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Vision IndiaTM
Foundation

Young Diplomats Conclave

Energizing Indo – ASEAN Ties

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Conference Summary and Outcome Report



Young Diplomats Conclave: Energizing Indo – ASEAN Ties

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The India-ASEAN partnership may be just 25 years old. But, India's ties with Southeast Asia stretch back more than two millennia. Forged in peace and friendship, religion and culture, art and commerce, language and literature, these enduring links are now present in every facet of the magnificent diversity of India and Southeast Asia, providing a unique envelope of comfort and familiarity between our people.

Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi penned these words in his article 'ASEAN-India: Shared values, common destiny' on the occasion of India's Republic Day on 26th January 2018, for which he had invited the heads of all the ten ASEAN countries. The visit also commemorated 25 years of dialogue partnership between India and ASEAN. Celebrations included high-level Summits, youth exchange programs, cultural programmes and economic meetings. The two sides also signed the Delhi Declaration for strengthening cooperation in the realm of combating terrorism, protecting economic and maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific and promoting intercultural dialogues.

With the aim of furthering the aforementioned initiatives and realizing that trust-building through dialogue and deliberation is quintessential for any relationship to prosper, Vision India Foundation organized the second edition of Young Diplomats Conclave (YDC) on 17th January 2019. The Conclave, themed '*Energizing Indo-ASEAN Ties*' was organized in partnership with Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries in New Delhi.

This edition was specially curated for young diplomats from ASEAN and Indo-Pacific countries to provide them with the requisite background and cultural understanding of India and an understanding of Indo-ASEAN ties based on India's socio-political complexities of its economic imperatives. However, owing to the centrality of India-ASEAN relations in India's foreign policy manifested through the Act East Policy, the one-day Conclave also saw the participation of the young strategic community in India as well as of Indian ambassadors, subject experts and senior officials from India and other countries.

The conference was convened by Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director-General at RIS and Mr. Sahil Aggarwal, co-founder of Vision India Foundation, and moderated by Ms. Arunima Gupta of Vision India Foundation.

Session 1: *The role of Indo-ASEAN relationship in meaningfully shaping the regional architecture in Indo-Pacific*

Diplomatic relations between India and ASEAN have evolved at multiple levels and through different institutions. Succinctly put, Indo-ASEAN relations are not linear in as much as they consist of economic, political, cultural and social dimensions. Talking about the various facets of this multi-dimensional relationship, Amb. Amar Sinha, distinguished fellow at RIS and the Chair for the session emphasized on the shared strategic interests of India and ASEAN. These interests have led to a greater convergence of relations, over the years and have played a central role in the US's Pivot to Asia, i.e. rebalancing the US's interests from Europe and Middle East to Asia. He highlighted the three key pillars of India's Act East Policy – culture, commerce, and connectivity – and underlined the centrality of enhancing connectivity with the ASEAN nations. The development of the North-Eastern states has further provided a strong impetus to India - ASEAN relations with the North-East serving as India's gateway to Southeast Asia. People-to-people connect is also imperative for better mutual understanding and better cooperation and this is reflected in the attraction ASEAN countries hold for tourists. Common concerns such as the South China Sea, and managing the peaceful rise of nations in the region make India – ASEAN unity absolutely essential for national interests of India and the regional interests of ASEAN.

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Mr. Sanjay Pulipaka, senior fellow at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, began by saying that international political regions are political constructs, contingent on power politics and rather volatile in nature. The evolution of Indo-Pacific in this context, which for India 'stretches from the Coast of Africa to the Coast of the USA,' can be traced in this context. He pointed out that ASEAN centrality has two dimensions which can be found in the ASEAN charter and the preamble. While the preamble emphasises the importance of the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of the member nations, the charters prescribes a 'central role' for the ASEAN in the external political, economic, social, and cultural relations in the region. He highlighted the challenges faced by the centrality of the ASEAN manifested in Inter-ASEAN developments such a refugee crisis, and regional factors like the rise of China and its Belt and Road Initiative, which is redefining economic and political interactions in the region. Mr. Pulipaka emphasized on the fact that, ASEAN is crucial for ensuring regional stability as it serves as a fulcrum for energy, trade and security issues, and hence it is not in India's interests to pursue a line where the ASEAN centrality gets diluted.

