
ASEAN-India Political Cooperation

How to reinforce a much-needed pillar?

Sophie Boisseau du Rocher

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Center for Asian Studies

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Executive Summary

India is one of Southeast Asia's principal neighbors and there is certainly great potential for cooperation with the region and its institutional representation, ASEAN. But does India properly exploit this opportunity? Is Southeast Asia satisfied with the level of engagement?

The bases for cooperation are strong. Since ancient times India's soft power has played a unique role in Southeast Asia and has contributed to shaping the region's political culture. Even if colonialism and the Cold War hampered these links, they have been revived with India's "Look East Policy" in the early 1990's. The relationship has since gathered momentum and evolved into a broad-level interaction encompassing economic and security pillars.

Nevertheless, this study shows that political linkages remain weak and penalized by the absence of a clear vision. This reality is indeed worrying and there is concern that between rising economic and security imperatives there is no room, no time and no investment for a much needed, constructive political dialogue.

The basic argument of this paper is that the missing political link might be detrimental to the whole relationship. The ASEAN – India framework for political cooperation has no substance and could not play a functional role in case of uncertainty or tensions. In a context of growing competition with China, both India and ASEAN need a reinforced partnership that includes a functional form of political cooperation.

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Introduction

“It is only natural that India should attach the highest priority to its relationship with ASEAN”

*Indian Prime Minister M. Singh
ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, New Delhi
20 December 2012*

Twenty years after the establishment of the India / ASEAN Dialogue Partnership and ten years after the beginning of the Summit Partnership, political cooperation between India and ASEAN remains highly elusive. In short, it can best be described as “more words than action”. A new, substantive impulsion is needed to go beyond the level of simple discourse and wishful thinking.

Until very recently, political cooperation was the weak leg of the relationship. Since the launching of India’s Look East Policy in 1991, the most often cited impetus for cooperation has been converging economic interests and the embrace of globalization. Most notably, a free-trade agreement (FTA) was signed in 2003, implemented in 2010 and subsequently widened in December 2012 to include investments and services. A second impetus has been common security interests and the need to prevent transnational threats and contribute to the new balance of forces in the region. It comes as no surprise that maritime security cooperation was a focus of recent convergence as both partners stress the necessity of ensuring the freedom of navigation in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. But political cooperation is never cited as a priority. It appears rather as an implicit condition for cooperation and as an asset, while in truth it is an empty box.

This reality is indeed troubling. The concern is that between rising economic and security imperatives, there is no room, no time and no investment for a much needed, constructive political dialogue. The basic argument of this paper is that this missing link might be detrimental to the whole relationship, even risky: the political cooperation framework has no substance and could not play its role in case of uncertainty or tension.

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Political dialogue is not a luxury in a context of increased interconnection and interdependence and in a timeframe associated with a shift of both global and regional balances of power. ASEAN is undergoing a dramatic overhaul with major changes in regional dynamics. Undoubtedly, the new political and security pattern emerging in Southeast Asia will have a direct impact on India's stability and security. The number of issues of common concern is rising, from matters of daily interest such as migration or religious co-existence to long-term choices such as political transition or the type of framework for regional institutions. These choices thus simultaneously bring challenges and opportunities in building a long-term, common vision with neighbors and not only, as it is now, a mere reactive exchange.

But if there is potential for a more substantial political relationship, and if dialogue and cooperative action to deal with these issues are viewed as necessary tools to solve potential contending issues in a peaceful manner, it is not yet clear when and how this potential will be fully exploited. Indeed, we observe two main contradictory trends: if, on one side, the foundations and incentives for a deeper and well-balanced political relationship are there and waiting to be more efficiently exploited, on the other side, there is also a palpable perception that because this relationship is seen as "non-threatening", it doesn't deserve priority. The current international political context might bring a new sense of urgency, as it was said during the 10th ASEAN / India ministerial meeting at Phnom Penh (July 2012), "to achieve the full potential of the partnership".

This paper argues that despite deeply historical and well-constructed linkages (I), strategic relations lack centrality and remain second-rank, (II) as illustrated in the sensitive case of Myanmar (III). The paper ends with a call for a new impulsion: in times of change, political cooperation is not an option but a necessity (IV).

India and ASEAN: Well-constructed relations

To consolidate their political relationship, India and ASEAN have some assets to exploit. To begin with, India and Southeast Asia are not recent partners. Indeed, they have a long history of interaction made of exchanges and peaceful interactive influence.

India's imprint on Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia's political culture has been deeply and structurally influenced by India. As demonstrated by Lucian Pye in his master book on the cultural dimension of political authority¹, the conceptualization of political space (the "mandala" pattern as a construction to diffuse political power²), political rules and mechanisms (concepts of kingship and authority explains many features of the modern Thai monarchy for instance) have been inspired by India and derived from its ancient organization³.

Therefore, there is a common political background and a deep understanding that links both partners in a community of political culture. Other scholars, such as Robert Heine-Geldern, have also extensively written on this process of Indianization⁴. Undoubtedly, the Indian footprint on political culture in Southeast Asia has created an implicit political affinity that defines and justifies in itself the Indian / ASEAN relationship. Nonetheless, this asset has been neglected until now because India has not yet assumed its role and responsibility as a source of political inspiration for its neighbors and doesn't want to appear as a "paternalist leader" for Southeast Asian political states.

¹ Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and politics: the cultural dimensions of Authority*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985

² The polity was defined by its center rather than its boundaries, and it could be composed of numerous other tributary polities without undergoing administrative integration, cf Rosita Dellios Mandala, "From sacred origins to sovereign affairs in traditional Southeast Asia", CEWCES Research Paper, 1 – 2003, p: 2

³ Lucian Pye called this process "Indianization": the "borrowing" and absorption of Indian customs, rituals, ideas, religion and forms of government exemplified by such heritage as the Borobudur, Angkor wat or Bagan, whose construction has been partly inspired by Indian influence

⁴ Robert Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1956. Robert Heine-Geldern described how the Indian cosmological principle (a belief in the parallelism between the cosmic universe and the world of men) has been used in Southeast Asia

A second asset is historical coexistence with an alternation of proximity and distant periods. Civilizational and cultural links date back thousands of years, perhaps even well into the prehistoric period. Probably no other country has influenced the Southeast Asian region as much as India by way of religion, language, culture and civilization. Ancient Indian classical works, such as the Ramayana, became important references in Southeast Asia, while Indian merchants began bringing Hinduism and Buddhism by the 1st century CE, influencing the development of kingdoms and empires like Srivijaya in Sumatra and Majapahit in Java, Bali and the Philippine archipelago. Indian influence is still visible today in Southeast Asian architecture, food, musical culture, language and religion.

