

**India ASEAN : Collaboration for Building a Resilient Community**  
**Remarks by Ambassador Suchitra Durai on 13 May, 2022**

***Chairman of CASEAN Khun Thapana Sirivadhanabhakdi,***

***Excellencies,***

***Distinguished speakers and participants. Ladies and Gentlemen.***

***Good afternoon, Sawasdeekha***

I feel truly privileged to be part of this wonderful initiative by CASEAN for this conversation between ASEAN member states and dialogue partners on Reopening, Recovery and Resilience in the wake of Covid 19 pandemic.

Jambudvipa, which is one of the names of ancient India, and Suvarnabhumi (as this region is known in ancient Indian texts) have a long association going back millenia.

2. We share the same maritime space. We have geographical contiguity between India's North East states and South East Asia. India and Myanmar have a 1600 kms of shared border. All our coastal states on the eastern seaboard as well as some from the western coast have had sea faring links and trade with this region since antiquity. The ancient ports of Tamralipta in Bengal, Muziris and Nagapattinam in south west and east respectively as well as the eastern seaport of Machilipatnam in the medieval period hosted trading communities from South East Asia, even as similar Indian trading communities settled on the Andaman sea coast or even in the hinterland as during the Ayuthaya period. Thus the movement of both goods and people also brought about exchanges of thoughts, ideas, philosophy and religion which impacted on the lifestyle of our peoples. Stories are replete in many parts of our eastern coast especially in modern day Odisha of the annual voyages from there to Indonesia, celebrated till now as Bali yatra.

3. Thus, when India and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) became strategic partners in 2012 (when we marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Dialogue status) it was a natural culmination of these civilisational links into a substantive multifaceted partnership.

4. India's relationship with ASEAN is a key pillar of India's foreign policy and the foundation of our Act East Policy. It was in 1992 that India's then PM Narasimha Rao launched India's Look East policy, reorienting India towards its eastern neighbours both in terms of trade as well as political and security linkages. India became a Sectoral Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, Dialogue Partner in 1996, Summit Level Partner in 2002 and a Strategic partner in 2012. There are more than 30 Dialogue Mechanisms between India and ASEAN, cutting across various sectors ranging from commerce, agriculture, telecom, tourism and so on.

5. India's engagement with the ASEAN has been driven by three goals: firstly, enhancing connectivity between India and ASEAN in the broadest sense of the term (ie, physical, digital, people-to-people, business etc); secondly strengthening the ASEAN organization; and thirdly, expanding practical cooperation in the maritime domain. In practical terms this is carried out in a structured manner under the 5 year Plan of Action. The current plan of action for the period 2021-25 for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (of which 85% of action lines have or are being implemented as identified by the ASEAN Secretariat) covers four broad areas (I) Political & Security Cooperation; (ii) Economic Cooperation ; (iii) Socio-Cultural Cooperation and (iv) cross-pillar cooperation. To support cooperation activities between ASEAN and India, India has created three funds: (i). **ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund(AIF)**, (ii) **ASEAN-India Green Fund(AIGF)** and **ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund(AISTDF)**.

6. Coming to the Covid 19 pandemic: the pandemic has had a devastating effect on all countries, resulting in loss of lives as well as livelihoods. In this region alone, several millions have been reduced to poverty. While these are the material effects of the pandemic which are obvious, what is unseen are the long-term psychological and mental consequences of the pandemic. Among the large economies, India took several proactive steps over the past two years which has helped it to both contain the pandemic and place its economy on a recovery

path. The massive vaccination drive based on indigenously produced vaccines, the economic stimulus package of around USD 280 billion, that only only included critical fiscal and monetary support for the economy, but also provision of cash transfers to vulnerable sections of society and free food grains to 800 million people as well as key structural reforms. The challenging times of the pandemic were utilised by the government to initiate some of the biggest projects to modernise India's digital and physical infrastructure, the foreign direct investment regime was liberalised and and Production Linked Incentive schemes were launched worth USD 26 billion across 14 crucial sectors. Exports were ramped up and in 2021 we were able to achieve a record USD 400 billion worth of exports. For us, the AtmaNirbharBharat campaign or the Self Reliant India programme was not to become a Fortress India but to give a fillip to domestic manufacturing and thus become a reliable partner in the global supply and value chains. Thus, after the pandemic our trade and investment engagement with the world has acutally increased. India's GDP is expected to grow at around 8%. Through our Vaccine Maitri or Vaccine Diplomacy initiative we supplied 200 million Made in India vaccines both bilaterally and through the COVAX facility to around 100 countries and essential medicines to around 150 countries in the world. Our approach is based on the ancient Indian concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the world is one family. In India itself, around 90% of the adult population has been fully vaccinated, we are vaccinating children over 12 years old and the per day case load is now around 2000 cases. We have developed low-cost mitigation strategies to detect and treat Covid 19 infections. Since March 2022, we are fully open to the world in terms of international travel.

7. The Indian experience underlines the importance of four aspects in a country's Covid 19 recovery and resilience – **a successful vaccination roll-out; a whole-of society approach; economic stimulus and recovery package including reforms; and willingness to play a pro-active and responsible role in the global fight** against the pandemic.

