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ASEAN in a Competitive World Order

ASEAN's absence, both from certain new global formations and from key United Nations groups, raises questions about the role the regional organization is playing. The author also suggests that the time has come to reboot India-ASEAN relations in the interest of both sides, in order to stay relevant.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is everybody's favorite in the Indo-Pacific. China, the Quad, and other Dialogue Partners see ASEAN as the central core, whose unity, stability, and prosperity are important to the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN has taken steps to stay relevant. Like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and bringing it into cohesion with several of its strategic partners.¹ The holding of the first ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF) under Indonesia's chairmanship in Jakarta in September 2023 was a new initiative to position ASEAN as a center of prosperity and

¹ "Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," Asean, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf



economic linkages in the wider Indo-Pacific.² For this, ASEAN is now significantly transitioning beyond the traditional Asia-Pacific concept.

The Absence of Big Powers at the East Asia Summit

Since the important AIPF event and around it, several things have happened, which make one query ASEAN's place in the emerging world order. First is the absence of U.S. President Joe Biden from the ASEAN+1 and East Asia Summit (EAS) meetings in Jakarta on September 6-7, 2023. Indonesia had especially accommodated a change in dates from the traditional November meetings to early September, so that leaders from North America and Europe, who were going for the G-20 meetings in New Delhi, could attend the EAS in Jakarta. Some did, like Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Canada, the European Union, and the United Kingdom are ASEAN Dialogue Partners but not EAS members, and all of them attended the G-20 in New Delhi. Other leaders who were at the EAS as ASEAN Partners and went to Delhi for the G-20 included Japan, China, Korea, and Australia.

First, Biden gave Jakarta a skip despite Indonesian accommodation of dates. This was as unexplained as Chinese President Xi Jinping's absence from the G-20. None of the big powers' leaders turned up in Jakarta at the highest levels, since Xi never attends the EAS and is always represented by the Chinese Premier, and Russian President Vladimir Putin avoided both the EAS and the G-20.

Second, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris attended the EAS while Biden himself came to India for the G-20 a day later.³ He then flew to

² The ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum, Kemlu, <https://events.kemlu.go.id/aipf>

³ Readout of Vice President Harris's Participation in the U.S.-ASEAN Summit, The White House, September 6, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing->

Vietnam, preferring that visit and its rising context to meeting the whole of ASEAN together in Indonesia. The Americans insist—having held the ASEAN-U.S. Summit with Biden in Cambodia in 2022, when they raised their partnership with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic one—that there was no slight intended, but American choices of leader-level meetings became clear.⁴ The United States remains more engaged now, bilaterally with ASEAN and through the Quad, than during the Trump presidency. The perception here was of a diminishing of ASEAN, even though substantively it may not be so.

ASEAN out of BRICS for now

Third, as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) expanded in August 2013, and Indonesia was invited to the BRICS plus meeting, there will be no ASEAN member included in the expanded BRICS. The expanded BRICS has a preponderance of two African countries (Egypt and Ethiopia), two West Asian countries (United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), besides Argentina from Latin America, and Iran.

What prevented an ASEAN country from being inducted into BRICS? Indonesia, which in the past has sought to be a member, is eminently qualified as an emerging economic power and a leading strategic partner for many in the Indo-Pacific. Its successful chairing of G-20 and ASEAN in two successive years gave it a positive stature. Yet Indonesia remained diffident. According to some sources Indonesia was uncertain whether membership of BRICS would compromise its strategic

room/statements-releases/2023/09/06/readout-of-vice-president-harris-participation-in-the-u-s-asean-summit/

⁴ President Biden and ASEAN Leaders Launch the U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, U.S. Mission to Asean, November 2, 2022, <https://asean.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-asean-leaders-launch-the-u-s-asean-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>



autonomy, and according to other sources, they had not consulted ASEAN as yet.

