

Act East in India's Foreign Policy: India-ASEAN Relations

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We live today in an interdependent world. The concept of the 'Global Village' is a part of India's culture, and we see 'Vasudeiva Kutumbhakam' as a part of our ethos. A country's foreign policy contributes immensely towards its progress and prosperity in a globalising village. This reinforces the idea that the foreign policy of any country cannot be divorced from its domestic policy and governance - the influence and outcome of each impact with equal measure on the other.

A hundred years ago, the guns fell silent after World War I. It is 75 years since the end of World War II. The developments in the history of war and peace during this period had Europe at its centre. The predominant influence of the USA on world affairs became evident since the mid-1940s. The rush towards influencing the course of events in global affairs led to the Cold War between the USA led alliance of the West and the allies of the Soviet Union in the East. The idea of Non-alignment among India's founding fathers was born as a by-product to these militarised alliances.

The days of the Cold War are long gone. Nearly two decades of the 21st Century have gone by. Despite reports to the contrary, the USA will continue to hold strategic predominance in the years ahead, especially in the political, financial, and geo-strategic areas. The Russian Federation, the Successor State to the Soviet Union, has struggled to hold its erstwhile power and heft. However, Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, is slowly regaining its influence. The Euro-Atlantic no longer continues to dominate headlines. With the gravitational shift in global dynamics, it will be the Indo-Pacific which

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will play a determining role in international relations in the coming years. The Cold War of the 20th Century might be long over; and the nature of this debate has taken an altogether new dimension.

As we move towards the third decade of the 21st Century, new and significant players have emerged to influence relations between States and developments among the comity of nations. The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA and the statements emanating from Washington have created confusion in a world which perhaps earlier had some semblance of order. The rapid rise of China and its dominant role in deciding the course of events around the globe is unmistakable. Its non-transparent Belt and Road Initiative has generated more suspicion than comfort. The US-China trade dispute is seen as being stage managed with a larger political objective. Europe is in a state of flux because its pre-eminent position in international relations has suffered. And, BREXIT has brought in new uncertainties in an already struggling Europe.

In his address to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA) in June 2019, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar had noted, “Globalisation is under stress due to new and emerging geo-political and geo-economic fault lines. India supports a rule-based order in Asia, as in the rest of the world”.¹

The state of international relations is not static but dynamic. There are areas which stand out as possible sources of tension, conflict or discord. India needs to keep a close eye on such developments, and respond appropriately to the evolving situation. Challenges will always be there, but they also throw up opportunities. These opportunities need to be looked at in the larger national interest.

The thrust of India’s foreign policy in pursuit of its national interests has been a work in continuity in response to various global developments. By and large, there has been across the board political consensus regarding its foreign policy, barring some differences in nuances.

Relations with its neighbours dominate India’s Neighbourhood First foreign policy, and are a priority. This is followed by the states of ASEAN and Japan, which come under the ambit of its Act East policy. Coined by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, when he was Foreign Secretary,² the Think West idea in India’s policy formulation includes the states of West Asia and the Gulf. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the European Union are accorded significant importance. Greater attention is now being given to countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean and

Oceania. Indian leaders have visited some of these countries which had never seen an Indian VVIP before.

India has had extensive interaction with countries of East and South East Asia over the centuries. This interaction started with commerce but expanded rapidly into other areas. The influence of Indian art, culture and religion is significant in many of these countries. Buddhism acquired strong roots in the region while the influence of Hinduism was also seen in some of the countries. The Kalingas had trading relations with the different countries in the region, and the Chola Empire also ventured politically and economically into many of these countries. The Asian Relations Conference and the Bandung Conference brought the countries of the region closer together. India has a multifaceted mutually beneficial partnership with ASEAN as a group as well as with its individual members. The development of India-ASEAN relations in the future would bring greater progress and prosperity to the North-Eastern States of India.

ASEAN celebrated its 50th Anniversary in August 2017. From its five founding members in 1967, ASEAN today has 10 members. Timor L'este could be included as the group's 11th member in the not too distant future. ASEAN today is the most successful and harmonious regional grouping.

At their 34th Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, ASEAN leaders saw three main themes at the Summit. These were: (i) "Advancing towards a "Digital ASEAN"; (ii) "Partnership" both within ASEAN and with Dialogue Partners while reinforcing the ASEAN-centred regional architecture; and (iii) Building sustainability in all dimensions. The "ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together" will be the driving force in advancing this partnership towards sustainability.

