

# India strengthens ties with ASEAN countries

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Late last month Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted leaders from all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in a clear move to strengthen Delhi's geo-strategic and economic ties and counter China's growing influence in the region.

ASEAN leaders were the chief guests at the Indian Republican Day celebrations on January 26, having attended an India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit a day earlier. Modi also held bilateral talks in New Delhi with each ASEAN country leader—from Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Brunei, Laos and Cambodia.

Modi's attempt to boost relations with ASEAN is being encouraged by the US, as part of India's transformation into a frontline state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

In an op-ed article published by 27 newspapers in the ASEAN countries, Modi declared: "South-east Asia and ASEAN, our neighbours by land and sea, have been the springboard of our Look East and, since the last three years, the Act East policy."

Addressing the India-ASEAN summit, which was held under the theme of "Shared Values, Common Destiny," Modi declared that India shared "ASEAN's vision of peace and prosperity through the rules-based order for the oceans and seas.... Respect for international law, notably UNCLOS [the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea] is critical for this."

The references to "a rules-based order" meshes with Washington's stance on the territorial disputes in South China Sea and the US-instigated case in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2016 that ruled against China's maritime claims (see: "The Hague ruling: A dangerous step toward war").

A joint "Delhi Declaration" issued at the conclusion of the summit stressed the "importance of maintaining

and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region." The US repeatedly uses the terms "freedom of navigation" and "overflight" to justify its military provocations against China in the South China Sea.

While many ASEAN members have close connections with Beijing, several have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The Modi government is clearly attempting to exploit the situation to drive a wedge between China and ASEAN countries so as to expand India's influence in the region.

In his bilateral talks with ASEAN leaders, Modi called for enhanced defence and maritime security and socio-economic development in the Indo-Pacific region. A press release issued after his separate meetings with Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte noted their "satisfaction" at the growth of bilateral relations with India.

Agreements were signed with the Vietnam premier for "increasing cooperation and information in communications" and "an ASEAN-India Centre of Satellite Tracking and Telemetry Station." According to Reuters, the satellite centre will give Hanoi access to images from Indian satellites covering China, the South China Sea and other parts of the region.

Modi also used the summit to secure support for the Indian government's so-called "anti-terror campaign." The "Delhi Declaration" reiterated a "commitment" and "comprehensive approach to combat terrorism ... including by countering cross border movement of terrorism."

The reference to "cross border movement of terrorism" is directed against Pakistan, which, Delhi insists, supports Kashmir separatist groups fighting Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir. No doubt the Modi government aimed to send a warning to Pakistan and

China, which is increasingly emerging as Islamabad's main international ally.

The declaration called for a further strengthening of ASEAN-India economic relations via “effective implementation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area”—an existing deal between India and the 10-member group that covers goods, services and investment.

Modi boasted that ASEAN-India trade “has grown 25 times over 25 years.” However, India still lags far behind China in the region. In 2017, India's trade with ASEAN countries totalled \$US70 billion, compared to China's \$514.8 billion. At the same time, Chinese exports to ASEAN countries were worth \$279.1 billion, compared to India's \$30 billion.

Voicing the concern of India's financial elite, an *Indian Express* editorial on January 26 commented: “India's relationship with ASEAN continues to be afflicted by the gap between promise and performance ... For India, it is not a question of competing with China, which is not really possible given China's geographical advantage. The real challenge is meeting India's own targets. On trade, it is nowhere near reaching the goal of \$200 billion by 2020, set five years ago.”

The editorial complained that “connectivity projects with ASEAN, like the trilateral highway to Thailand via Myanmar, are years behind schedule.” It concluded: “Meeting India's declared objectives at the summit will need a decisive push from the PM [Modi] to overcome bureaucratic and policy inertia.”

China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying responded cautiously to Modi's meetings with the ASEAN leaders. “We are pleased to see the development of normal relations and cooperation between Indian and ASEAN countries, and we hope to work with others to make positive contributions,” she said on January 25.

An op-ed article entitled “India's geopolitical bluff baffles China” in the Chinese government's *Global Times*, mocked Indian pretensions. Pointing to the disparity in India's trade with ASEAN compared to China's, it declared: “Some members of the Indian elite enjoy engaging in geopolitical bluster. But they cannot truly gauge the reality of India's comprehensive strength and diplomatic experience. They are beginners playing at geopolitics.”



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