BRICS is not an organization which invites only chairs of regional organizations in rotation. It invites specific countries and Indonesia would have been a good fit, which would also have balanced the BRICS. Perhaps it was the Chinese effort to give BRICS an anti-Western tone that cautioned Indonesia, or alternatively Indonesia was concerned that by joining BRICS, it may have to take positions which would contradict its close economic partnership with China. Either way, it was a lost opportunity. The focus of BRICS has moved away from ASEAN. When there was an opportunity to have ASEAN in it, through Indonesia, it was lost.

The successful G-20 meeting in New Delhi (September 9-10, 2023), following upon the heels of the success of Indonesia's Bali G-20 summit in December 2022, was a good continuum. Indonesian President Joko Widodo will be missed in the G-20, where he has been a regular for a decade. With his second term coming to an end, there will be a new Indonesian President at the G-20 in Brazil in 2024. With the end of the Jokowi era, the next G-20 will not only see a new Indonesian president, but ASEAN will be represented by Laos, which is not among the strongest of ASEAN members, as ASEAN chair. Such representation is an ASEAN tradition but in the dynamic international order in transition such international fora make a difference as to how ASEAN leadership is perceived globally.

Further, now that the G-20 chairmanship in 2024 has moved to Brazil, in 2025 it will be South Africa, and the United States likely in 2026. Therefore, the fulcrum of the G-20 has now moved much further away from ASEAN for the next few years till South Korea is a possible Chair in 2028. During the period of the Italian, Indonesian, and Indian

presidencies, Indonesia was a part of the Troika, a group of current, immediate, past, and succeeding country, to maintain continuity.

The shift in focus from ASEAN is not due to any fault of ASEAN, but a natural rotation which the G-20 follows, but it does come after a high profile and therefore will be seen as a low in the next few years.

ASEAN is also not regularly participating as a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council. Its members often seek election and then position themselves as ASEAN candidates, but they do not work out a rotation with other Asian group contenders like India, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, and others, all of whom want a proper rotation. Indonesia was a non-permanent member in 2019-21, and Vietnam in 2020-22, thus in 2021 there were two ASEAN members in the UN Security Council!⁵

The problem here is not that ASEAN is ineffective. Vietnam and Indonesia in recent years have been good non-permanent members of the UNSC. However, ASEAN seems to lack that forward thinking of coordination with other members of the Asian group, thus leaving long years when no ASEAN member is on the UN Security Council.

India and ASEAN Need to Reboot

During Prime Minister Modi's interaction with ASEAN at the ASEAN-India Summit on September 7, 2023, connectivity was mentioned, and connectivity was a running theme of the East Asia Summit and the Indo Pacific Forum.⁶ However, despite the Belt and Road Initiative and

⁵ UN Membership, DHL Research Guides, UN Documentation Research Guides <https://research.un.org/en/unmembers/scmembers>

⁶ Prime Minister's participation in the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit, Ministry of External Affairs, September 7, 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37070/Prime_Ministers_participation_in_the_20th_ASEANI_ndia_Summit_and_the_18th_East_Asia_Summit



Japanese interest in ASEAN, there is no cogent regional connectivity project which would also include India. Separately, India has two projects with Myanmar, essentially to link India's North East.

Modi offered to ASEAN the “Establishing multi-modal connectivity and economic corridor that links South-East Asia-India-West Asia-Europe” as an objective. At the G-20 meeting there was an unexpected announcement of a plan where India will be linked in a multi modal manner, to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, and then into Europe.⁷ This project will have port to port connectivity, railway and land connectivity, and digital and energy connectivity. While the contours of this project are being worked out within 2023, the sheer audacity and enthusiasm with which so many heads of state and government participated in its enunciation and the signing of a memorandum of understanding shows that the shift in infrastructure development is also moving to West Asia and Europe. The Hamas attack on Israel has slowed it down.

ASEAN was offered this idea first by India, and it needs to get associated with it. Europe is interested in ASEAN as part of its Indo-Pacific policy but the geo-economics of it do not support such physical connectivity or energy corridors which can be worked out with West Asia and, through it, with India. The possibility of a similar corridor across Africa is also under discussion. So far, ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific have attracted all the attention for building up new connectivity. Now that is being challenged by other ideas around the Western Indian Ocean, beyond the Indo Pacific.