There is also historical evidence to suggest that these flourishing economic and cultural relations didn't vanished in the pre-colonial era or even during the colonial interlude. Because of the British policy of large scale migration to support the plantation and mining sectors, this interlude brought many Indians into Southeast Asia. The "Indian" community in the region could be considered as another asset in terms of political rapprochement, even if its position may look sensitive in some multiethnic states such as Malaysia. It was not by chance that Singapore emerged as an important bilateral partner of India, since it used its highly skilled diplomats of Indian origin to boost the bilateral link and support India's case for increased cooperation with ASEAN⁵.

The post-WWII and post-independence era again brought many opportunities to strengthen the links. Indian personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru were sources of inspiration for Southeast Asian leaders like Sukarno, Norodom Sihanouk, Aung San or Ho Chi Minh. Their common fight against colonialism allowed India to express its support – for instance, India convened the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947 primarily to express solidarity with the struggles for freedom across Southeast Asia. Equally important was the Special Conference on Indonesia held in January 1949 and attended by 15 nations to express support to the Sukarno-led armed struggle against Dutch colonial rule. Some years later, the participation in the new global order, notably through the Non-Aligned Movement, was another cause for rapprochement. Indeed, after independence, by virtue of its geopolitical location and its position during the region's freedom struggles, India was expected to play the role of a stabilizer and peacemaker: its non-aligned policy had considerable appeal in Southeast Asia. Due recognition was accorded to India's stature as a regional power when it was made the Chair of International Control Commission that was set up under the 1954 Geneva Accord on

⁵ Singapore also supported India's bid to become a permanent member of the Security Council at the United Nations cf Sinderpal Singh & Syeda Sana Rahman, *The Next Stage of Singapore-India Relations: Possibilities and Prospects*, ISAS / NUS, September 2009.

Vietnam. The Afro-Asian Conference (also called the Bandung Conference) in April 1955, which India had co-sponsored and actively participated in, was a major turning point and a striking signal, as the importance of this conference on the creation of ASEAN is well recognized⁶.

At this stage, two points can already be observed. First, India was, and still is perceived by Southeast Asian countries as a benevolent power. Unlike Japan or China, it does not have to worry about its past with the region. Second, India and ASEAN share certain diplomatic practices (such as consensus, non-interference in domestic affairs and power-balancing pragmatism) that definitely contribute to softer modes of understanding. These two points could reinforce political cooperation as a common ground.

The Cold War marked the start of a period of distancing and introduced suspicion and mutual distrust. As India went to fight with China (and suffered a humiliating defeat in 1962) and with Pakistan (1965 and 1971), it mechanically granted a lesser attention to Southeast Asia. Even, this context drove Indian diplomacy to a much more pragmatic and less idealistic position in world politics as it sealed a friendship Treaty with the (now-former) USSR in 1971. After its first nuclear test (1974) and its naval build-up in the Andaman Sea, its appeal among Southeast Asian countries decreased. The region itself was caught in the polarization process induced by ideological and security rivalry, notably with the Viet Nam war, whereas New Delhi was closed to the communist states of former Indochina.

A network of institutional links

The end of the Cold War provided the opportunity to reconsider and propel the relations into stronger economic and security ties. After three decades, the founding members of ASEAN had gone through tremendous transformations: it was time for New Delhi to correct its own neglect. With this ambition, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao conceived in 1991 the “Look East Policy” (LEP) to repair relations with its eastern neighbors, and most notably with Southeast Asia⁷. ASEAN was one of the focal points of the LEP. Institutional rapprochements were encouraged. Today, ASEAN is a major partner of India and this dense network of political links might serve as a support to boost the partnership. India is now a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN⁸, attends the Post-ministerial conferences, is a member of

⁶ See Anthony Reid, “the Bandung conference and Southeast Asian regionalism” in Seng Tan & Amitav Acharya eds., *Bandung revisited: the legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2008, p: 19 – 26.

⁷ Frédéric Grare & Amitabh Mattoo, *India and ASEAN: The politics of India's Look East Policy*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2001.

⁸ India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1992 and a Full Dialogue Partner at the 5th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand on 14 - 15 December 1995.

the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), has instituted an annual ASEAN / India summit since 2002, signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (ASEAN TAC) in 2003, signed a Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity in 2004 (at the third ASEAN / India Summit in Vientiane), and is a participant of the East Asia Summit (EAS) since its very beginning in 2005 (even if some countries still question the coherence of including India into East Asia). The Delhi Dialogue, an annual India-ASEAN conference of political and economic leaders, officials, academics and opinion-makers⁹, was inaugurated in 2009 and has become a regular calendar diplomatic event for track 1.5 level exchanges (with the fifth being held in February 2013). To foster this institutional network, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs set up an ASEAN Department in August 2011.

This multi-faceted institutional dialogue didn't impede bilateral relations with each Member-State of ASEAN. Some, like Singapore (which trains troops on Indian soil), Malaysia¹⁰ or Indonesia, have particularly close relations with India while others, like the Philippines or Cambodia, have a more insignificant level.

Apart from the motivation to regain some influence with this fast expanding region, to boost trade relations and to strengthen security ties, India needed to affirm its interest in being considered a full participant in Asia's new regional balance. Outside South Asia, India considered Southeast Asia as a natural space for cooperation. As geo-strategic, political and economic conditions offered an opportunity to play a new role in a booming region, and as Southeast Asia was going under growing pressure from China, New Delhi carved itself a suitable place for influence, but in a context of rising competition. Here, an implicit question that needs to be addressed is the gap between what has been done by New Delhi, which is quite significant in absolute terms, and the phenomenal activity and programs launched by Beijing, which far outstrips India in relative terms. This trivial assessment puts into question the efficiency of India's diplomatic tools such as aid or actions in the highly delicate realm of the South China Sea¹¹. To reposition itself, New Delhi might take advantage of the current search for friends and support expressed by Southeast Asia. ASEAN appears as an obvious candidate. The objective of closer ASEAN-Indian ties here is not to contain Beijing, but to provide a common supportive framework for its assertive profile in an inclusive and constructive way. This is not a minor challenge in the current context.