India became a Sectoral Dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992. In 1994, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao announced India's Look East Policy while speaking at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore.³ India became a Full Dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996. The partnership was raised to a Summit level in 2002, and to that of a Strategic Partner in 2012. In his opening statement at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on 12 November 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, "Externally, India's 'Look East Policy' has become [the] 'Act East Policy'".⁴ The geographical contour of this policy was supposed to extend from Bangladesh to the western seaboard of the USA. In 2012, India commemorated twenty years of its Partnership with ASEAN, and ten years of Annual Summits. Leaders from all ten ASEAN countries participated in the commemorative event.

The general statement of principles of the 2004 document relating to the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity⁵ was incorporated into a more comprehensive Vision Statement during the 2012 ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit.⁶ The rather free flowing Plans of Action for 2005-2010 and 2010-2015⁷ were upgraded to a more structured and detailed Plan of Action for 2016-2020.⁸ This document underlines India's support to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, and its three pillars: the ASEAN Political Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

India and ASEAN commemorated 25 years of their association in 2018 as a "historic milestone". All the ten leaders of ASEAN participated in the commemorative event. A "Delhi Declaration of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit to mark the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations" was adopted at the Summit Meeting.⁹ Besides their participation in the commemoration events, the ten ASEAN leaders were Chief Guests at India's 69th Republic Day celebrations, a first of sorts.

Over these 25 years of partnership, India's relations with ASEAN as a group and bilaterally with each of the individual ten countries have increased exponentially. There are 30 dialogue mechanisms which not only include annual Summit level interactions but also Ministerial meetings covering a wide range of areas, as those on External Affairs, Defence and Security, Commerce, Telecommunications, Agriculture, Energy, Environment, and Tourism.

As strategic partners, there is wide-ranging cooperation between India and ASEAN in the political and security spheres. India is actively associated with various ASEAN-related defence and strategic institutions. These include the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. India's bilateral defence ties with the region and with each individual ASEAN member has expanded significantly.

The common challenges confronting India and ASEAN have led to enhanced joint cooperation and exchange of information in combating international terrorism, piracy, money laundering, organised crime, drug trafficking, arms trading, human trafficking, cybercrime, the clandestine proliferation of nuclear materials, and missile technology, among others.

The Indo-Pacific region occupies a pivotal position in India's Act East policy. In his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted that the Indo-Pacific region is home to a vast array of global opportunities and challenges. He said,

The ten countries of South East Asia connect the two great oceans in both the geographical and civilisational sense. Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members.¹⁰

He noted “India’s own engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region - from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas - will be inclusive”.¹¹

At its 34th Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was adopted.¹² The Outlook emphasised that “ASEAN will continue to play a central and strategic role in the Indo-Pacific”. India “warmly welcomed” the Outlook proposals, noting “we see important elements of convergence with our own views, especially from the standpoint of principles, as well as its approach and ASEAN’s listing of areas of cooperation”.¹³ Most of the important countries recognise the significance of the Indo-Pacific region, and have welcomed the ASEAN Outlook. China and Russia use the nomenclature of ‘Asia-Pacific’ for the region, and do not recognise it as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region. These two countries see the Indo-Pacific construct as driven by US interests, and with a strong anti-China viewpoint.

India and ASEAN emphasise the importance of peace, stability, maritime safety and security, equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces in the sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation and over flight in the region as well as unimpeded commerce and the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. They have supported the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), and look forward to an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

There are many sub-regional multilateral forums such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which have provided additional platforms for engagement between India and ASEAN. India has an annual Track 1.5 event, the Delhi Dialogue, to discuss politico-security and economic issues between ASEAN and India.

ASEAN figures indicate that two-way trade between India and ASEAN increased by 8.4 percent, from US\$ 73.63 billion in 2017 to US\$ 79.83 billion in 2018.¹⁴ DGCI & S statistics indicate that Indo-ASEAN trade in 2017-18 was US\$ 81.34 billion (approximately 10.6 percent of India’s overall trade), and in 2018-19 US\$ 96.79 billion (approximately 11.5 percent of India’s overall trade).^{15,16} For the first month of 2018-19, the trade turnover was nearly US\$

8.0 billion (approximately 9 percent of India's overall trade). ASEAN is India's 5th largest trading partner. India is the 8th largest trading partner of ASEAN. The leaders of India and ASEAN had set a trade turnover target of US\$ 100 billion by 2015,¹⁷ which is just being achieved. Achieving the rather ambitious target of US\$ 200 billion by 2022¹⁸ will need a lot of effort. New opportunities and products need to be explored, along with attractive incentives in order to achieve this target.