Talking about the evolution of Quad as a strategic concept, Prof. Harsh Pant from Observer Research Foundation, stated that this arrangement is a 'work in progress that is yet to morph into something more tangible', which is a result of structural factors. He underscored the need for the Quad as an institution and an adequate response to the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. This shift in dynamics be attributed to the US-China relations with both the countries standing at opposite edge of the power spectrum. This is a shifting structural reality which will continue to remain volatile. Furthermore, QUAD also serves as a bridge between the constituent powers like China and ASEAN, especially with the decline of the latter, thereby creating room for diplomatic manoeuvring. Concluding his session, Prof. Pant laid emphasis on the need for the Quad to grow more sensitive to the regional aspirations of the ASEAN nations and evolve into an expansive organization.

Special Address: Leveraging India-Indonesia linkages for building a mutually beneficial relationship today.

H.E Mr. Sidharto Reza Suryodipuro, Ambassador of Indonesia to India spoke of the strong friendship India and Indonesia share. This relationship is not just due to the geographical proximity, but also the proximity of the past when there was an exchange of religious ideas, education and cultural traditions and extensive trade.

Amb Suryodipuro also shed light on the shared colonial experience between India and Indonesia and its impact on foreign policy, as both the countries became independent around the same time. This colonial experience also contributed to their journey of entering the new world order and developing their economies and polity as independent states. Both India and Indonesia were at the forefront of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955 which eventually led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru and Indonesia's first President Sukarno, both were founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Ambassador spoke of the rediscoveries and newer priorities accorded to India-Indonesia relations in the past twenty years. Both the countries have shared interests in the region, being key players in the Indo-Pacific. He highlighted the acknowledgement India has given to ASEAN's geographical and institutional centrality in its diplomatic conduct and Act East policy and the particular role of Indonesia. India and Indonesia, being maritime neighbours, have also undertaken naval cooperation and with the first joint naval exercise in 2018, this bilateral strategic partnership has strengthened. The Ambassador also shared the plans of both the countries launching a joint air force exercise in 2019. He mentioned the strong economic relations between the two countries with trade worth \$ 20 billion annually. The cultural bonds and people-to-people relations are also strengthened reflected by the sheer number of Indians visiting Indonesia every year to be over six hundred thousand. The Ambassador concluded on the note that India-Indonesia bilateral relations are not just because of economic relationship and development but also regional security and development as neighbours.

Session 2: India – ASEAN: Different but related cultures

India and ASEAN have shared centuries-old cultural and civilizational links, predating the current diplomatic relations established in the 20th century. Cultural relations are one of the three pillars if India's Act East Policy, and have played a significant role in redefining India – ASEAN relations.

Professor Gautam Jha delved into the civilizational bonds between India and ASEAN which also contributed in shaping the Indic Belt, marked by the geographical presence of rivers such as Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong on the ASEAN side and Ganga and Brahmaputra on the Indian side. These rivers, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean facilitated

the trade of spices, sandalwood and earthenware amongst various other items. The economic connectivity also led to the convergence of cultures. Scholars from Southeast Asia would visit education hubs of Taxila and Nalanda, Sanskrit and Pali languages travelled with these scholars and influenced vernacular in the Southeast Asian countries. Cultural exchanges also saw the influence of Ramayana and Mahabharata in countries such as Laos, where the national epic - where Phra Lak Phra Ram is an adaptation of Valmiki's Ramayana or as in Indonesia where over fifteen different versions are represented through popular culture. Influence of Buddhism to Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam is evident as well. Cultural imprints are also manifested through temple complexes such as the Khmer Wat Phou Shiva temple in Laos which is now a Buddhist temple. Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and, Borobudur and Prambanan temples in Indonesia are perhaps amongst the most magnificent temple complexes that exist today.

Undoubtedly India and ASEAN share the same cultural fabric and reviving this with a greater push will build a long-lasting relationship overpassing economic and political concerns.

