



## Strengthening ASEAN – India Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*One of the most overlooked yet promising relationships in Asia is that between Southeast Asia and India. This is despite the fact that both parties, in addition to sharing cultural and civilizational links that stretch back millennia, are major players in the global economy, important contributors to the future development of Asian regionalism, and partners which have significant common interests in various fields, including counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, climate change, and natural disaster relief. The Asia-Pacific region as a whole would also benefit from a closer partnership between ASEAN and India in these areas, since it helps create a more open, peaceful and stable Asia which is in the interest of all parties including the United States. While the impetus for mutual cooperation is strong, forging a strong partnership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require ASEAN and India to overcome several formidable challenges and seize key opportunities with courage, vision and deftness.*

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### ***Strengthening ASEAN-India Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

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## History and Evolution of ASEAN – Indian Relations

Southeast Asia and India are by no means strangers. Civilizational and cultural links date back thousands of years, perhaps even well into the prehistoric period. Ancient Indian classical works, such as the *Ramayana*, reference parts of Southeast Asia, while Indian merchants began bringing Hinduism and Buddhism across the sea by the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, influencing the development of kingdoms and empires like *Srivijaya* in Sumatra and the *Majapahit* in Java, Bali and the Philippine archipelago.<sup>1</sup> Indian influence is still visible today in Southeast Asian architecture, food, pop culture, language and religion.

However, ideological differences precluded close political ties from developing after Indian independence from the British in 1947 and throughout most of the Cold War. Though India initially was a champion of decolonization in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s as head of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM), the 1970s saw India drifting into the Soviet orbit.<sup>2</sup> India and ASEAN thus found themselves advocating different economic strategies and supporting distinct political ideologies. This became clear when India supported Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979, while ASEAN condemned it as a blatant violation of the organization's sacred non-intervention principle.<sup>3</sup> India also twice refused (in 1975 and in 1980) to engage in dialogue with ASEAN countries, labeling them allies of the "imperialist West."<sup>4</sup>

Things began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. India's balance of payment crisis and subsequent economic liberalization, coupled with the collapse of the USSR and ASEAN's success as a model for regional cooperation in contrast to the stagnated South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), forced a rethink and pulled New Delhi's attention toward Southeast Asia via its Look East policy under then Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.<sup>5</sup>

The ASEAN-India relationship has made great strides since then. Tangible bilateral cooperation began in the economic realm in 1992 but quickly broadened to include the political and security fields when India was accorded full ASEAN Dialogue Partner status in 1995. India then became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 and the East Asian Summit in 2005, and signed on to the Treaty of Amity of Cooperation in 2003.<sup>6</sup> New Delhi has also inked bilateral free trade agreements with Singapore and Thailand and sub-regional initiatives like the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). ASEAN and India have also concluded an ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement in Goods (AIFTA), which was concluded in May 2009 and came into force earlier this year.