⁹ The ambition of the Delhi Dialogue is to discuss how to intensify and broaden political, strategic, economic and civil society interaction between the two regions.

¹⁰ The 1993 Memorandum of Understanding between Malaysia and India for instance led to defense cooperation (supply of spare parts and training of MIG-29 pilots).

¹¹ Raman Puri & Aurun Sahgal "The South China Sea Dispute: implications for India", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* vol. 6 n° 4, October – December 2011, p: 437 – 448.

A strategic relationship, yet lacking centrality

Why is this relationship strategic for both partners and why is it necessary to give it a new impulsion when celebrating this 20th anniversary?

The second part of the question is the easiest to answer: a new impulsion is necessary because there is growing disappointment from the ASEAN side. Indeed, the Association considered that India would play a much more active role given the experience of China and the United States, which both have launched plenty of political initiatives and supported them by a constant stream of visits by political leaders of all levels. Visits by India's Prime Minister to Southeast Asia have been rare, to say nothing about members of Parliament, federal or local representatives. Now, ten years after the launching of the Summit meetings, after a period of adjustment and mutual knowledge, it is time for more political affinity. "ASEAN India relations" is a conceptual reality in the economic realm but not yet in the political one.

Rationale: The importance of a political dialogue

On the first part of the question posed above – the importance of the relationship for both partners – political arguments are obvious. A first argument relates to the current structural change in the global balance of power, a change of paradigm that needs to be discussed, understood and managed since it will have lasting consequences on the development (economic as well as political) and performance of East Asia and on each of its members. The systemic evolution of global as well as regional geopolitics calls for consultation and dialogue. The emerging flow of power in East Asia can create all the more turbulence as it takes place in a global context characterized by uncertainty, mostly due to the decline of a world order that was dominated by the West. For more than a decade, East Asia has been considered as the rising region in the global balance. This shift has introduced new challenges, especially concerning the distribution of power with increasing pressure of China, which overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy, and the "return" of a pro-active America, which has wagered both on India and ASEAN. If it is not difficult to observe an increasing interconnectedness, the rationale for

stronger political cooperation still appears elusive and has to be worked out.

One major question still needs to be addressed by Asian countries: what kind of Asia do we want to build and transfer to the next generations? Of course, the basic and spontaneous answer will be: a prosperous Asia. But is this enough of a promise as a political future and, furthermore, can a prosperous Asia even be achieved without a collective political future? As the answer is loaded with political content, it cannot be addressed by China or the United States alone, as they might be immediately accused of promoting their own national interests in defining the political contours of the region. Yet, because this central question is not debated, by default, the most vocal in the region are those who will define it. Ultimately, the price to pay for secondary actors such as ASEAN and India (i.e. alignment), could prove very high. What has been perceived as the “failure” of the ASEAN meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, when for the first time in its history no common declaration was signed by member states, sent an alarming signal for the Association. It raised questions about the group’s ability to preserve its autonomy and much-vaunted centrality amidst great powers with the potential to dominate the region. This setback revealed the weakness of the Association, and its absence of resilience, when taken into the trap of competing and overwhelming external interests.

Therefore, there is a strong political incentive to engage in a debate on what kind of political governance would be the most appropriate for Asia’s future in a polycentric world. And how will Asian countries be embedded in such governance? A basic observation: if India wants to be part of the region as it has proclaimed, and not be left out or stayed at its margins, it must contribute in the ongoing debate. For all the reasons presented in part I, Southeast Asia and India might find a constructive support in each other’s position to engage the discussion and enlarge it to other participants in an inclusive dialogue emphasizing political cooperation as opposed to competition. Because of the diversity of its members and its tradition of “comfortable and goodwill diplomacy” to produce connectivity, ASEAN is even a dialogue partner of choice. This debate might be a big project, and a risky one, but certainly a necessary and strategic one if India and ASEAN do not want to be submitted to a *fait accompli* either by an assertive China and/or by an external power. New Delhi as ASEAN should support the rise of complementary and alternative poles of soft power in Asia and the creation of a network of like-minded partners.

The second, correlated incentive relates to the unfinished regional architecture. The main challenge posed by this still elusive political cooperation scheme is to make it more coherent, more concrete and efficient and not simply a potential tool for the ambitions and projections of great powers. What kind of regional political order would India and ASEAN like to fashion? Major players have their own agendas and long-term strategies while India and ASEAN, for

different reasons, would more favorably adopt a flexible and inclusive approach to this essential question for the political order to work. What kind of common vision/ambition do India and ASEAN share for the current regional construction, and to what extent do they consider each other as leading forces behind this regional project? The next question is: what kind of rules can secure political cooperation? To implement this vision, both partners need to be clear on the identity, and the substance of the identity they want to promote for the regional grouping, and not only the functional side of the regional grouping. The challenge for the next generation is to transform the economic and trade architecture into a substantive and consistent political grouping. Regionalization is not only a matter of money and trade agreements, it is first and foremost a matter of future co-existence – the essence of political action. Ambivalence on the issue of identity might drive at a misunderstanding on goals and the exploitation of an implicit competition for national interests. As India has consistently supported ASEAN as the driving force in the further evolution of the undergoing regional processes, their cooperation in shaping the future of Asia appears only natural. Furthermore, it will be of mutual benefit, reinforcing ASEAN's much needed centrality while offering India a non-threatening platform to exchange with other regional powers. This common vision also comes with a high strategic value. In a climate of growing implicit tensions, to work and engage on a revisited but consensual political vision for the future is of major interest to all parties.