Bilaterally, Singapore is India's largest trading partner, with a trade turnover of US\$ 27.85 billion in 2018-19¹⁹. This is followed by Indonesia at US\$ 21.12 billion²⁰ and Malaysia at US\$ 17.25 billion.²¹ Besides these three countries, Vietnam and Thailand also find a place among India's 25 largest trading partners.

Based on the Ministry of Commerce & Industry data, cumulative FDI inflows into India from ASEAN between April 2000 and March 2018 were US\$ 68.91 billion, which represents approximately 18.28 percent of the cumulative inflows received. As per the Ministry of Finance data, Cumulative FDI outflows from India to ASEAN countries, from April 2007 to March 2015, were about US\$ 38.67 billion.

The conclusion of the ASEAN-India Trade and Goods Agreement and the ASEAN-India Services and Investment Agreement allows for the creation of an ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. However, both sides need to monitor progress to remove whatever obstacles there may be in the smooth operationalisation of these agreements.

With a combined population of nearly 2 billion in India and the ASEAN region, and a combined GDP of over US\$ 5 trillion, the opportunities are immense. Both sides have sought greater private sector involvement in the expansion of trade and investment. An ASEAN-India Business Summit took place in New Delhi in January 2018. The ASEAN-India Business Council has been reactivated. The ASEAN-India Business Fair and Conclave has also taken place.

At their November 2012 Phnom Penh Summit, the Heads of States/Governments of ASEAN and ASEAN's Free Trade Agreement partners endorsed the "Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership" (RCEP) adopted by their Economic Ministers in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in August 2012.²² The objective of the RCEP was to

achieve a modern, comprehensive, high-quality and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement; establishing an open trade and investment

environment in the region to facilitate the expansion of regional trade and investment and contribute to global economic growth and development; and boost economic growth and equitable economic development, advance economic cooperation and broaden and deepen integration in the region through the RCEP.²³

This was supposed to build upon the existing economic linkages of the partners.

The members of the RCEP include the ASEAN 10, the ASEAN+3, viz. China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, and the three Dialogue Partners, viz. India, Australia, and New Zealand. The agreement aims to cover goods, services, investments, economic and technical cooperation, competition, and intellectual property rights. The membership of the RCEP would represent 47.4 percent of the global population, 32.2 percent of the global economy, 29.1 percent of global trade and 32.5 percent of global investment flows.²⁴ RCEP Ministers have noted that it is “the most important trade agenda in the region, supportive of an open, inclusive, and rules-based trading system, and an enabling trade and investment environment”.

Many rounds of talks have been held among RCEP members towards negotiating an agreed document. At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, suggested that he was ready to push forward in concluding the Agreement even without some members for the time being, implicitly implying India.²⁵ India is also keen that the Agreement be concluded by the next 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, but would like its concerns to be adequately addressed. Australia and New Zealand also have some concerns on the RCEP document.

During his visit to Singapore in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched upon India's commitment to the RCEP noting, “I also conveyed India's firm commitment to an early conclusion of the RCEP Agreement and hoped for a fair, balanced and comprehensive agreement.”²⁶ He did not want India to be seen as holding out. At the Shangri La Dialogue, he said “RCEP must be comprehensive, as the name suggests, and the principles declared. It must have a balance among trade, investment and services.”²⁷

Significant progress has been made in the market access negotiations of goods. Similar efforts are called for towards making progress in negotiations relating to services as they constitute more than 50 percent of the GDP of most of the RCEP countries. Services are expected to play an important role in the future. India continues to seek a modern, comprehensive, balanced, and mutually beneficial agreement.

India's main areas of concern include: the lack of transparency in the conduct of business in some partner countries; its own burgeoning deficit in trade in goods; taking advantage of loopholes in the rules of origins provisions by RCEP partners; difficulties in market access; the lack of interest by partners in satisfactorily addressing India's concerns on services, among others.

While looking for a win-win by signing the RCEP, India would like to ensure that the agreement is balanced not only across its key sectors - trade in goods, services, and investment - but also within each sector. India has said that there should not be an unequal balancing of tariff reductions in goods and services - partners need to ensure equal high levels of tariff reduction in services as in goods, with binding commitments. Right now, ASEAN has proposed a common concessions approach in goods with up to 92 percent tariff elimination, 7 percent tariff reduction, and 1 percent in the exclusion list. India is also concerned at some of the provisions of the Investor-State Dispute Settlement process (ISDS). Many industry groups have submitted memoranda to the Government highlighting their concerns. [India has since conveyed its intention to withdraw from the RCEP at the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in November 2019.]²⁸ In parallel with the RCEP negotiations, India and ASEAN have agreed to review their trade pact.

