

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP



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PROGRESS & PROSPERITY

**Keynote Address**  
*on*  
**ASEAN-India Partnership**  
*by*  
**Smt. Sushma Swaraj**  
Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs  
Government of India

22 June 2017  
New Delhi



**RIS**  
Research and Information System  
for Developing Countries

विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

**AIC**  
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS



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Amb. Hardeep Singh Puri, Chairperson, RIS

H.E. Ton Sinh Thnh, Ambassador of Vietnam to India

Excellencies from ASEAN and other countries

Shri Amar Sinha, Secretary (ER), MEA

Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, DG, RIS

Dr. Prabir De, Coordinator, ASEAN-India Centre

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today to share my views on the ASEAN – India Partnership. 2017 is a landmark year for both ASEAN and ASEAN India partnership. While ASEAN celebrates 50 years of its existence, we celebrate 25 years of our Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN, 15 years of our Summit Level interaction and 5 years of our Strategic Partnership with ASEAN.

ASEAN and India have very strong ancient cultural and civilisational linkages. There are numerous examples of the

same that can be found in texts, folklore, architecture, literature, dance-forms, music, religion and culture. The Malay annals, Burmese chronicles & ancient inscriptions in Vietnam, all celebrate links with India.

From the ancient period upto the 12th century, Hinduism as a way of life permeated South East Asia. Thailand incorporates significant elements from Hinduism in its architecture, arts, sculpture dance, drama and literature. The Cham temple complex of My Son Wat in Vietnam is dedicated to Bhadreshvara an incarnation of the Lord Shiva.

The magnificent Angkor Vat in Cambodia was originally built as a Hindu temple dedicated to the Lord Vishnu.

The Vat Phou temple in Lao PDR, Ananda temple in Bagan, Myanmar and the Borobudur Buddhist temple in Indonesia are examples of the influence of Hindu architectural principles.

The various forms of Ramayana prevalent in the region, be it Ramakien in Thailand, Pha Lak Pha Lam in Laos, Yama Zattdaw in Myanmar, Kakawin Ramayana in Indonesia or Hikayat Seri Rama in Malaysia, bear testimony to our historical connect.

I could continue endlessly narrating the examples, however the intent is to highlight that historically we have been bounded by strong ties, politically, economically and socio-culturally.

ASEAN occupies the pride of place in Asia's institutional architecture and this centrality of ASEAN serves as a counter balance to the various great power concerts and rivalries that get played out in the region.

By working together to transcend their differences, ASEAN member states have become a unique example of how different nations can come together to weave a shared vision. In this sense, the Idea of ASEAN echoes

India's Unity in Diversity. India is, after all, a celebration of a grand synthesis of cultures, religions and languages of people belonging to different communities, who are bound into an inseparable whole by a civilizational consciousness and cohesiveness.

This affinity and civilisational connect between us constitutes a special asset for the further development of our relations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, The economic and geo-political centre of gravity of the world is slowly but surely shifting towards the Asia region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The region comprising ASEAN and India together represents a combined population of 1.85 billion which is a quarter of the global population and a GDP of over US\$ 3.8 trillion, creating one of the largest economic spaces in the world.

India would like the creation of an enabling external environment in East Asia for the growth and stability of the region, which constitutes its extended neighbourhood.

India looks towards strengthening its relations in the region through boosting its security networks, benefiting from the ongoing economic and physical integration underway in the region as well as reviving age-old historical links with the countries of South East Asia.

In pursuing these goals, India is relying on strong bilateral diplomacy and active multilateral engagements, including by expanding and strengthening strategic partnerships within the region and beyond.

The new found salience of our eastern neighbourhood and beyond has found its rightful place when the Prime Minister Modi formally enunciated the ‘Act East Policy’ at the ASEAN India and East Asia Summits in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on 11-12 November, 2014, observing that our Government had moved with a great sense of priority to turn the hitherto ‘Look East Policy’ into an ‘Act East Policy’.

He placed South East Asia at the core of India’s Act East Policy and at the centre of our dream of an Asian century, and said that as young entities but old civilizations, India and ASEAN make great partners.

India’s relationship with the ASEAN is the foundation of our Act East Policy and as the Prime Minister said, at the very core of our dream of an Asian century. It is central to India’s presence in East Asia. An equally essential element of the Act East Policy is the connect with the North East and Eastern part of the country.

