. Foreign ministers shared virtually the same views on issues that called for closer cooperation: regional security challenges, physical, digital and people-to-people connectivity, and, naturally, trade and investment.

In the past two years, the signal of Look East policy by New Delhi towards Asean could not have been stronger. Leaders of Indonesia and Thailand were invited consecutively as the chief guests for India's Republic Day in 2011 and 2012. Going eastward, the Indian president made State visits to Laos and Cambodia in 2010, followed by Singh's visits to Malaysia in 2010, Singapore and Indonesia in 2011 and Myanmar in 2012.

Geographical and cultural closeness makes Asean and India natural trading partners. Perhaps nothing can speak for the success of Asean-India relations better than trade figures. The Asean-India trade in 2012 has already surpassed \$70 billion, the target set when the free-trade agreement (FTA) in goods was signed three years ago.



■ We're all in it together: Asean leaders with PM Manmohan Singh (centre), Hanoi, 2010

Back then, trade barely touched \$40 billion. It is now \$80 billion.

Both sides have much more to gain if the remaining FTA negotiations can be completed soon. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a strong case for that when he visited New Delhi recently.

He also invited India to join the Asean-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and urged India to enhance connectivity with Asean through road networks and a more liberalised open sky policy. When the market and infrastructure of India and Asean become more integrated, they will comprise 1.8 billion people

and with a combined GDP worth \$3 trillion. The RCEP could potentially extend India's reach to the markets of Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and beyond.

Connectivity and economic partnership will form the core of the December commemorative summit celebrations. The Asean-India Car Rally will show that seamless road travel linking Southeast Asia to North-east India is possible. The INS Sudarshini Ship Expedition will retrace the old spice route that founded the unbreakable historical and cultural ties between India and the countries of Southeast Asia. The second India-Asean Business Fair and Conclave will bring business people of 11 countries together to further enhance cooperation in areas such as automotive and light engineering, handlooms and decorative items, food processing, infrastructure and construction, information technology and information technology enabled services.

At the Delhi summit, leaders also will unveil the Asean-India Vision Statement. This new blueprint, authored by the Asean-India Eminent Persons Group, will outline actions needed to solidify cooperation. The emerging strategic challenges over the next decades will require the full engagement of India with Asean.

Are India and Asean ready for it? Pisan Manawapat is Thailand's ambassador to India and currently Chair, the Asean New Delhi Committee

The views expressed by the author are personal

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