

ASEAN-India Connectivity: Mapping Pathways of Shared Prosperity

It's an Arc of Prosperity spanning shared dreams and values of over 1.8 billion people of India and 10 ASEAN states. Underpinned by a soaring vision of an Asian century, this rainbow arc is now acquiring new and innovative dimensions as India and ASEAN are getting closely intertwined in a web of co-prosperity through an intricate network of rail, road, air and maritime links. Enhancing connectivity, physical, digital, civilizational and people-to-people, is the animating mantra as the leaders of India and ASEAN hold their special summit on January 2018 to mark the silver jubilee of their blossoming partnership.

Spurring multi-faceted connectivity across all domains, including land, air and sea, is a gamechanger in fructifying the potential of burgeoning strategic partnership between India and ASEAN. Ahead of the summit, India and ASEAN held the Connectivity Summit (AICS) in New Delhi on December 11-12, 2017 to accelerate major connectivity projects and envision new ideas and initiatives that will integrate these two hubs of growth, dynamism and entrepreneurial energy.

Themed "Powering Digital and Physical Linkages for Asia in the 21st Century," the connectivity summit brought together ministers, policymakers, senior officials, investors, industry leaders, representatives of trade associations and entrepreneurs from India and ASEAN on the same platform. What emerged from the summit was a dovetailing of India's initiatives with the 2025 Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), with a concrete plan of action to accelerate existing connectivity projects and policy changes to enhance economic, industrial and trade relations between ASEAN and India. In the coming days, the focus will be on promoting connectivity initiatives pivoted around sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence and people mobility.

With India's Look East policy turning into Act East under the watch of the NDA government, promoting India-ASEAN connectivity to quicken regional integration has acquired an added energy and vigour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has raised the bar for converting corridors of connectivity into economic corridors of shared prosperity. At the 13th India-ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, he announced a Line of Credit of US\$ 1 billion to promote projects that

support physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN. India has become the third dialogue partner of ASEAN after China and Japan to initiate an ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee-India Meeting, which seeks to link India closer to MPAC.

On the connectivity front, there are several good news stories which are unfolding quietly and steadily. There is rapid and visible progress in a host of connectivity projects, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP). The Trilateral Highway is expected to be operational by 2019 and is set to have ripple effects on the economic fortunes of people living in India's north-eastern states. IMT could be a bridgehead for North-eastern states to booming markets in ASEAN countries. Plans to extend Trilateral Highway to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam are shaping up, and will open new vistas for enhanced trade, tourism and people-to-people contacts between India and ASEAN. The finalisation of the proposed protocol of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Motor Vehicle Agreement (IMT MVA) will spur seamless movement of passenger, personal and cargo vehicles along roads linking India, Myanmar and Thailand.

Sea of Opportunity

Looking ahead, the focus will be increasingly on enhancing maritime and air connectivity between ASEAN and India. Besides launching more direct flights between Tier 1 and 2 cities of India and ASEAN countries, the real action will be in the area of maritime connectivity as the bulk of India-ASEAN trade flows through sea lanes. The ASEAN India maritime transport cooperation agreement is being negotiated and finalised. India is looking to set up a maritime transport working group of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to explore the feasibility of shipping networks. Plans to interlink islands in India and ASEAN countries for improving maritime connectivity shows future possibilities.

Out of Box: New Horizons

Thinking out of the box pays. Cruise tourism could be the next big idea in promoting tourism and people-to-people bonds between India and ASEAN. At the connectivity summit, India's Minister of Shipping Nitin Gadkari unveiled plans to boost cruise tourism from 80 ships per year to 900 per year. "Cruises from India can start from Mumbai or Cochin and can go to Thailand, Philippines and Cambodia, saving Indian tourists

time and money for specially travelling to Singapore to enjoy cruises,” said Mr Gadkari. Maybe next time, instead of a boring flight, take a cruise to savour the journey to these beautiful countries.

Promoting digital connectivity is the next big frontier in India-ASEAN connectivity. India has already shared with ASEAN an integrated approach to digitally intermesh India and ASEAN states, which will involve setting up of a regional high-capacity fiber optic network, a National Rural Broadband Network and Digital Villages in Remote Areas. This focus on digital connectivity has been showcased at ASEAN-India ICT Expo in December 2017 in Jakarta. ASEAN-India Start-up Festival and Hackathon in Hyderabad and Jaipur in India and ASEAN India Grand Challenge in Singapore in January 2018 are set to open new vistas to unleash entrepreneurial energy of start-ups in India and ASEAN countries. India is also looking to promote broadband connectivity in CLMV countries which shall bring internet to the masses, including in the rural sector.

Given shared values and common destiny of India and ASEAN countries, connectivity transcends geographical and physical realms and opens new avenues for revitalising civilizational and people-to-people contacts. Looking ahead, besides commerce and connectivity, culture and creativity, as seen in holding of India-ASEAN Youth Summit, artists’ camp and music festival, will hold the key to unlocking the collective dreams of India and ASEAN countries. Let a million ideas bloom, to connect India and ASEAN closer to realise an Asian Century!