Thus, while on the one hand, the Act East policy aims to enhance India’s multi-faceted engagement with ASEAN and the wider Asia Pacific, on the other, it seeks to deepen economic integration, politico-security cooperation and socio-cultural dialogue with countries of the region for domestically better integrating our North-East with the wider, the North East is a ‘‘natural partner’’ in India’s Act East Policy.

India's relationship with ASEAN has matured from a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1992 to a full-fledged Dialogue Partnership in 1996, Summit Level Partnership in 2002 and a Strategic Partnership in 2012.

The relationship rests on three pillars: political-security, economic and socio-cultural. There are 30 annual institutional mechanisms for dialogue between ASEAN and India, including a Summit and seven Ministerial level dialogues in agriculture, commerce, environment, foreign affairs, renewable energy, telecommunication and tourism.

The depth of our engagements can be gauged from the fact that since PM Modi's Government came to power in May 2014, we have had visits by the President, Vice President and Prime Minister to 9 out of 10 ASEAN countries.

PM Modi's presence at the three ASEAN-India and East Asia Summits in 2014, 2015 and 2016, and his visits to 5 ASEAN countries, viz., Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Laos is reflective of the new salience of the ASEAN in our foreign and security policy paradigms.

India has been working with ASEAN towards evolving regional security architecture in the Asia Pacific that hinges on emphasising the peaceful settlement of disputes, finding collaborative solutions to emerging and non-traditional challenges, and support for the centrality of ASEAN.

Enhancing Maritime Cooperation and Security has been an area of focus for both ASEAN & India. Combating drug abuse and drug trafficking remains a major challenge in the region. Apart from drug-related crimes, the region faces several other forms of

trans-national crime, such as terrorism; arms smuggling; human trafficking; sea piracy; money laundering; terrorist financing & cyber crime.

ASEAN and India have consciously striven to step up cooperation on counter-terrorism, cyber security, anti-piracy and other transnational crimes through various forums to include the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum.

Economic partnership between India and ASEAN is deepening day by day. In 1992, India's total trade with ASEAN was less than US\$ 5 billion. Twenty five years later, ASEAN has become India's 4th largest trading partner, accounting for 10% of the total trade. India has become ASEAN's 7<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner.

After almost two years of slow growth, ASEAN-India trade is now back on track with an increase of 8% in 2016-17 and with India's exports to ASEAN having increased by almost 20% in 2016-17. We are also witnessing robust Investment flows which are growing constantly.

While the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area is fully functional from July 2015, we are also actively engaged in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations involving ASEAN and its six FTA partners, which, when finalized, will be the largest regional trading arrangement, accounting for about 40 percent of the world trade.

An important ingredient for boosting economic engagement is making Indian companies a part of regional value chains and production networks. To this end, at the ASEAN-India Summit

in 2015, Prime Minister had announced a Project Development Fund for catalyzing Indian economic projects in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.

This fund with a corpus of US\$ 77 Million is up and running now, with potential sectors identified and pre-feasibility studies being undertaken soon.

In addition, the Department of Commerce, under its Market Access Initiative, has financed over 14 trade promotional events in ASEAN Member States at a cost of Rs.767 crore during the last year alone.

It is our conviction that these interactions between policy makers and industry would explore ways to further boost India-ASEAN trade so it may reach its true potential, estimated at US\$200 billion by 2020.

We have accorded preferential treatment to the Least Developed Countries (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) by way of Duty Free Preference Scheme for import of goods, preferential treatment for Services, liberalized Market Access, including movement of natural persons, technical assistance and capacity building. We currently provide a visa fee waiver for Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar applicants applying for Indian Business and Employment visas.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We see connectivity as a huge enabler-for development, for improving the quality of life of our people, for encouraging greater people-to-people exchanges, for stimulating trade and investment & indeed for building peace and stability.

We recognise that the single most important ingredient that can make a qualitative shift in our economic engagement with ASEAN is a major boost towards infrastructure and connectivity, both within India and in the North-East in particular, and with ASEAN.

We are making substantial progress on all fronts, physical and digital. Efforts are on to enhance physical connectivity by land, air and sea so as to transform the corridors of connectivity into corridors of economic cooperation. For enhancing digital connectivity, specific proposals have been put forward, involving the setting up of a regional high-capacity fibre-optic network, supplemented by national rural broadband networks and digital villages in remote areas. Government of India has also extended a US\$1 billion Line of Credit, to help finance these and other connectivity projects with ASEAN.