The third reason to enhance this dialogue is political convergence, which is a rather strategic issue. Here too, and whether it admits it or not, India offers an alternative political model to the existing models within the East Asian community. Often qualified as the biggest democracy in the world, India cannot neglect this parameter. Its symbolic value – as proof that democracy and development are not incompatible – may have a spillover effect on countries that are still struggling in the turbulence of political transition. To put it bluntly, the country's democratic credentials coupled with its status as an emerging/developing economy are the major difference between India and other Asian powers. And yet, New Delhi never presents these credentials as an asset in its political dialogue with its ASEAN partners. Even, India's perceived lack of enthusiasm for democracy promotion in the case of Myanmar is cited by critics as a hurdle in its claim to global leadership. Of course, India, as ASEAN, is committed to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, but there are plenty of ways to contribute to political consolidation, such as support to institution-building, political pluralism or freedom of expression. Myanmar might provide the opportunity of further engagement.

The fourth reason concerns common security interests and the imperative to deal with common security challenges such as terrorism, sea-lane protection and maritime security or non-traditional security challenges (climate change, disaster relief, food security, etc.). Much has already been accomplished in terms of bilateral

cooperation¹², yet much needs to be improved to go beyond what is simply a functional cooperation and move towards a stable political community. India signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in October 2003 and endorsed the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone concept. In 2010, India and ASEAN signed a joint declaration for Cooperation in combating international terrorism through the exchange of information, intelligence and capacity-building. During the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit of December 2012 in New Delhi, projects for maritime security cooperation were revealed. In a sign of stepping up the “strategic partnership” with the Association, Prime Minister M. Singh spoke of the need for an intensification of “engagement for maritime security and safety, for freedom of navigation and for peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law”¹³.

As India chooses to embark on a benign projection of its rising power, it has become imperative to chart common goals with its neighbors. Southeast Asia has always been a place of geostrategic interest for external partners. Finding countervailing forces in the new strategic landscape of Southeast Asia is a priority for ASEAN members. For India, these security rapprochements appear like a basis to secure the ASEAN/India plan of action for a strategic partnership. Furthermore, the Obama administration considers their strategic relation as a “linchpin” in its rebalancing towards Asia¹⁴.

Only a second-rank relationship

India’s “Look East” policy (LEP) has been in force for more than two decades now and the ASEAN/India relationship has gained permanent speed. Originally devised as a strategy to boost trade and foster economic cooperation with ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries, it has succeeded in this field but failed to evolve towards a complete and substantial process, most probably because the political side of this LEP is light and not yet perceived as a priority. There is obvious reserve and a lack of investment from both parties. The incentive to intensify political dialogue is not perceived as a priority.

Indeed, India’s policy of engagement with the region has a low visibility in ASEAN member states since it has not been structured along clear political lines. India is not perceived as a reliable potential political leader. There is no strong political initiative or dialogue that

¹² India has entered into agreements with Singapore, Viet Nam and Myanmar, see Dalbir Ahlawat, *India’s Strategic Perceptions: Dilemmas and Opportunities*, Future Directions International, 12 July 2012, p: 3.

¹³ PM’s opening statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, 20 December 2012

¹⁴ Ernest Bower & Prashanth Parameswaran, *Can Indian transition from looking East to acting East with ASEAN’s help ? Commemorating two decades of ASEAN – India relations*, CSIS, Washington, June 13, 2012.

can be associated with this political relationship in ASEAN public opinion. Through committees and functional groups, the network for political dialogue has been implemented but remains under-utilized: there is little political substance in the so-called common political declarations. Political cooperation is viewed through the prism of cooperation on functional projects such as building roads, bridges or organizing a car rally but apart from having a prosperous future, the choice of societal and political values or the building of institutions to protect them are not debated. The ASEAN / India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), as an epistemic community of dedicated persons joint to propose directions and tools to enhance the relationship, might be pivotal in changing this perspective¹⁵ and might help to forge a rationale and incentive to boost this facet of cooperation.

This lack of progress and limited political clout can be explained by several interrelated factors:

- (1) India's political stance often appears tentative and not well thought out as opposed to being rooted in long-term strategy and planning. In fact, India has not decided which seat it wants to occupy in Asia. On a short-to-medium-term basis, to compete with China might be out of reach and exhausting (and if India had some pretention to serve as a counterweight to China, the pro-active Chinese political initiatives have put a very high level of potential comparison these last ten years and only stress India's limited capacity);
- (2) India has failed to spell out its interests, concerns and strategic stakes clearly, which often results in considerable confusion, especially in Southeast Asia, notably when compared with countries like South Korea or Australia, not to speak of China;
- (3) Indian domestic problems (which sometimes question the coherence of its discourse and its ambition to be considered as a candidate for a great power status) and a sometimes shoddy administration;
- (4) other priorities (instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan for instance) or lack of priority,

¹⁵ The AIEPG has been set up to draft a new ASEAN-India Vision - 2020 document to be adopted at the Commemorative Summit. Three meetings of the AIEPG were held in Phnom Penh from 2-3 August, 2011, New Delhi from 20-21 October, 2011 and Kuala Lumpur from 9-10 March, 2012. The fourth and final meeting was held in Kochi from 16-17 September, 2012.

(5) the unwillingness to be seen as antagonizing other players.

Basically, India has yet to convey a precise political agenda with ASEAN and maintains a declaratory diplomacy. It often acts in a desultory fashion that creates disappointment and frustration. The management of the human rights issue is a case in point. ASEAN has made these rights more visible in its Charter, and since 2009 has adopted an ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights. If India obviously shares the same concern and priority, it has decided to avoid this “sensitive” issue in the Plan of Action, a move that has been even accepted by China. What about the sharing of identity, values and experiences? If it portends to world or regional power status, India should not be reluctant to assert its political status.

On its side, ASEAN has also its fair share full of difficulties. The Association didn't express enough interest in this political dialogue. As was said in the introduction, ASEAN / India relations are perceived as “non-threatening”, therefore coming second after more pressing issues. Coveted by China and the United States, and also approached by second-rank partners such as Japan, South Korea or Australia, ASEAN hasn't dedicated enough time and resources to deepen new partnerships. The Association also has to deal with its own deficiencies and limits, including persistent nationalism and mutual distrust, thus reducing the Association's capacity to project itself as a united front abroad, articulate policy and enhance collective leverage. As a result, intra-ASEAN discord and domestic turbulence make it difficult for outsiders to conduct negotiations with an Association that still lacks collective authority. Despite the implementation of its charter, the Association is still better at reacting rather than launching new initiatives. Furthermore, public opinion doesn't know much about India and won't support any specific measure.

