



OPINION

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## Identify new areas of nurturing India, Asean relations

I am delighted to address you, at this fifth round table of the Asean-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT). This fifth round table, is taking place at a very important juncture. In less than three weeks from now, India will host the Asean-India Commemorative Summit to mark the 25th anniversary of India-Asean relations. Your discussions today, are therefore, timely and opportune. It will provide useful inputs to our leaders, when they meet on January 25th in New Delhi for the Summit. It will be an honour and a prestige for us to host all the ten Asean Leaders as Guests of Honour for our Republic Day. Their presence in New Delhi on the Republic Day, will place India-Asean relations at centre stage, and at the heart of India's Act East Policy.

I thank Foreign Minister of Indonesia H E Retno Marsudi for her active support and participation at today's event. I also take this opportunity to congratulate H E Mr Lim Jock Hoi on his appointment as the Secretary General of Asean and thank him for his presence today. Friends, Think tanks generate new ideas, in formulating public policy. They make significant contributions, in shaping the future discourse of our leadership. The AINTT, as an initiative, has successfully enabled our academic and our strategic communities in the region, to come together, on a common platform for exchange of views.

The last four rounds of the AINTT have made important contributions towards policy decisions by the Governments of Asean countries and India to further strengthen Asean-India relations. I expect this round of the AINTT, to build upon its past work. Today, representatives of think tanks from India and Asean countries will deliberate on maritime security, trade and investment, education and cultural heritage. These are important markers in our engagement with South East Asia, in enhancing our strategic ties with Asean across 3 Cs. These 3Cs are Commerce, Connectivity and Culture. Both India and Asean countries are maritime nations, with a rich and glorious history of maritime trade. We have energised our ancient links in a contemporary setting, to become a driving force in Asia's resurgence. As a mature and responsible nation, one of India's foreign policy interests, is to evolve a regional architecture based on the twin principles of shared security, and shared prosperity.

This was enunciated by our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in 2015, in his vision of SAGAR. SAGAR stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. It recognises the central role played by the seas and oceans around us in promoting sustainable economic progress in a secure and stable environment. The Indo Pacific region, is increasingly seen as a connectivity pathway - much of the world's trade passes through these oceans.

These waters must not only get better connected, but remain free from traditional and non-traditional threats, that impede free movement of people, goods and ideas. Respect for international law, notably UNCLOS, in ensuring this is, therefore imperative.

Friends, A deeper economic integration with the dynamic Asean region, is an important aspect of our Act East Policy. Asean is India's 4th largest trading partner, accounting for 10.2 per cent of India's total trade. India is Asean's 7th largest trading partner. Trade is back on track and registered an 8 per cent increase in 2016-17, as compared to the previous year. Investment flows have also remained robust. It is our continuous attempt to promote dialogue among Asean and Indian business and trade associations, to further enhance bilateral trade and investment. The establishment of a Project Development Fund will encourage Indian companies to develop manufacturing hubs in CLMV countries. Our offer of a US\$1 billion Line of Credit is another important initiative to enhance physical and digital connectivity. In this context, I invite the scholars, academics and think tanks present here today to offer new ideas, for a greater integration of Asean Economic Community with India and identify collaborative opportunities in investment, trade and services sector.

Promoting greater collaboration among educational institutions, will contribute towards investing in the future of our relationship, especially where it involves the youth of our countries. We continue to offer scholarships to students from the region, for pursuit of higher education in India. I invite you all to discuss modalities for setting up a network of Universities among Asean countries and India, to intensify our cooperation in the education sector. The revival of Nalanda University in Rajgir, renowned as a centre for learning and Buddhist studies in ancient times, is yet another attempt to energise our civilisational links.

Our efforts are to recreate this knowledge hub. A Dharma Dhamma Conference will be organised next week, at the Nalanda University for which we have invited scholars from the entire region. We look forward to an active participation from the Asean countries at this Conference. While physical & digital connectivity initiatives are poised to seamlessly integrate us into a greater Indo-Asean community, our shared cultural heritage remains a strong emotional bond that already integrates us. We commenced our silver jubilee celebrations last year, with the second edition of the Conference on Cultural and Civilisational Links in January 2017. A potent symbol of our integration through the assimilation of our mythology and folklore, can be seen in the depiction of the epic, Ramayana. The various forms of Ramayana prevalent in the South East Asian region, be it Ramakien in Thailand, Pha Lak Pha Lam in Laos, Yama Zatdaw in Myanmar, Kakawin Ramayana in Indonesia or Hikayat Seri Rama in Malaysia, bear testimony to our historical connect. Various interpretations of Ramayana through performing arts are part of our shared tangible heritage. We will organise a Ramayana Festival in India, to showcase our cultural interpretations of Ramayana across the Asean countries and India. The similarities of Mudra (hand gestures) in our dance forms across Asean and India, will also be showcased during this Festival.

I urge the think tanks to strengthen consultations and suggest ways, to enhance maritime, commercial, educational and cultural cooperation. I look forward to new areas to be identified where both India and Asean can work together. With these words, I wish all success to the organisers for this event.