⁷ Memorandum of Understanding on the Principles of an India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor, White House, September 9, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-principles-of-an-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/>

There is a buzz about connectivity. ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific remain a priority for India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. But since the India and the United States are also part of the I2U2 Quad (grouping India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States), attention is refocused and when opportunities emerge faster in those regions than with ASEAN—then there is diversion of attention. An impression goes around that the same kind of plans as are discussed with ASEAN are also discussed with India's partners in West Asia and Africa and seem to get better traction over there.

For India, there is a welcome recognition of being a part of connectivity and supply chains to West Asia and Europe. While with the UAE a Free Trade Agreement has already been signed, it is on the anvil with the Gulf Cooperation Council and the European Union. The EU and the Gulf area are huge partners of India in the US\$100 billion plus category. Towards the east, certainly China and ASEAN are both in the same category. But with China, there is little hope for India for an FTA because of China's continued lack of attention to providing better market access to India while claiming it from India.

In the case of ASEAN, the delayed and slow response to requests for a review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) has been a dampener, and now that the review is likely to continue to 2025, the limited human resources which India has to deal with FTAs will probably be focused on dealing with those FTAs which are more likely to happen in a faster timeframe.⁸ The Africa Continental FTA has also become attractive for Indian companies unlike the Regional

⁸ ASEAN Economic Ministers-India Consultation Encourages Review of ASEAN India Trade in Goods Agreement, Embassy of India, Hanoi, August 23, 2023, https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/news_letter_detail/?id=225

Comprehensive Economic Partnership which India withdrew from in 2019.

Is everything negative? Not really. There is a lot more that India and ASEAN can do, even without the problems of China and Myanmar holding them back. The Indo-Pacific, which was thought to be a major problem as evinced in Ambassador Tommy Koh's book in 2022 has now become a cooperative venture.⁹

Therefore, it is important that more ASEAN countries emerge and play a role with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) under the AOIP-IPOI collaboration.¹⁰ If Vietnam and Philippines firm up which pillar they would support, then four out of ten ASEAN countries would be involved, since Singapore and Indonesia have stepped out of the ASEAN crease to engage.

Similarly, where trade is concerned, it should not be viewed purely as bilateral trade, but as an effort to make India and ASEAN part of growing global supply chains. This cannot happen unless there is a powerful AITIGA which includes new items of current relevance. Finally, collaboration between the digital economic frameworks that India and ASEAN are developing is going to be a major determinant of how India and ASEAN move ahead together, particularly using technology, the private sector, and linking the people and the benefits that governments bring to them more clearly.

India and ASEAN will not benefit from strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. They will do well to engage each other more, paying

⁹ *ASEAN and India: The Way Forward*, ed. Tommy Koh, Hernaikh Singh, and Moe Thuzar (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022).

¹⁰ Gurjit Singh, "The India ASEAN AOIP-IPOI Cooperation," Observer Research Foundation, October 15, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-india-asean-aoip-ipoi-cooperation/>

greater attention to each other, prioritizing their action plans, and recognizing that they are both important poles of a multipolar order.

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Gurjit Singh retired as the Indian ambassador to Germany. A 1980 batch officer of the Indian Foreign Service, he has served as ambassador to Indonesia, ASEAN, Timor-Leste, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. He is an Honorary Professor of International Relations Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Indore. He holds a Bachelors' degree in politics from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, and a post-graduate degree from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Ambassador Singh has authored five books, *The Abalone Factor* on India-Japan business relations; *The Injera and the Paratha* on India and Ethiopia; *Masala Bumbu* and a comic book, *Travels through Time*, both on the India-Indonesia relationship; and *Opportunity Beckons: Adding Momentum to the Indo-German Partnership*. *The Harambee Factor*, on India and Africa development cooperation, was released in 2022. He is the Consulting Editor of *Rising Asia Journal* and a member of the Rising Asia Foundation's advisory board.

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