

International Conference
on
Connecting East: Confluence of AOIP and IPOI Visions

**Organised by Association of Asia Scholars in collaboration with Ministry of External Affairs, Govt.
of India**

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Proceedings of the conference

The 3-day international conference ‘Connection East; Confluence of AOIP and IPOI visions’ organised by Association of Asia’s scholars in collaboration with Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and partnered by Institute for Indian and South-West Asian Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences as an associate began with inaugural session on September 1st with a keynote address by India’s Minister of State for External affairs Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh. The conference had 8 technical sessions over next two days encompassing various aspects of the AOIP and IPOI visions and their confluence which included connectivity, evolving multilateralism in the Indo-pacific, strengthening education and knowledge in the region, challenges in maritime connectivity, multi-sectoral connectivity (socio-cultural, economic, and technical and energy) and the way forward for comprehensive strategic partnership between India and the ASEAN. There were 25 presentations by scholars and practitioners of the domain and two special addresses by the Ambassadors of Thailand and Myanmar to India. Besides the main speakers, the Chair and Co-chair of each session brought in their insights on the issues of the respective sessions and, in general, on the larger theme of the conference.

In the first session, it was emphasized that regional architecture was important for leveraging Indo-pacific region’s ‘Asian Century’ as the region had immense potential for peace and prosperity of the region. Further, strategic collaboration between the two initiatives was crucial but without bringing in a single country dominance. There are many commonalities like competition, but not rivalry, between the two visions. The speakers in the session highlighted maritime security pillars and factors affecting these in the region besides opportunity and challenges including the regional context of the domain especially the rise of China in terms of economic, soft, military, and international relations dynamics and the role of US strategy. It is in this context that the role of IPOI vision has to be seen. The convergence of the two visions can be based on inclusiveness, peaceful settlement of disputes, and compliance with international law and regulation. It was clear that seven pillars of IPOI and four pillars of AOIP have many commonalities.

Multilateralism in the Indo-pacific region was the theme of the second session wherein increasing role of India and Japan due to their high and fast economic growth and trust in them in the region for being democratic which mattered for regional security and prosperity was highlighted. It was pointed out that Indo-pacific is more about sea space rather than land space and, therefore, maritime cooperation is very important. The role of QUAD (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), China, and the recent experience of Sri Lanka also came in for some discussion especially the slow progress of One Border- One Road (OBOR) in the recent years. It was highlighted that future of multilateralism depends to a large extent on what China will do in the region. A Malaysian perspective of the two visions highlighted the role of competing economic partners like USA, China and India and regional polarisation.

The role of educational knowledge in strengthening in Indo-Pacific cooperation was the theme of third session wherein potential people-to-people initiatives like educational programmes, knowledge generation and its sharing about coastal resources and people, including online mechanisms, were emphasised. More importantly, awareness about sustainable maritime use was much needed as was about health security which can help attend to most of the SDGs. A Cambodian perspective brought forward the non-security challenges and India's role as the region was highly diverse though it has all the ingredients of a trade and investment region. An Indonesian perspective highlighted the need for cooperation between ASEAN, India and China and problems in achieving that like security issues between India and China, economic competition between the two nations, and ASEAN's internal dynamics. Education and knowledge could be the first non-political domain for working together.

Session four focused on new alignments in maritime connectivity. The centrality of ASEAN and intentions versus capacity of India in naval security were the major issues highlighted besides the challenge of poor infrastructure like port facilities and lack of trained human resources in the sector. But, it was pointed out that 69% of India's trade was intra-regional and India had high dependence on it (62%). Therefore, the role of coordination, cooperation and collaboration (3Cs) was important to promote regional connectivity. A Malaysian perspective on the two visions highlighted it as 'Asian century' which focuses on self-determination and unified goal of advancing common good of all with an Asian voice.

Session five focussed on social cultural connectivity wherein certain unexplored dimensions of people-to-people cooperation in ASEAN-India connectivity like women's groups, Civil Society Organisations, and local governments were highlighted in the beginning of the session itself. It was also pointed out that levels and variety of exchange does matter and the low offtake of Government of India PhD fellowships in Southeast Asian countries was a matter of concern. The Philippines perspective on its relationship with India brought out the confluence and promise of Filipino engagement which included maritime security cooperation, value chains, and ASEAN centrality the latter meaning 'perform as a reliable member, advance national interest, and maintain integrity of 'ASEAN centrality'. It was concluded that a political will is needed to convert vision into reality and there was need for exploring non-traditional engagements. The positioning of India's northeast region in the confluence of the two visions brought out IPOI as an extension of India's Act East policy whereas AOIP is more about strengthening ASEAN centric inclusive regional architecture. However, both the visions have implications for the development of the northeast region of the India which accounts for 4% of her population and 8% of area. However, there are many governance and institutional challenges in the development of the region though there have been recent initiatives in digitalisation, industrial development, innovation, and educational infrastructure.

Economic and technological connectivity was the theme of session 6 wherein it was recognised that India and ASEAN have been working towards better economic integration and connectivity in the region. A Vietnamese perspective on opportunities and challenges of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific pointed out that India plans to play a leading, chairing and coordinating role in cooperation among small sized countries of the region. However, there were challenges of maritime disputes, India's limited Naval presence, gap between commitment and deliveries by India, differences in perception of India's role by members of the ASEAN and counterbalancing between India and other players. It was recognised that IPOI gives India a security and strategic opportunity in the region where both Indo-Pacific cooperation and competition are important.

Session 7 was focused on connectivity in the domain of energy. The importance of energy security was underlined, and it was noted that ASEAN region has enough energy supply for itself and for export. However, safety and security and its implications for sustainability need to be understood and

managed carefully. India is a net importer of energy in the region while three southeast Asian countries are net exporters of crude oil. BIMSTEC has also keen interest in regional energy security. India has an important role to ensure security of energy supply through bilateral and multilateral agreements. A Thai perspective on energy and environmental aspects of IPOI and AOIP visions highlighted that energy crisis is a man-made crisis and, therefore, these visions have a role, but the energy routes need to be carefully managed to avoid conflict. The happening of extreme weather events due to climate change is a challenge especially for Philippines, Bangladesh, and Thailand as 9 out of 10 cities prone to such events are in the Indo-Pacific region and most polluted rivers are also mostly in the countries of Indonesia, Myanmar, and Philippines. The challenge of environmental pollution has arisen largely due to a mindset of treating ocean as a public good which leads to tragedy of the commons.

The last session (8) focused on ways forward for comprehensive strategic partnership. It was pointed out that India-ASEAN partnership is now 30-year-old but there are gaps in the intent of partnership in making plans and their implementation which is a big challenge to overcome. Therefore, prioritisation in terms of vital needs and potential impact of plans and initiatives is needed besides impact assessment and concurrent monitoring in the light of recent and emerging issues of sustainability in the region. Business as usual will not do anymore and focus on regionalisation with digitalisation is essential to move forward. It was also pointed out that adherence to global trade rules has not benefited ASEAN or India and therefore, regional agreements in trade and investment and focus on existing agreements like RCEP is likely to be the way forward.