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FROM TOI PRINT EDITION

Acting East on R-Day: Why India now needs to extend its conception of neighbourhood from Saarc to Asean

January 24, 2018, 7:46 PM IST / Sreeram Sundar Chaulia in TOI Edit Page, Edit Page, India, TOI

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Sreeram Sundar Chaulia

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The presence of heads of government or state of all 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) at India's 69th Republic Day is a monumental marker of India's 'Act East' diplomacy. Never before has India hosted so many presidents and prime ministers at one go in its annual showpiece event. That Asean responded unanimously to

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to participate as a combined chief guest in such a seminal celebration reflects how much it, as a group, values India's rise.

Modi's ability to attract a collectivity of foreign dignitaries belonging to a region is already established, given that leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), the Pacific Island nations, and the African Union (AU) have visited India en masse in recent years.

Southeast Asia is especially crucial for India because of its location and economic dynamism. The Asean-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) has been operating since 2010, but the two-way volumes of commerce stand at around \$60 billion per annum and India has concerns about a trade deficit worsened by Southeast Asian barriers to Indian exports in agriculture, textiles and pharmaceuticals.

Part of the problem is the structural difference in economies of Asean countries, many of which are industrialised with manufacturing bases primed for exports, while India is at a nascent stage of export-based industrialisation. This imbalance can be redressed through pushing more service sector exports from India, especially in



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Modi's fervent pitch for FDI has won wide notice within Asean, but the amounts pouring in are inadequate and motored by just one member — Singapore. The fast-growing sub-group of 'Asean-5' nations, comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam, are yet to significantly join the 'Make in India' bandwagon.

Beijing has capitalised on its early lead as a massive emerging market to integrate itself into Asean's economic arteries. Yet, it is precisely the overweening might of China and its big brotherly behaviour that is forcing Asean to view India as a necessary counterweight. The level of economic dependence of Asean members on China is so alarming that the former are being blackmailed into surrendering their territorial claims and their overall strategic autonomy to the latter.

Modi's India offers Asean a useful handle to decouple economics and politics vis-à-vis China. Southeast Asia may be trapped in a Chinese vise in the economic realm, but it can build more robust military links with India and hedge against the strategic uncertainty spawned by the maverick foreign policymaking of US President Donald Trump.



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Singaporean visionary Lee Kuan Yew prophesied that the US and China, followed closely by India, would determine his country and region's fate by 2030. For Asean, getting India deeply involved in maritime security, commerce and multilateral institutions is a matter of survival. India needs to grasp this reality and fast-forward its glacial connectivity corridors with southeast Asia and simultaneously champion unity within Asean, which has frequently been battered by China's divide-and-rule tactics.

India must also broaden its mindset which treats Asean as distant and confines its conception of 'neighbourhood' to Saarc alone. The pageantry and pomp of Republic Day can help illustrate the simple reality that Asean is next door and that door is open for India to enter.

The writer is a foreign affairs expert

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