

Shared values, common destiny

Today, 1.25 billion Indians will have the honour to host 10 esteemed guests - leaders of Asean nations - at India's Republic Day celebrations in our capital, New Delhi.

Yesterday, I had the privilege to host the Asean leaders for the Commemorative Summit to mark 25 years of Asean-India partnership. Their presence with us is an unprecedented gesture of goodwill from Asean nations.

Responding to this, on a winter morning, India has come out to greet them in a warm embrace of friendship. This is no ordinary event. It is a historic milestone in a remarkable journey that has brought India and Asean to a deepening partnership of great promise for their 1.9 billion people, about one-fourth of humankind.

India-Asean partnership may be just 25 years old, but India's ties with South-east Asia stretch back more than two millennia.

Forged in peace and friendship, religion and culture, art and commerce, language and literature, these enduring links are now present in every facet of the magnificent diversity of India and South-east Asia, providing a unique envelope of comfort and familiarity between our people.

More than two decades ago, India opened itself to the world with tectonic changes.

And, with instincts honed over centuries of interaction, it turned naturally to the East. Thus began a new journey of India's reintegration with the East.

For India, most of our major partners and markets - from Asean to East Asia to North America - lie to the East.

And South-east Asia and Asean, our neighbours by land and sea, have been the springboard of our Look East and, since the last three years, the Act East policy.

Along the way, from dialogue partners, Asean and India have become strategic partners.

We advance our broad-based partnership through 30 mechanisms. With each Asean member, we have growing diplomatic, economic and security partnership.

We work together to keep our seas safe and secure.

Our trade and investment flows have multiplied several times.

Asean is India's fourth-largest trading partner; India is Asean's seventh. Over 20 per cent of India's outbound investments go to Asean. Led by Singapore, Asean is India's leading source of investments.

India's free trade agreements in the region are its oldest and among the most ambitious anywhere. Air links have expanded rapidly and we are extending highways deep into continental South-east Asia with new urgency and priority.

Growing connectivity has reinforced proximity.

It has also put India among the fastest-growing sources of tourism in South-east Asia.

The over six-million-strong Indian diaspora in the region - rooted in diversity and steeped in dynamism - constitutes an extraordinary human bond between us.

Singapore is a window to the heritage of India's ties to the region, the progress of the present and the potential of the future. Singapore was a bridge between India and Asean.

Today, it is our gateway to the East, our leading economic partner and a major global strategic partner, which resonates in our membership in several regional and global forums. Singapore and India share a strategic partnership.

Our political relations are infused with goodwill, warmth and trust. Our defence ties are among the strongest for both.

Our economic partnership covers every area of priority for our two nations. Singapore is India's leading destination and source of investments.

Thousands of Indian companies are registered in Singapore.

Sixteen Indian cities have over 240 direct flights every week to Singapore. Indians make up the third-largest group of tourists in Singapore.

Singapore's inspirational multiculturalism and respect for talent have nurtured a vibrant and dynamic Indian community that is contributing to deeper cooperation between our nations.

And India and Asean are doing much more. Our partnership in Asean-led institutions like the East Asia Summit, ADMM+ (Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus) and ARF (Asean Regional Forum) is advancing peace and stability in our region.

India is also an eager participant in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, seeking a comprehensive, balanced and fair agreement for all 16 participants.

The strength and resilience of partnerships come not just from the arithmetic of numbers, but also from the underpinnings of the relationship.

India and Asean nations have relations free from contests and claims. We have a common vision for the future, built on commitment to inclusion and integration, belief in sovereign equality of all nations irrespective of size, and support for free and open pathways of commerce and engagement.

Asean-India partnership will continue to grow. With the gift of demography, dynamism and demand - and with rapidly maturing economies - India and Asean will build a strong economic partnership.

Connectivity will increase and trade will expand. In an era of cooperative and competitive federalism in India, our states are also building productive cooperation with South-east Asian nations. India's north-east is on a resurgent path. Links with South-east Asia will accelerate its progress. In turn, a connected north-east will be a bridge to the Asean-India ties of our dreams.

As Prime Minister, I have attended four annual Asean-India Summits and East Asia Summit.

These have reinforced my conviction in Asean unity, centrality and leadership in shaping the region in this vision.

This is a year of milestones. India turned 70 last year.

Asean reached the golden milestone of 50 years. We can each look to our future with optimism - and to our partnership with confidence.

At 70, India exudes the spirit, enterprise and energy of its young population.

As the fastest-growing major economy in the world, India has become the new frontier of global opportunities and an anchor of stability of the global economy.

With every passing day, it is easier and smoother to do business in India. I hope that Asean nations, as our neighbours and friends, will be an integral part of New India's transformation.

We admire Asean's own progress. Born when South-east Asia was a theatre of a brutal war and a region of uncertain nations, Asean has united 10 countries behind a common purpose and a shared future.

We have the potential to pursue higher ambitions and address the challenges of our times, from infrastructure and urbanisation to resilient agriculture and a healthy planet. We can also use the power of digital technology, innovation and connectivity to transform lives at unprecedented speed and scale.

A future of hope needs a solid bedrock of peace. This is an age of change, disruptions and shifts that comes only rarely in history.

Asean and India have immense opportunities - indeed, enormous responsibility - to chart a steady course through the uncertainty and turbulence of our times to a stable and peaceful future for our region and the world.

Indians have always looked East to see the nurturing sunrise and the light of opportunities. Now, as before, the East, or the Indo-Pacific region, will be indispensable to India's future and our common destiny.

Asean-India partnership will play a defining role in both. And, in Delhi, Asean and India renewed their pledge for the journey ahead.

SOURCE : THE STATISTICS

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