ASEAN-India connectivity is a priority for India as also for the ASEAN countries. In 2013, India became the third dialogue partner of ASEAN to initiate an ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee-India Meeting. India shares a seamless boundary with the ASEAN countries through Myanmar. Upgrading and strengthening connectivity should not only help develop India's relations with ASEAN further but also, more importantly, provide avenues for development and progress in the North-Eastern States of India.

India is committed towards the completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Friendship Highway, its extension to Laos and Cambodia, and onwards to Vietnam. India is associated with the completion of the Rhi-Tiddim road enabling connectivity between Mizoram and Mandalay in Myanmar; the construction of the Kalewa-Yargi road section; the construction of 69 bridges in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa to improve connectivity, among others. India is developing the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar. This will link Mizoram to the Myanmar port of Sittwe as also Kolkata and Sittwe ports. The waterways component of the project has been completed. The construction of the road component should be completed soon. An India-ASEAN Connectivity Summit was held in Delhi in December 2017.

China's proposal of a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 has been seen as a form of a neo-colonial approach towards dominating or taking over assets in debt-laden developing countries. The Belt and Road Initiative is supposed to connect 65 countries, and the total cost outlay is over US\$ 1 trillion.²⁹ Nearly US\$ 750 billion has been committed to BRI projects in ASEAN. ASEAN-China trade reached US\$ 479.4 billion in 2018 or 17.1 percent of ASEAN's total merchandise trade. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows from China to ASEAN amounted to US\$ 10.2 billion in 2018, or 6.6 percent of total ASEAN FDI.³⁰

India's cultural imprint is visible in most ASEAN countries. ASEAN and India have agreed to preserve, protect, and restore symbols and structures which represent civilisational bonds between India and ASEAN countries, including those in Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur and Prambanan in Indonesia, Wat Phu in Laos, Bagan in Myanmar, Sukothai in Thailand, and Mù Sôn in Vietnam.³¹ The Indian epic *Ramayana* is an important thread culturally binding India and ASEAN.

People-to-people contact forms an important element of ASEAN-India cooperation. Tourism provides a significant platform in facilitating this cooperation. There is a greater need for encouragement and awareness for tourists from India to visit ASEAN, and vice versa. The setting up of the Nalanda University is an important step in highlighting the dimension of Buddhism and education in India's cooperation with ASEAN. 3.45 million Indian tourists visited ASEAN in 2017 while under a million visitors from ASEAN countries visited India during the same period. The ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Lecture Series and ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks are some of the other areas promoting ideas and avenues to further India-ASEAN cooperation.

The role of a strong Indian Diaspora in ASEAN in acting as a bridge in developing close partnership with the countries of their adoption and in the economic development of India, and in bilateral commercial and economic cooperation, needs no reiteration.

India's engagement with ASEAN has been paying good dividends. This needs to be continued and developed further to maintain the momentum. India and ASEAN need each other in a complex region where one super power is stepping back, and a more combative and supremely ambitious power is emerging at the global stage. While India has done well in the political, security, cultural, and people-to-people areas, a lot more needs to be done on the trade, economic, and connectivity fronts with ASEAN to

help the relationship blossom further. This will provide traction for growth, development and security bilaterally between India and ASEAN members, individually as well as collectively with other members, in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

Notes :

- ¹ External Affairs Minister's address at 5th CICA Summit 2019 in Dushanbe, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31448/External_Affairs_Ministers_address_at_5th_CICA_Summit_2019_in_Dushanbe
- ² Speech by Foreign Secretary at Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi on 2 March 2015, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26433/Speech_by_Foreign_Secretary_at_Raisina_Dialogue_in_New_Delhi_March_2_2015
- ³ Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's speech: "India and the Asia-Pacific – Forging A New Relationship", October 1994, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
- ⁴ Prime Minister Modi Act East, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24230/Opening_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_at_the_12th_IndiaASEAN_Summit_Nay_Pyi_Taw_Myanmar
- ⁵ ASEAN-India Partnership, at https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-india-partnership-for-peace-progress-and-shared-prosperity-2
- ⁶ ASEAN India Vision Statement, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/20982/Vision_StatementASEANIndia_Commemorative_Summit
- ⁷ Plan of Action 2010–2015, at https://asean.org/?static_post=plan-of-action-to-implement-the-asean-india-partnership-for-peace-progress-and-shared-prosperity-2010-2015
- ⁸ Plan of Action 2016–2020, at https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/August/POA_India/ASEAN-Indiaper cent20POAper cent20per cent20FINAL.pdf
- ⁹ ASEAN India Delhi Declaration, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29386/Delhi_Declaration_of_the_ASEANIndia_Commemorative_Summit_to_mark_the_25th_Anniversary_of_ASEANIndia_Dialogue_Relations
- ¹⁰ Prime Minister Modi's Shangri La Dialogue address, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri_La_Dialogue_June_01_2018
- ¹¹ Ibid
- ¹² ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, at https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf
- ¹³ India on ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook, at https://mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/31470/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_a_query_on_Indias_view_on_the_recently_announced_ASEAN_Outlook_on_the_IndoPacific
- ¹⁴ See, <https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-ASEAN-India-as-of-July-2019-fn.pdf>