8. While the pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges, it has opened new vistas for ASEAN-India cooperation. ASEAN and India have mutually assisted each other during the pandemic by providing essential medicines, vaccines and other COVID related assistance e.g during India's second wave, we sourced oxygen related equipment from Singapore and Thailand and when countries in the region including Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand were

experiencing a surge in cases, we supplied oxygen and oxygen-related equipment. Going forward, we intend to share medical technologies, exchange traditional medical knowledge, collaborate in vaccine and pharmaceutical production & distribution as well as cooperate for capacity building and transparency in health information.

9. India's Act East Policy has focused on ensuring security, growth and prosperity in the region by **promoting greater connectivity with the ASEAN region**. By connectivity with we mean not only physical but also economic, political connectivity and close contacts at the people-to-people level. India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is an ongoing effort to enhance road-connectivity between India's North East and ASEAN. While there is good air-connectivity between India and a few ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia we are making efforts to improve air connectivity with other countries in the region as well.

10. On the economic front, India-ASEAN trade and investment relations have been growing. ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner. The India-ASEAN trade is close to USD 98 billion in 2022, but it is yet to reach its full potential. India and ASEAN are in the process of revitalizing the India ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. We have been working to initiate an early review of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement.

11. **Development Cooperation is another mainstay of ASEAN India relations**. India has launched a number of programmes and projects for capacity development in ASEAN. Our sub-regional cooperation in the form of Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) is also dedicated to furthering this aspect and contributing to the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) by implementing various community related short gestation projects.

12. **The Covid 19 pandemic period has underlined the importance of digital connectivity and the need for robustness in cyber technologies**. With large young populations, there is immense potential to enhance online economic, educational and cultural exchanges between India and the ASEAN. In turn, given the rapidly increasing threats to safe and secure cyberspace in the COVID and post-COVID era, ASEAN-India Cyber Cooperation is important.

13. As part of our P2P exchanges, there has been greater interaction among the youth. The ASEAN India Hackathon held virtually in Feb. 2021 and the 1000 integrated PhD Fellowships for ASEAN students offered by India at our prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) are aimed at this. India also provides more than 1000 scholarships to ASEAN students, both bilaterally and under ASEAN-India track, every year at the various universities and institutions. The “Delhi Dialogue” (DD) mechanism hosted by India’s External Affairs Minister annually, serves as the main Track 1.5 mechanism that allows participation of think tanks, academics and prominent civil society persons from both sides. The XII<sup>th</sup> edition of Delhi Dialogue is planned for June, 2022. Further, an “ASEAN India Centre”, has been set up as part of the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) New Delhi.

13. ASEAN is not only central to India’s Act East Policy but also to its vision for the wider Indo-Pacific region. A strong, united and prosperous ASEAN contributes to Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). India and ASEAN have converging visions for the Indo-Pacific. India was one of the first countries to welcome the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The synergy between AOIP and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative launched by India’s PM Shri Narendra Modi during his participation at the East Asia Summit held in Bangkok in November 2019, provides us a great opportunity to advance ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity and achieving sustainable development goals. We look forward to Thailand joining with India to work on one of the pillars of the IPOI.

14. In the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic, the question is how can we collaborate to ensure both recovery and resilience. In fact, only yesterday at the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT), India’s Hon’ble Minister of State for External Affairs Dr Rajkumar Ranjan Singh recalled that the world is facing headwinds both from the global economic and security scenarios. He suggested three areas of cooperation between India and the ASEAN : Health Security, digital economy and Green & Sustainable Development.

- On a pan-ASEAN level, India has contributed USD 1 Million towards Covid-19 ASEAN Response Fund. We have also contributed USD 200,000 worth medical aid as Humanitarian assistance to Myanmar through ASEAN. Under the Quad Vaccine Partnership, India has contributed 525,000 Made in India vaccine doses to Cambodia

and Thailand in April this year. In terms of meaningful health partnerships that are long-term he spoke of the need to share medical technologies and traditional medical knowledge. With Thailand, we have an MoU on medical R&D under consideration. We are also working on cooperation in the area of traditional medicine to enhance immunity and promotion of yoga and meditation to deal with the psychological aspects of Covid 19.

- More Quick Impact Projects particularly in CLMV countries in the digital area: centres of excellence in IT and English language centres; cyber security training programmes; telemedicine projects connecting remote areas to urban centres; collaboration in fintech, etc.
- We have to ensure a greener economic recovery. India has an ambitious vision for renewables and green hydrogen. Thailand itself has its BCG economic model. We can work together in developing smart technologies which are useful for agriculture, construction and transportation. Above all, we have to conserve our bio-diversity and combat illicit trafficking of endangered species of flora and fauna. Above all we have to adopt responsible lifestyles to preserve our planet. I can only recall the words of Gandhiji who said that there is enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed.

This year marks 30 years of ASEAN-India relations. It has been designated as ASEAN-India Friendship Year. Let us work together to contribute in the creation of a prosperous and resilient community in both India and ASEAN.

Thank you, Kob Khun ka.

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