Session 3: RCEP and the regional economic architecture – opportunities, challenges, and the way forward

Mr. Rajeev Kher, former Commerce Secretary of India spoke about the role of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in shaping the economic architecture of India-ASEAN relations. A multilateral trade mechanism involving the ten ASEAN countries, India, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea was formally launched in 2012 and has been on the negotiating tables since then. Mr. Kher shed light on the global economic architecture that evolved since the end of Cold War which evolved from a unipolar context to multipolar world order. The World Bank and the World Trade Organization continue to serve as foremost economic institutions and have been a major component of global political and economic paradigm. The development paradigm is also changing through multilateral agreements and with TTIP, TPP and RCEP covering 31 nations, the economic and political impact is enormous. However, the balance of power is shifting from the West to the East, RCEP is gaining greater prominence.

RCEP which reflects on the interests of the emerging and developing economies, particularly when the established system is undergoing instability in the light of Brexit and US policies under President Trump, can serve as an alternate to WB and WTO. RCEP focuses on the manufacturing strengths of its members, many of which already have free trade agreements (FTA) bilaterally. India has experienced a slower growth of manufacturing sector, unlike other RCEP members such as China and Japan. On the contrary, India has a strong service sector. However, while the global economy and the Chinese economy is slowing down, the Indian economy is on the rise, and this serves as a major opportunity for India. Mr. Kher in his concluding remarks mentioned the challenges of India withdrawing from RCEP, which would majorly be the loss of market access in all the other RCEP member countries.

Mr. Pranav Kumar, Head of International Trade Policy at Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), remarked that ASEAN centrality has been foundational to RCEP and three factors have redefined this centrality. First, the global economy and the Chinese economy is slowing down. Second, the US-China trade war has led to considerable uncertainty in the international economic environment. And third, India's economy is rapidly growing. Mr. Kumar noted that these external factors coupled with the recent history of India's economic development has answers to India's position in the RCEP. However, Mr. Kumar remarked, that India's negotiating strategy since 2013 has largely been China-specific. As a consequence, India has not been able to articulate and promote its national interest but, focus more protecting industries and reducing tariffs. India needs to change its narrative and aim at strengthening its manufacturing sector.

Speaking of India-ASEAN relations, Mr. Kumar mentioned that it is only in the recent years that India has given more attention to ASEAN economies and as a result, both the imports and exports has doubled in 2017-18, from what it was in 2009-10. However, while India has developed a strong service sector, it has a long-way to make progress in manufacturing sector. The priority is to protect Indian industries and then secure market access in ASEAN and other RCEP members. Mr Kumar emphasized on the position of India's manufacturing sector to be at a low standing ground vis-a-vis the manufacturing giants in ASEAN economies and that this realization has further incentivised India to unveil programs and policies like Make in India. Such policies will also put India to a level playing field and the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement is a step in this direction. With a strengthened manufacturing sector, Indian industries will also receive favourable responses from the other fifteen RCEP members, which is missing today.

Adding to Mr. Kher's remarks, Mr Pranav Kumar, spoke of the economic architecture of Asia Pacific as one of the most promising and dynamic regions, especially after the global financial crisis. In this context, India's fast paced economic growth brings immense opportunities for strengthening economic and trade relations in the Asia Pacific region. Being a member of RCEP will also allow India to gain market access to some lucrative and some smaller economies. Mr. Kumar concluded by noting that while India's interest may not be adequately addressed in RCEP its withdrawal from the trade bloc may be to India's disadvantage as well.

The Young Diplomats Conclave came to an end with Mr. Shobhit Mathur, Executive Director of Vision India Foundation, delivering the concluding remarks. An enriching conference left the delegates with some key takeaways as follows:

- Developing better channels of connectivity would enable greater people-to-people exchange as well as facilitate more trade and exchange of services. Furthermore, this will further integrate the North Eastern states in the India-ASEAN infrastructural development networks.
- With regards to ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad and ASEAN should play a complementary role to strengthen the security and economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific in adherence to international conventions and norms.
- India should be more articulate about its interests and concerns in RCEP negotiations and thereby change the narrative of its membership. In parallel, strengthening the manufacturing sector through domestic reforms, policies such as Make in India and India's rise in the Ease of Doing Business Index would provide the further impetus to India-ASEAN economic relations.
- With the aim of strengthening cultural relations, governments of both India and ASEAN member states can initiate joint conservation projects on preservation in the form of temples and other monuments as well as intangible heritage.