Myanmar as a showcase of limited cooperation

Myanmar is the place where the spheres of influence of ASEAN, China and India overlap. It links South and Southeast Asia, sharing borders with Bangladesh and India to the West, and China, Laos and Thailand in the North and East. Myanmar is India's front door to Southeast Asia. Its location is central to strengthening India's Look East Policy and counterbalancing China's influence in the region. The country's recent political opening is a cause for optimism and an incentive to reconsider cooperation. It is therefore the perfect case study for measuring the degree of political connectivity between India and ASEAN.

The political interest is of course not the only factor. Myanmar's geostrategic positioning at the entrance of the Malacca Strait (1,930 km off the coast on the Bay of Bengal with some 800 islands) and close to Indian Ocean shipping lanes gives this country an indisputable strategic value. But Myanmar is also a country richly endowed with natural resources (wood, hydrocarbons, copper, zinc, uranium, gold, precious stones), it has become a significant source of energy for Asia¹⁶. In a resource-intensive economic context (especially with regard to energy), the supply/demand argument outweighs many other considerations. Access to Myanmar's still largely untapped oil and gas reserves is probably the most important consideration in Indo-Burma relations. Myanmar's five main trading partners are from Asia, accounting for 70 percent of its exports and 90 percent of its imports respectively¹⁷.

As a gateway to Southeast Asia and ASEAN, Myanmar can be considered as a showcase of India's policy with the region. And on this ground too, the record is poor; until now, Myanmar has not been a bridge to India/ASEAN political cooperation. But let's consider it with an optimistic view: Myanmar might be "the" space of a new active rapprochement between ASEAN and India.

¹⁶ Myanmar is one of the five major energy exporters in the region, particularly of natural gas, cf *Myanmar: Energy sector initial assessment*, Asian Development Bank, October 2012.

¹⁷ Myanmar Trade Statistics, DG Trade, the European Union, 29 November 2012

No public political cooperation

Because the stakes are high for both parties, one might have expected Myanmar to be an easy and natural focus of cooperation between India and ASEAN. This is not the case and very little can be found on this issue. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze the reasons for this diplomatic posture that is certainly not in neglect.

Both India and ASEAN apply common principles towards Myanmar: non-interference in domestic affairs and flexible transformation by invitation. Through these principles, both partners share some basic convictions that explain their convergent approach and their reluctance to cooperate in a publicly political front. First, India as ASEAN never believed that domestic change in Myanmar would come by force or confrontational diplomacy. They were very uncomfortable with Western pressure (and ASEAN paid a heavy price for its position¹⁸). Indeed, they felt much more comfortable discussing with the junta than with any other political actor in order “to change the system from inside”. Second, strategic imperatives were predominant for them as they both needed to avoid driving Myanmar into China’s arms. Third, the concept of a “pariah state” introduced by the United States and the European Union was perceived as illusory by both partners as Myanmar was a participant in Asian power games and a member of ASEAN; further ostracizing it was leading to a dead-end.

ASEAN built its policy of “constructive engagement” at the end of the 1980s to open a dialogue with the “legitimate” political actors in Myanmar. This policy was mostly driven by ASEAN member-states’ willingness to exploit untapped resources and investment opportunities¹⁹. Rangoon was then invited to join the Association in the early 1990s, an entry that was finalized in July 1997 (and this admission made India contiguous neighbor to ASEAN, sharing a long border of 1,600 kilometers). During this phase, and in order to engage and socialize the junta – thus giving preference to stability – ASEAN’s approach was governed by a strict adherence to the non-interference doctrine as “the sanctity of national sovereignty is ASEAN’s most sacred corporate value”²⁰. Yet, much of the so-called engagement was economic dealings by individual ASEAN members with the government in Burma/Myanmar. Political persuasion was not considered as an aggressive feature but rather as a process of conviction; the “constructive engagement” policy was thus replaced

¹⁸ Sophie Boisseau du Rocher, “The European Union, Burma/Myanmar and ASEAN: a challenge to European Norms and values or a new opportunity?” *Asia-Europe Journal*, 2012 (10), p: 165 – 180.

¹⁹ Ralph Bachoe & Debbie Stothard, eds., *From Consensus to controversy: ASEAN’s relationship with Burma’s SLORC*, Bangkok, AltSEAN-Burma, 1997, cf p: 37.

²⁰ Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*, London, Routledge, 1989.

by the “flexible engagement” policy, with no better results²¹. The 1997 financial and subsequent socio-political crisis in the different member-states of ASEAN contributed to this failure. Little was done because each member, from Thailand to Indonesia, had already much to do at home. Furthermore, ASEAN was torn between new and founding members, thus unable to pursue the reforms advocated by some members (Thailand and the Philippines). The Depayin killing²² and the ASEAN chairmanship crisis²³ were additional events that further put ASEAN in the spotlight. Criticized for its contradictions and its inability to influence the junta, ASEAN was not ready to launch any new policy on Myanmar. And if some experts demonstrated that its “critical disengagement” policy, coupled with the writing of the ASEAN charter, was indeed another attempt to cautiously influence Myanmar’s junta through “quiet diplomacy”²⁴, most of them agreed on ASEAN’s risk-adverse posture on this issue. It was only after cyclone Nargis (May 2008) that the Association adopted a more exposed position and called for further cooperation with the international community, including India.

On its side, India’s policy towards Myanmar was driven by three motivations: (i) access to natural resources, (ii) combating insurgencies (in the North East region), and (iii) balancing against growing Chinese influence. After a virulent criticism of the 1988 events in Myanmar, India abandoned its political ambitions with the country early-on. Initially, India strongly supported the prodemocracy movement in Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi, who was given the Jawaharlal Nehru Award in 1993. But in 1993, New Delhi realized the growing Chinese influence in the country and the consequent potential threat to its territorial security. This strategic parameter constitutes a permanent feature of Indian policy towards Myanmar, irrespective of the nature of the Myanmar regime. Realpolitik contingencies prevailed and New Delhi changed course to a “velvet diplomacy”, giving itself the tools to discuss with the regime. The support to the “representatives of Burmese democracy” was perceived as counterproductive to India’s interests and security. But even after this shift, Myanmar has never been at the forefront of Indian interest, except when the Burmese generals played one off

²¹ Lee Jones, “ASEAN’s Albatross: ASEAN’s Burma policy : from constructive engagement to critical disengagement”, *Asian Security*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2008, pp. 271–293.