**Timeline of Recent Milestones in ASEAN-Indian Relations**

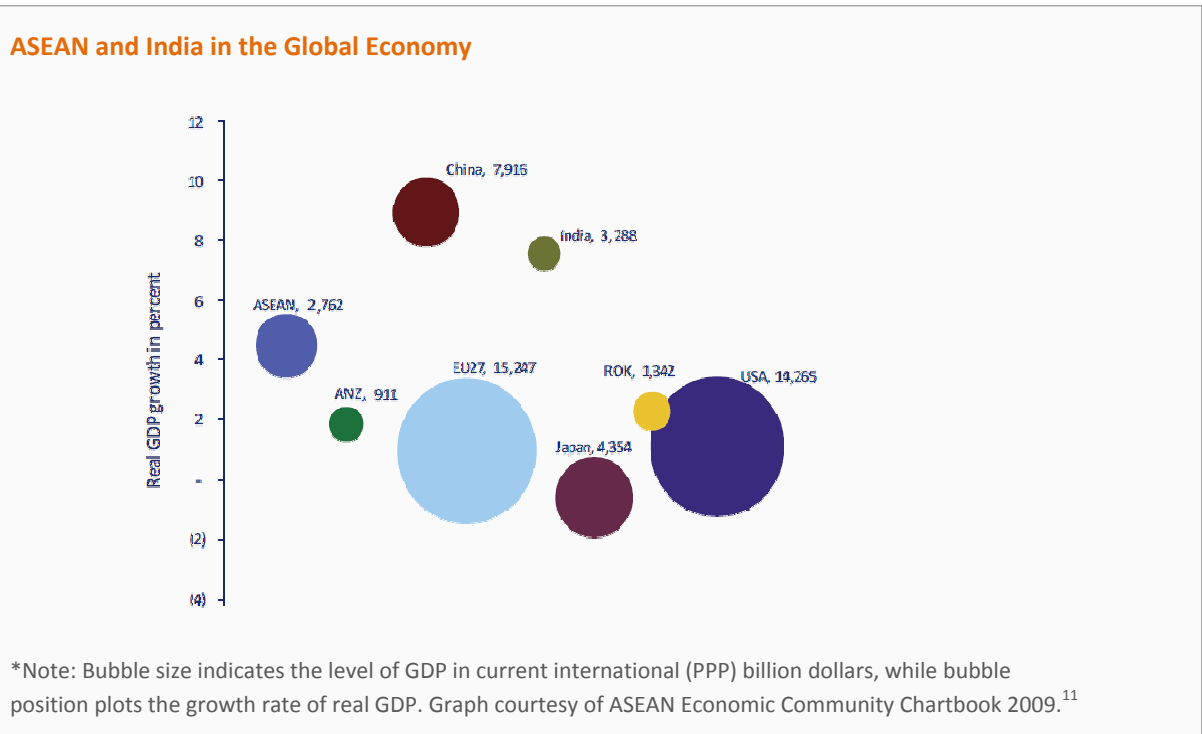
Year	Event/Agreement
1992	Sectoral Dialogue Partnership of ASEAN
1995	Full Dialogue Partnership of ASEAN
1996	Membership in ASEAN Regional Forum
1997	Establishment of BIMSTEC
2000	Mekong Ganga Cooperation Initiative begins
2002	First India-ASEAN Summit and India-ASEAN Business Summit
2003	Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation
2003	India signs Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
2003	ASEAN India Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism
2004	ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity
2005	India becomes member of East Asian Summit
2009	Signing of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA)

**Shared Interests and Common Challenges**

Before addressing how to bolster the ASEAN-Indian partnership for the future, it is first essential to articulate what both sides, and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, would gain from a stronger partnership. Doing so requires examining the sets of interests and challenges currently at stake in the relationship, as well as to identify where they are common or shared, where they may be unique to one party, and where they may diverge.

The most often cited impetus for cooperation is converging economic interests. ASEAN and India are both significant markets in the world economy (see chart on page 3). At the time when the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) was inked in August 2009, both had a combined market of almost 1.8 billion people and a combined GDP of US\$2.75 trillion.<sup>7</sup> While India's total trade volume with ASEAN is not as large as China's, its growth trajectory is equally remarkable.<sup>8</sup> According to ASEAN statistics, total trade mushroomed from 2.9 billion in 1993 to 47.5 billion in 2008, while India's share of total ASEAN trade quadrupled from just 0.7% in 1993 to 2.8% in 2008, making it ASEAN's seventh biggest trade partner.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, ASEAN accounts for 10% of India's global trade and is India's fourth largest trading partner after the European Union (EU), the United States (U.S.),

and China.<sup>10</sup> Both ASEAN and India have a strong interest in intensifying this cooperation in the long run, albeit for different reasons. In addition to the common goal of maximizing overall economic gain, India sees economic engagement with ASEAN as a way to develop its poorer northeastern states, while ASEAN views India’s trade with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (or CLMV) as an opportunity to help these newer, less-developed members of the organization catch up and further intra-ASEAN trade and unity.



While the attention is often on the economics of the relationship, ASEAN and India have much to gain from cooperation beyond this area. Security-wise, India’s shared maritime borders with Indonesia and Thailand, and long land border with Myanmar, means that India and ASEAN share joint concerns about and interests in counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, counter-narcotics, and sea lane protection (see map on page 4). In the sea, the primary shared security interest is protecting the Strait of Malacca, which connects the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and is one of the world’s busiest sea routes, carrying goods vital to the economic viability and energy security of India and ASEAN. Insulating the sea lanes from piracy and crime is thus a key concern for both sides. And while incidences of piracy have fallen significantly over the last few years, Singapore’s recent warning of a possible terrorist attack on oil tankers, suggests that the Strait will continue to be a security concern.<sup>12</sup>

On land, ASEAN and India both share concerns about terrorism and organized crime. Though both parties have intensified their crackdowns in recent years, India’s recent experience in the 2008