- ¹⁵ India-ASEAN Import figures, at <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/irgn.asp>
- ¹⁶ India-ASEAN Export figures, at <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/ergn.asp>
- ¹⁷ ASEAN India Vision Statement, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/20982/Vision_StatementASEANIndia_Commemorative_Summit
- ¹⁸ See, <https://asean.org/asean-india-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-cooperation/>
- ¹⁹ See, <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/iecnttopn.asp>
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² RCEP Guiding Principles, at [https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2012/documents/Guidingper cent20Principlesper cent20andper cent20Objectivesper cent20forper cent20Negotiatingper cent20theper cent20Regionalper cent20Comprehensiveper cent20Economicper cent20Partnership.pdf](https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2012/documents/Guidingper%20Principlesper%20andper%20Objectivesper%20forper%20Negotiatingper%20theper%20Regionalper%20Comprehensiveper%20Economicper%20Partnership.pdf)
- ²³ RCEP – Launch of negotiations, at [https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2012/documents/Jointper cent20Declarationper cent20onper cent20theper cent20Launchper cent20ofper cent20Negotiationsper cent20forper cent20theper cent20Regionalper cent20Comprehensiveper cent20Economicper cent20Partnership.pdf](https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2012/documents/Jointper%20Declarationper%20onper%20theper%20Launchper%20ofper%20Negotiationsper%20forper%20theper%20Regionalper%20Comprehensiveper%20Economicper%20Partnership.pdf)
- ²⁴ RCEP Inter-Sessional Ministerial Meeting, at https://asean.org/storage/2019/08/RCEPISSLMM8-05-Draft-JMS-FINAL_cln.pdf
- ²⁵ Mahathir Mohamad interview to CNBC, at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/24/malaysia-mahathir-rcep-can-go-on-without-india-for-the-time-being.html>
- ²⁶ Prime Minister Modi in Singapore, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29941/English_Translation_of_Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_visit_to_Singapore
- ²⁷ Prime Minister Modi's Shangri La Dialogue address, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri_La_Dialogue_June_01_2018
- ²⁸ India's withdrawal from RCEP,
- (a) Addressing the RCEP Summit in Bangkok in November 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "The present form of the RCEP agreement does not fully reflect the basic spirit and the agreed guiding principles of RCEP. It also does not address satisfactorily India's outstanding issues and concerns. In such a situation, it is not possible for India to join the RCEP agreement", adding "When I measure the RCEP agreement with respect to the interests of all Indians, I do not get a positive answer. Therefore, neither the Talisman of Gandhiji nor my own conscience permits me to join RCEP." See, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/neither-gandhi-s-talisman-nor-my-conscience-allows-to-join-rcep-pm-modi/story-MwoYlJchVp3S1OK1EKilHK.html>

- (b) Briefing the press at the conclusion of the RCEP Summit, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs said, on 4 November 2019, “We have conveyed our decision not to join the RCEP to the participating countries. The reasons for not joining are the participating countries aware of it and I can say that we have had a very clear and a principled position for a fair and balanced outcome of the RCEP but when we did not see that ... We took the right decision in national interest.” See, https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/32007/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_by_Secretary_East_during_PMs_visit_to_Thailand_November_04_2019
- (c) The Joint Leaders’ Statement on The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) observed, “India has significant outstanding issues, which remain unresolved. All RCEP Participating Countries will work together to resolve these outstanding issues in a mutually satisfactory way. India’s final decision will depend on satisfactory resolution of these issues.” See, <https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/FINAL-RCEP-Joint-Leaders-Statement-for-3rd-RCEP-Summit.pdf>

²⁹ See, <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>

³⁰ ASEAN-China, at https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-of-ASEAN-China-Relations-Dec-2019_For-Web.pdf

³¹ ASEAN India Vision Statement, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/20982/Vision_StatementASEANIndia_Commemorative_Summit