²² On May 30, 2003, a NLD (National League for Democracy, the former Party headed by ASSK) motorcade was attacked at Depayin, thus killing 4 of Aung San Suu Kyi’s bodyguards. This dramatic incident signaled a return of the hard-liners to power, a shift confirmed by Khin Nyunt’s demotion of his post as Prime minister in August 2003.

²³ After tough discussions within the Association, Myanmar decided not to assume the rotating chairmanship in 2006 “in order not to affect ASEAN’s solidarity and cohesiveness”.

²⁴ Lee Jones, *op.cit.*, p : 288.

against the other to “raise the bids”²⁵ because when Sino-Indian energy interests compete, Myanmar benefits in some form.

The sensitive point to stress here is that even if India decided purposely to neglect the political side of its bilateral dialogue with the junta, it was not rewarded. The local power struggle was unfavorable to India (as it doesn't have a permanent seat at the Security Council as China has, and therefore no veto right). On the two sides, oil policy and political dialogue, the choice made by India proved disappointing. As a consequence, dialogue with ASEAN was a way to build a new policy approach. Furthermore, closer engagement with ASEAN on Myanmar could give a boost to the “Look East Policy”.

It is important to realize that for different reasons, including divergent positions within public opinion or amongst members, India as ASEAN didn't invest much on Myanmar. No one believed in a prompt change in the country and all refused to antagonize the junta. They both considered economic sanctions as meaningless and counterproductive and even after dramatic events such as the Depayin massacre or the Saffron Revolution of 2007²⁶, sanctions as a means to pressuring the junta were not even mentioned. Indeed, they systematically refused to be associated with Western pressure. As long as China was giving the junta resources and revenues, India as ASEAN thought it was more productive to engage the generals because, by virtue of the Chinese cooperation, these generals were not isolated. It was not an ideological stance but a pragmatic observation. “The regional organization forced Myanmar's officials and leaders to attend thousands of meetings in ASEAN countries. These travels opened their eyes to how far Myanmar was falling behind—they realized it had to become a more ‘normal’ country” declared Kishore Mahbubani, an academic and a former Singaporean diplomat²⁷.

To create a constructive relationship that could bring about change was a common tactic but it was never considered to take collective measures in order to prompt developments. So, India and

²⁵ More often than not, Beijing has stumped New Delhi on the energy front, which was most visibly demonstrated in 2006 when Chinese state-owned company Petro China beat India's OVL (Oil & Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Ltd) and GAIL (Gas Authority of India Limited) in securing a deal to access natural gas in an offshore block in the Shwe field in the Bay of Bengal'. Naypyidaw's decision to sell China the gas from the fields where India has made an investment has been a major disappointment for New Delhi. Recently, extensive natural gas finds in three fields in the Gulf of Bengal has become a new contentious issue in China-India relations.

²⁶ After the Saffron revolution, ASEAN Foreign ministers expressed their “revulsion” in a common statement while New Delhi did not condemn the repression but merely issued anodyne statements such as “it is our hope that all sides will resolve their issues peacefully through dialogue. India has always believed that Myanmar's process of political reform and national reconciliation should be more inclusive and broad-based” (26th September, 2007).

²⁷ Quoted by John Riady “How ASEAN engagement led to Burma reform”, the Jakarta Globe, June 5, 2012.

ASEAN followed their own soft engagement policy, mostly dedicated to economic issues, without much fanfare²⁸ but with the implicit ambition of contributing to a political transition through moderate pressure and incentives to policy change. In this perspective, New Delhi and ASEAN welcomed the seven-point Roadmap to Democracy (2003), which secured a role for the military, therefore reassuring the junta of its position in the future Burmese political landscape. Today, most observers date the emergence of the ongoing political change with this Roadmap. Therefore, if political cooperation was limited to the lowest level, India and ASEAN worked for the same goal.

A call for rapprochement? Myanmar as an appropriate showcase of political cooperation

The current political transition of Myanmar is one of the most important and positive developments in Southeast Asian and Asian affairs more broadly. It is a process of strategic and symbolic significance for both India and ASEAN, which are major and obvious stakeholders in the transformation. This transition is greeted as a common success (India and ASEAN consider that their policy of engagement paid off), and could be exploited as the beginning of a new cooperation programme (as a promising achievement for the 20th commemorative anniversary) to concretely support a transition still hampered by many uncertainties. More than any other players²⁹, India and ASEAN are directly concerned by the impact and consequences of the Burmese return to “the international community”³⁰. Both appear as reliable and legitimate partners, as they have been efficient contributors this last decade in the establishment of an atmosphere conducive to meaningful international dialogue. But there is an obvious upshot to a convergence of interests: India’s strengthening interactions with the individual countries is reinforcing the coherence of an approach with the regional body at large. Does it mean they might try to engage in some kind of cooperation to jointly comfort and encourage this political process?

²⁸ Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that both India and ASEAN member-states allowed Burmese political activists or dissidents the freedom of expression. Declarations were made against the military regime in those countries but couldn’t be attributed to local authorities.

²⁹ and first and foremost, because of the Chinese pressure on the region, cf Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt, ‘India/China Rivalry and Competition in Southeast Asia’, international conference ‘India in International Relations: European and Indian perspectives’, 27-29 April 2011, New Delhi, India, organized by Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and Centre for Contemporary India Research and Studies, Institute of International Relations, University of Warsaw.

³⁰ Myanmar, as a buffer between India and ASEAN, is either a point of contention or a point of rapprochement, cf Thant Myint-U, *Where China meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011.

