



22nd ASEAN-India Summit: Understanding the Implications

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Key Takeaways

- Strengthening ASEAN centrality in a multipolar Indo-Pacific
- Expanding maritime cooperation and connectivity
- Advancing sustainable and inclusive economic growth
- Revitalising civilisational and people-to-people linkages

Introduction

The 2025 ASEAN-related summits in Kuala Lumpur marked a notable phase in ASEAN-India relations. India's participation in the 22nd ASEAN-India Summit, the 20th East Asia Summit (EAS), and the adoption of major declarations, especially the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the EAS and the ASEAN-India Joint Leaders' Statement on Sustainable Tourism, reaffirmed India's enduring commitment to ASEAN centrality and a rules-based, inclusive Indo-Pacific. Key themes that emerged from these engagements include the following;

- Strengthening ASEAN centrality in a multipolar Indo-Pacific
- Expanding maritime cooperation and connectivity



- Advancing sustainable and inclusive economic growth
- Revitalising civilisational and people-to-people linkages

Together, these commitments illustrate a maturing, multidimensional ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that aligns with ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and India's *Viksit Bharat* 2047.

ASEAN Centrality and a Multipolar Regional Order

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar both reiterated India's unambiguous support for ASEAN centrality and unity. They emphasised that India views ASEAN not merely as a regional grouping but as the anchor of the Indo-Pacific's institutional architecture. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration (2025), which reaffirmed ASEAN's leadership in shaping a peaceful, rules-based regional order, was brought by the 20th East Asia Summit. The EAS was described as a "Leaders-led forum" at the apex of ASEAN-centred architecture, facilitating candid strategic dialogue. India emphasised that multipolarity is here to stay, and collaboration, not coercion, should guide regional conduct. Thus, ASEAN centrality remains important for India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Strengthening ASEAN's institutional capacities through inclusive multilateralism aligns with India's strategic goal of ensuring an open, stable, and balanced Indo-Pacific.

Maritime Cooperation and Connectivity: Anchoring the Partnership

Maritime cooperation featured as the

most prominent cross-cutting theme in all 2025 ASEAN Summit and related statements. It reflects both a historical continuum and a forward-looking strategy for resilience and prosperity. The leaders declared 2026 as the "ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation." A proposal for an EAS Maritime Heritage Festival at Lothal, Gujarat, connecting ancient maritime trade legacies with modern cooperation, was given. India put forward another proposal for Hosting the 7th EAS Conference on Maritime Security Cooperation. India mentioned continued progress on the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, reinforcing physical and digital connectivity. This reinforces freedom of navigation, the blue economy, and collaboration on marine heritage. It strengthens linkages between heritage and security, reflecting India's integrated maritime vision. It further advances ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) by emphasising cooperation rather than competition. India and ASEAN should prioritise maritime domain awareness, sustainable fisheries management, and port-led economic zones as deliverables for 2026. Linking connectivity projects with green maritime infrastructure would further enhance strategic alignment.

Sustainable Economic Growth and Tourism as a Driver

The ASEAN-India Joint Leaders' Statement on Sustainable Tourism placed Sustainability at the centre of economic cooperation. Both sides acknowledged tourism's dual role, as a growth engine and a tool for cultural preservation and community empowerment. It speaks about

environmental Sustainability promoting green, blue, and circular economy principles. Encouraging renewable energy use at tourist sites through partnerships, such as between the ASEAN Centre for Energy and India's TERI, and implementing Travel for LiFE and ESG protocols to minimise pollution and promote eco-friendly tourism were mentioned. It also speaks about economic sustainability. Issues like supporting inclusive tourism models that benefit local communities, youth, and women; facilitating mutual investment in low-carbon infrastructure, including eco-resorts and renewable energy-based facilities; and leveraging digital tools and data analytics to optimise tourist flows and sustainability monitoring were mentioned. The statement also talks about socio-cultural sustainability, protecting and promoting cultural heritage and world heritage sites, integrating fashion, handicrafts, and gastronomy tourism for community-based development and utilising ASEAN-India networks on museums, crafts, and monuments to promote sustainable heritage tourism. This would serve as a collaborative effort to expand capacity-building programs, green certification systems, and technology-sharing for sustainable destination management.

Civilisational Linkages and People-to-People Cooperation

Cultural and civilisational affinity remains the emotional foundation of ASEAN-India relations. Both sides acknowledged shared histories, religions, languages, and maritime interactions as enduring sources of connection. ASEAN and

India are planning to hold a Maritime Heritage Festival to mark ancient trade and cultural linkages. They have recently organised the EAS Knowledge Exchange Workshop on Energy Efficiency and the Higher Education Conclave, fostering research and academic collaboration. These initiatives will strengthen people-to-people connectivity through tourism, education, and cultural diplomacy.

Strategic Convergence and the Road Ahead

The statements collectively underscore convergence between ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and India's Viksit Bharat 2047. Both envisage inclusive growth, digital transformation, and Sustainability as key pillars of progress. India is committed to playing an active role in the implementation of the EAS Plan of Action (2024-2028), willing to partner with ASEAN to address cybersecurity, energy transitions, and HADR cooperation, and taking a strong stance on zero tolerance toward terrorism and advocating for peace in global conflicts such as Gaza and Ukraine.

Further, ASEAN and India can think about the following developments;

- **Institutionalise ASEAN-India Maritime Dialogue:** Create a regular mechanism to coordinate on AOIP-IPOI synergies and maritime security.
- **Launch ASEAN-India Green Corridor Initiative:** Promote renewable energy-based connectivity infrastructure across ports and tourist hubs.
- **Expand Collaboration on Human Capital:** Align skill development and higher education programs with

ASEAN's digital and green economy priorities.

- **Establish a Sustainable Tourism Data Exchange:** Leverage digital platforms to monitor ecological footprints and socio-economic impacts.
- **Strengthen Crisis Response Cooperation:** Enhance disaster resilience through shared HADR exercises and early warning systems.

Conclusion

The 2025 Kuala Lumpur summit reaffirmed the depth and dynamism of the ASEAN-India partnership. The relationship has moved beyond trade and diplomacy into a comprehensive developmental and strategic partnership, integrating sustainability, connectivity, and cultural resilience. The year 2026 will serve as a crucial testing ground for implementing these visions. As both ASEAN and India advance toward their respective long-term aspirations, their collective efforts are poised to make the Indo-Pacific a model of cooperative multipolarity, sustainable growth, and civilisational harmony.



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