In every relationship, it is the people who are key. The communities of the North East share ties of blood and history with ASEAN countries. The Ahoms, Khamtis and Khasis have ancestral roots in Thailand. We have a large and vibrant diaspora in the ASEAN countries. We thus recognise the salience of ensuring further fostering of our deep historical & cultural linkages.

Numerous initiatives are being taken in this regard. We have initiated a programme on Cultural and Civilizational Linkages.

We propose to document our civilizational ties by mapping Indian inscriptions along the Mekong River as well as documentation of shared cultural symbols. ASEAN was designated as the Guest of Honour for the 5<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist Conclave held in India from 2-6 October 2016.

People-to-people connect is being enhanced through Students Exchange Programme, Exchange of Parliamentarians, Participation of ASEAN students in National Children's Science Congress, ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks, ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Lecture Series etc.

The guiding beacon for our relationship remains the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity and the Vision Statement of ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, adopted by the Leaders of ASEAN & India on 20 December 2012 in New Delhi.

The goals and objectives of this vision, envisages continued cooperation to accelerate & mutually reinforce sustainable growth and development of our economies towards shared prosperity, poverty alleviation and reduction of social disparities, to enable our people to enjoy unhindered access to opportunities for development. We are executing a mutually agreed upon Plan of Action to fructify the same.

Our Strategic Partnership has been to our mutual benefit. Together we have contributed to regional growth and stability. We hope to continue working with ASEAN in regional and international fora, to shape the economic and security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.

The partnership with ASEAN provides mutually beneficial gains and paves the way to benefit from the US \$ 2.5 trillion ASEAN economy and eventually into the US \$ 21 trillion RCEP economy.

It also supports the growth of our North East.

In order to celebrate 25 years of our partnership, a series of events have been planned throughout the year 2017 on the theme “Shared Values, Common Destiny.” Our celebrations span political, economic, cultural and people-to-people contacts, to culminate in a Commemorative Summit.

In addition, Ministerial level Meetings, a Youth Summit, a Business Summit, CEOs Forum, Regional Indian Diaspora Meeting, a car rally, a sailing expedition, conferences, public competitions and cultural festivals are also planned in India, as well as in ASEAN countries.

Let me end by referring to the congratulatory message that our Prime Minister sent to President Duterte on 28 January 2017, on the commencement of the celebrations of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year.

The Prime Minister stated that India’s Act East Policy is a reflection of the importance we attach to our strategic partnership with ASEAN.

He reaffirmed India’s desire to deepen this engagement, and I now quote *“so that it may scale new heights and constitute a defining partnership of our times.”*

We look forward to working earnestly with the ASEAN Member States in order to turn this vision into a reality.

Thank you.

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Smt. Sushma Swaraj, Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs, Government of India, is a distinguished parliamentarian. She has been elected seven times as a Member of Parliament and three times as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. She is an Advocate by profession and was educated at S.D.College, Ambala Cantt (Haryana) and Department of Laws, Punjab University, Chandigarh. Her alma mater Punjab University has honoured her with the degree of Doctor of Laws (Honoris causa). She became a member of the Haryana Legislative Assembly and a Cabinet Minister in Haryana at the age of 25 in 1977. She has held many important positions in the past such as Chief Minister of Delhi (1998); Cabinet Minister for Information & Broadcasting (2000-2003); Chairperson, Committee on Home Affairs, Rajya Sabha (2004-2009); Chairperson, Standing Committee on External Affairs (2009-2010); Leader of Opposition, Lok Sabha (2009-2014), among others.

## About RIS

Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) is a New Delhi-based autonomous policy research institute that specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. RIS is envisioned as a forum for fostering effective policy dialogue on global and regional economic issues. The institute is engaged across inter-governmental processes of several regional economic cooperation initiatives. It seeks to strengthen policy coherence on international economic issues and the development partnership canvas. For more information about RIS and its work programme, please visit its website: [www.ris.org.in](http://www.ris.org.in)

## About AIC

AIC is set up at RIS to serve as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC undertakes policy research, advocacy and networking activities with organizations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN, with an aim to promote the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership. For more information please visit <http://aic.ris.org.in>