Some arguments speak in favor of deepened “political connectivity”. In the current transformation of the balance of power in East Asia, India needs a stronger ASEAN, ASEAN needs to regain some legitimacy before it launches its Community, and Myanmar needs to enhance its credentials as a “normal” member-state of ASEAN and a “normal” participant to regional security. This change suits the interests of both India and ASEAN, which will certainly benefit from a stable, prosperous and predictable Myanmar. They both have offered to help strengthen Myanmar’s political transition. To keep Myanmar on track with reform will provide them with new opportunities, a more stable environment and an access to the national and local political network. New areas of cooperation could be tapped such as capacity building, strengthening of democratic institutions and engagement with civil society. Both are key providers of expertise and training (institution-building, reconciliation process, elections...) and, as long-term, benevolent partners, can play the role of facilitators and collaborators in policy formulation and basic social development.

Working together on some focused projects in an interactive relationship, without expectation for any immediate rewards but long term stability for the region, sends a confidence-building message to the regime. But much still needs to be done to instill trust and goodwill in the implementation of a community of “caring and sharing societies”. The Rohingyas crisis of summer 2012 (communal violence in the Rakhine State that degenerated and caused some 90 deaths and the displacement of an estimated 90,000 people), though concerning both India and ASEAN (because of refugees), didn’t arouse a joint declaration to sort out the beginning of a solution. Indeed, there was not even an attempt after Myanmar’s Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin categorically rejected an ASEAN proposal to call for an “emergency meeting” because of the humanitarian crisis. The question is still on the table as to whether the transition will lead to a change of behavior from the Burmese regime.

To engage a lasting cooperation with the regime, India and ASEAN do have some arguments:

- (1) The willingness of the regime to decrease its dependence on China without shifting mechanically to the United States;
- (2) Their own experience with a fast growing process (the founding members of ASEAN all have similar experiences of attracting and managing FDI for long-term growth and can transfer their pool of knowledge and experience in their developmental trajectory);
- (3) The same can be said with their own political transitions, sometimes erratic and fragile, but certainly not antagonistic to growth and stability;

- (4) The fact that, because of their policy these last 15 years, neither ASEAN nor India can be accused of being in favor of one or the other political actors;
- (5) The existence of different forums, ASEAN of course, but also BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal for Multi-Sectoral and Technical Cooperation) and MGC (Mekong Ganga Cooperation) that might help to create political networks.

The added value of their cooperation to nurture political opening in Myanmar might be of interest for all parties. ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan urged Myanmar to take advantage of the ASEAN family, and avoid the pitfalls and mistakes that others have made. "We are all working towards the common dream of improving the lot of the people, and I assure you of the fullest support from the (ASEAN) Secretariat, and the ASEAN family," said the Secretary-General³¹.

To ensure that Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014 is successful might also be a common argument. "Myanmar's chair in 2014 will be a critical landmark in the history of ASEAN, as you will be the one responsible for wrapping up, and tying the loose ends, before handing over to Malaysia on 31 December 2014. There will be a lot resting on your shoulders," added Surin Pitsuwan. On their side, the Indians should use Myanmar's increasing weight in ASEAN – starting precisely from its chairmanship in 2014 – to reinforce ties with the Association and produce a win/win situation for the three partners. India/ASEAN political cooperation has the potential to bridge all the countries of the region into a (still potential) community of "political destiny", an ambition that is still a gamble for some countries of ASEAN.

Indeed, for ASEAN as a group, the good news could come from Myanmar. What Myanmar has done is considered a milestone under the ASEAN Charter (which champions democracy and human rights' promotion) and the ASEAN Political and Security Community³² to be implemented in 2015. If the country continues on its path without reversing, it will justify the Association's methods and the mutual benefit: "after years of being chastised as the black sheep of the ASEAN family since it joined in 1997, now the time has come for the Thein Sein government to make his country a showcase for ASEAN"³³. When Myanmar chairs ASEAN, after Brunei, it can give the region an energising wake-up by choosing the promotion of

³¹ ASEAN Secretariat Myanmar to Tap the ASEAN Secretariat to Prepare for 2014 Chair, Business Group Call for Level Playing Field, and Lifting of Sanctions Will Help Clear the Road to Better Livelihood for the People, 22 February 2012, <http://www.aseansec.org/26799.htm>

³² Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Burma shaking up media reform in ASEAN countries", Mizzima, 1st October 2012, <http://www.mizzima.com/edop/commentary/8138-burma-shaking-up-media-reform-in-asean-countries.html>

³³ Idem

freedom and democratic stability in ASEAN as one of its themes. In this perspective, the support of India would be much appreciated.

Last but not least, the international community is following Myanmar's recent democratization with attention. A common policy to help Myanmar achieve a "sustainable development" would certainly have a positive impact on the perception of India and ASEAN's capacity to join forces to improve the political future of the country. Indeed, Myanmar could become the showcase of an efficient political cooperation. Furthermore, following India and ASEAN's policy of engagement, the US and the European Union already pay greater attention to this region, thus opening new windows of opportunity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The year 2012 marked 20 years of Dialogue Partnership between India and ASEAN and 10 years of Summit Partnership. Time of maturity has come, as demonstrated by the India/ASEAN commemorative summit in December 2012. And with maturity comes responsibility. The challenge is to justify that ASEAN and India have become pivotal for each other (as declared) and to translate this ambition into a political asset.

Difficult times

ASEAN, which marked its 45-year anniversary in 2012, is going through difficult times. Some experts have even predicted “the end of its centrality”³⁴ as the Association is facing challenging deadlines.

The implementation of an ASEAN Community by 2015 is the first of those. Not only are member-states not doing enough to get ready for the ASEAN market, is ASEAN as a regional institution not well equipped to deal with its new responsibilities, and are nationalist discourses more frequent, but even some governments such as Cambodia or Laos (which are close to China) are less convinced of the interest of such a community and put it in the balance. Indeed, the ASEAN Community might illustrate the deep diverging trends that penalized the Association; it might also widen the gap between the founding members and the late-comers. The challenge is not only of an economic nature; it is mostly a political challenge that calls into question the members’ intrinsic willingness to cooperate.

