Asean and India at 30: The way forward

While the big picture gives cause to celebrate, there have been drawbacks in the relationship. Domestic concerns and challenges distract attention from realizing its full potential.

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For The Straits Times

The ties that bind India, Asean and Singapore go back a long way. Singapore has long played an active role in the (informal) sounding responsibility for Asean-India relations between 2001 and 2004. The Republic has been a country coordinator for the relationship and a host to two formal meetings of the Asean-India Dialogue begun in 1992. The current tensions have added meaning to the regional bloc and India are commemorating 30 years of dialogue relations, and 2022 has been designated as the Asean-India year.

Our contribution to the commemorative sector is a riding place in 2022 takes the form of an editorial book, Asean-India: The Way Forward, which reflects the authors’ aim to “look back to look forward”. While the big picture gives cause to celebrate, there have been drawbacks.

Domestic concerns and challenges in Asean and India have contributed to the full potential of the Asean-India dialogue relationship. Insights from practitioners and academics familiar with the peace and disarmament between the two sides, and the history of their relationship and help identify pathways for future success.

The Singapore-India relations are a positive one. There are 30 mechanisms linking the two sides— an annual summit, seven high-level meetings, and 18 sectoral and bilateral meetings meetings of officials. Singapore is Asean’s third largest trading partner while India is the bloc’s fifth largest. India participates in all of Asean’s most important forums, such as the Asean Regional Forum, the ministerial meeting and the Asean Defence Ministers’ Plus.

There are disputed between Asean and India. After 30 years of dialogue and cooperation, there is a good degree of comfort and trust between the two sides. But India’s choices in 2020 not to sign the Asean Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement has cast a shadow on the relationship. Singapore has also announced that it will not sign the RCEP. This presents a new agenda for cooperation between the two sides. But for now, let us take stock of the current situation.

ECONOMIC TIES

The economic bridge linking Asean and India is strong one, buttressed by a free trade agreement, a free trade investment agreement and an investment agreement.

The two-way trade and investment between Asean and India has grown from US$2.7 billion in 2000 to US$27.6 billion in 2022. Asean’s trade with India was US$28.4 billion in the same year, more than 10 times the size of its trade with India. On investment, India is investing more in India than the other way round. In the period 2000-2022, India has invested a total of US$2.4 billion in India. Singapore alone accounted for US$1.2 billion. We expect the other Asean countries to increase in India’s rapidly growing economy.

India today is one of the top 10 investors in Asean, with its accumulated investment totalling only US$1.2 billion in 2020. India is currently undertaking in India’s most popular destinations for investors. In 2022, India has received US$734 million in foreign direct investments.

Tourism is in an important economy for both sides but there were only 53,389 Indian tourists to Asean in 2019, fewer than one-tenth the number of Chinese tourists in the same year. Singapore’s share of India’s tourism market is a minuscule 3.3%. India is under a million. India has been making more efforts to boost tourism between them. This is needed double and a low hanging fruit.

POLITICAL SECURITY TIES

The political and security ties between Asean and India have improved. Asean has granted India a seat in its top advisory bodies. There are increasing collaboration on maritime issues and the Indian Navy is involved in the Asean-led search for Malaysia’s missing Flight MH370. There are also increasing economic collaboration between the two sides and much appreciated by the leaders and people of Asean.

There are, however, two recent developments which are causing some concerns in India. The first is India’s strong support for the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept. China sees it as a strategic threat.

The second development is the revival and growing of the Quad. The Quad is now a grouping, consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia and India. The Quad will promote the economic, security and defence cooperation, furthering the US-India relationship. India’s decision not to sign the RCEP agreement comes as a name of the Quad and the US-India relationship.

The relationship between India and China is sensitive. In the Indian Ocean, there are many countries, including Singapore, continuous to the 30 years of Asean and India. The other concern is the rise of China in the Indian Ocean, the economic and the Quad will play a large role in India’s future security and influence. India’s relationship with China has become more political concern for New Delhi where it is forced that it would grow even bigger if India were to join the RCEP. India is a signatory in New Delhi that Beijing has not reciprocated after India opened its market to Chinese exports. India has not become protectionist and it is against free trade. India has decided to focus on bilateral free trade agreements and is negotiating from trade agreements.

A NEW AGENDA

What we need is a new agenda for cooperation between Asean and India. We should avoid becoming hub to mutual economic security and its security. The relationship between India and China is sensitive. In the Indian Ocean, there are many countries, including Singapore, continuous to the 30 years of Asean and India. The other concern is the rise of China in the Indian Ocean, the economic and the Quad will play a large role in India’s future security and influence. India’s relationship with China has become more political concern for New Delhi where it is forced that it would grow even bigger if India were to join the RCEP. India is a signatory in New Delhi that Beijing has not reciprocated after India opened its market to Chinese exports. India has not become protectionist and it is against free trade. India has decided to focus on bilateral free trade agreements and is negotiating from trade agreements.

Tourists at the Taj Mahal in India. Tourism is an important industry for both India and Asean but there were only 53,389 Indian tourists to Asean in 2019, fewer than one-tenth the number of Chinese tourists in the same year. PHOTO: AFP

Third, at present, the relationship is good but not sufficient. There is a huge gap between the relationship and the Singapore-India relationship. We should attempt to narrow the gap, it is not possible to do so. It is the gap is not only among the relationship and to raise it to its much higher goal.

* Tommy Koh, Hermaini Singh and Moe Thazur are co-editors of the book Asean-India: The Way Forward, which will be launched on Oct 12.