Of course, the Phnom Penh ministerial meeting (9-13 July 2012) was a watershed and sent the wrong signal in this critical juncture. For the first time of its history, the ASEAN ministerial meeting (AMM) failed to issue a common declaration because of the refusal of Cambodia (which handled the ASEAN chairmanship in 2012) to include the positions of the Philippines and Viet Nam regarding their dispute with China over the South China Sea. The traditional norm of consensus building has not been respected, thus putting aside the ASEAN spirit and putting in doubt the famous ASEAN way. After this unprecedented failure, and because there are still plenty of tensions within the Association, Surin Pitsuwan has

³⁴ Amitav Acharya, “The end of ASEAN centrality”, *Asiatimes online*, 8 August 2012 http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NH08Ae03.html

called for an ASEAN “soul searching”³⁵. The ambition is to regain some cohesion and coordination, efficiency and legitimacy around a common identity before the 2015 deadline.

This challenge is all the more difficult because no strong leadership can be expected from the next chairs. After Cambodia, it will be the turn of Brunei and then Myanmar. Both of these members are more in the learning process than in the control process, putting some additional stress in the preparation of 2015.

The situation is all the more critical for the Association because it will have to solve its problems in an evolving environment with more powerful neighbors. Therefore, there is a strong incentive, for its own survival, to forge closer political partnerships with those neighbors. The support of India and enhanced political cooperation might be encouraging signs.

India has to show not only solidarity but creativity. It has to express more loudly the political values that found its community – i.e. the democratic management of diversity – in order to go beyond a utilitarian relationship with ASEAN.

Some general observations might be of value to redirect India’s policy towards ASEAN:

(1) India should get rid of the mistaken assumption that GDP, trade or even connectivity automatically translates into political or geopolitical influence: economy and political power are complementary but economy alone doesn’t make a preeminent player;

(2) India should also not overestimate the influence of its strategic partnership with the US or even with the European Union on its own influence in Southeast Asia. India is neither an intermediary nor a balancer in the region. With its own assets, it should convince its partners of its statute and reliability;

(3) When focusing on the political declarations issued by the Indian foreign ministry, one notices that there is little political substance and that economy serves as a political message, so allowing India not to redefine the substance of its political message. But what does India have to offer of its own? What is its added value? In the 1950s, India had a strong influence on Southeast Asia in forging choice (either domestic policy or foreign policy). Southeast Asia’s new independent countries were inspired by Nehru’s vision as a blend of realism and

³⁵ Pia Lee-Brago, “ASEAN should do some soul-searching”, *The Philippine Star*, 15 July 2012.

idealism. What is the specificity of India's message today?
What kind of power does India aspire to?

The basic argument here is that the 1997 crisis has illustrated a local evolving perception of the limits of the Anglo-Saxon liberal model for Southeast Asian societies. Simultaneously, what has been observed these last 15 years is the rising interest for the Chinese model of governance based on the power of its economy and a unique style of government. But this model, which is not presenting only benefits but also challenges for Southeast Asia and ASEAN and which is itself in a process of self-introspection and doubt as a new team takes power in China, might not be the premium choice for Southeast Asia's future.

The argument lies in India's strength and resilience in its being the world's largest non-Western democracy. India has successfully integrated pluralism and diversity with institutional democracy. How can it share its experience with ASEAN and member-states? How can it bring something new to the debate? Because the process of acculturation is already done, India should find an advantage in expressing more clearly its policy and values when cooperating with ASEAN. In a context of competing models of governance and modernity, it should define and use its soft power and think about the ways its pluralistic political system can inspire Southeast Asian countries. Its political values and institutions are assets when deepening its political relation with ASEAN. India has to convince its partners of the interest of its model of modernity and of its benefits on long term socio-political stability.

India has a special responsibility to support a collective commitment to participatory political systems. It has the legitimacy to do so since the resilience of its democracy, despite its dysfunctions, disorders and abuses, speaks for itself. Political cooperation is not about prosperity and trade; it is about engaging in a debate on political values, political identity and the choices for societies. Although and perhaps even because India has experienced numerous political crises, has a special added-value to bring to the debate.

Proposals

To adopt a realistic middle way of engagement and strengthen "political connectivity", India and ASEAN should launch different initiatives that could be associated with their "special relationship".

- (1) In the perspective of the launching of the ASEAN socio-political community, introducing a debate on political values and political identity would be of interest. What are the foundations of this political community, how can it be built, how can a plural community be managed? India should use its own experience to demonstrate that it has

a political trajectory that can be perceived as complementing rather than challenging to ASEAN.

(2) With the 2015 deadline and two non-leader chairmanships (Brunei and Myanmar), ASEAN will need support and assistance. India, which has already provided aid to the new members in terms of institution-building, human skills or technical expertise, could extend this assistance in the preparation of the Community. To act through functional support might be considered as an efficient step to a deeper political dialogue.

(3) An India / ASEAN Institute for the Future to deal with long-term issues that have a direct impact on stability (demography, food security, ecology...) should be established. Economic as well as political development has to be sustainable for coming generations and this is a common ground where ASEAN and India could position themselves together. It is the responsibility of “knowledge intermediaries” to provide arguments and facts for debate. This institute could be located within the Nalanda University³⁶.

(4) An exchange of “good services” should take place to demonstrate confidence in each other’s capacities, the refusal of any alignment and their involvement in contributing to a peaceful political architecture across Asia. This mutual support would also help to comfort each party’s self-image (a much appreciated move when ASEAN is under harsh critique). ASEAN could support India’s permanent membership at the UN Security Council (when China is boxing India into the corner on this topic) while India could support the ASEAN nuclear-free zone initiative.

The potential for a constructive political relationship between India and ASEAN remains largely untapped. India and ASEAN have set up the framework, but they now have to fill the substance. The December 2012 ASEAN-India Summit made it clear that both partners have the willingness to take the political relationship to the next level. For both partners, and also for other regional players, it is a “win-win” game as East Asia is searching for a new political compromise.

³⁶ The ancient Nalanda University was a Buddhist institution of international repute which flourished from the fifth to the twelfth century CE. It attracted students from China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Thailand, Turkey and elsewhere to study in a wide range of disciplines such as religion, history, law, linguistics, mathematics, medicine, public health, architecture, sculpture, and astronomy. The new Nalanda University was first proposed at the Second East Asia Summit in 2007 to bolster regional educational cooperation. In 2010, the Indian government approved it through an act of parliament. The university will begin admitting students in two schools from 2014.