Mumbai attacks and the 2009 bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton Hotels in Jakarta illustrate that terrorism will still remain a threat in the future. ASEAN and India can cooperate in various fields in this regard, including the sharing of intelligence and technologies as enshrined in the 2003 ASEAN-India Joint Declaration on Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism.<sup>13</sup> India also has a particular concern about its border with Myanmar where separatist groups are waging decades-old independence campaigns against New Delhi. Groups such as the Manipuri People's Liberation Front (MPLF) and the Assamese United Liberation Front (ULFA) have used northwestern Burma as a safe haven since the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> The porous border has also long been a hub for smuggling, drug trafficking, and insurgency, with the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) and the International Narcotic Control Board (INCB) warning that northeast India could become a major transit point for illicit drugs.<sup>15</sup>

There is also convergence between ASEAN and India on non-traditional security challenges, particularly in the areas of climate change and natural disaster relief. Southeast Asia, with its densely-populated coastlines and huge agricultural sectors, is particularly vulnerable to climate change. According to ADB and WWF projections, ASEAN countries, particularly impoverished ones like Cambodia and Laos, could face significant risk from energy shortages and declining crop yields in the near future, while low-lying 'mega-cities' such as Manila and Jakarta will be highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, tropical storms, droughts and heat waves.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, in India, monsoon seasons are getting more difficult to predict and may become shorter in duration<sup>17</sup> (as evidenced by the prolonged drought that affected two-thirds of the country last year), cyclones could become more frequent and intense, and crop yields could decrease by 30% by 2050.<sup>18</sup> The two parties also share a common commitment to assisting each other with disaster relief, an avenue for cooperation that was visibly demonstrated by the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that rocked South and Southeast Asia, one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. While ASEAN and India have facilitated cooperation in the area of non-traditional security by, for instance, creating an India-ASEAN Network on Climate Change and the Green Fund, there remains great potential for further collaboration in the future, such as cooperation in the agricultural sector to meet the challenge of food security.<sup>19</sup>



Southeast Asia map. Source: DNI



Indian Ocean Tsunami Strikes Thailand

Lastly, ASEAN and India can both find each other useful when facing the strategic challenge posed by the rise of China in Asia. For India, Southeast Asia presents one avenue to diversify its relationships in the face of Beijing's growing influence in the region. For instance, when India became alarmed that Chinese support for upgrading Myanmar's naval facilities, including electronic listening posts and radar stations, made Myanmar "a Chinese satellite in the Indian Ocean," it moved to woo the junta with greater economic and military cooperation.<sup>20</sup> Reciprocally, for some ASEAN states, greater interaction with India could help dilute Chinese influence in line with the organization's philosophy of engaging all interested powers and not being dominated by any single hegemon.<sup>21</sup> For example, Indonesia and Singapore's

proposal to bring Australia, India and New Zealand into the East Asian Summit was widely perceived as a way to dilute 'Chinese dominance' in regional architecture.<sup>22</sup> The objective of closer ASEAN-Indian ties here would not be to contain Beijing, but to jointly manage its rising profile in the region in a peaceful and constructive way.

The Asia-Pacific region as a whole would also benefit from a tightly-knit ASEAN-Indian relationship. More economic and political integration and greater cooperation on key regional concerns like terrorism, piracy, sea lane protection and climate change by these two key players will create a more open, stable and peaceful Asia which is in the interest of all parties, including the United States.

Therefore, the convergence of interests between India and ASEAN on several fronts provides a firm foundation undergirding both current and future cooperation. In addition to being strong economies and attractive markets, both share similar concerns and interests with regard to several fields including piracy, terrorism, drug-trafficking, natural disaster relief, climate change, and facing the rise of China.

## Overcoming Future Challenges in ASEAN-Indian Relations

Though a great room for collaboration exists between ASEAN and India, long-term partnership between the two parties is not assured. Both ASEAN and India must display vision, courage and deftness in order to navigate the future challenges that lie ahead for the relationship and fully reap the benefits of mutual cooperation.

Arguably the greatest challenge to ASEAN-Indian relations, particularly in the economic realm, has been and will continue to be protectionism. Hence, both ASEAN and Indian leaders must continue to resist protectionism in the future if they hope to deepen bilateral economic cooperation.



Signing Ceremony of AIFTA

On the Indian side, AIFTA negotiations took a long six years, broke down repeatedly, and almost fell through because businesses and politicians feared that a flood of cheap imports from Southeast Asia would cripple domestic industries, particularly in fields such as tea, spices, palm oil, and rubber.<sup>23</sup> Though several Indian scholars have documented that these fears are exaggerated and that the overall benefits of free trade far exceed the costs to certain industries,<sup>24</sup> it took great political will from the Indian leadership, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, as well as favorable coalition politics, to finally push the deal through.

Even with these boosts, AIFTA in its current form only provides for the elimination of tariffs on 80% of items, with about 10% deemed 'sensitive' and classified under a reduced tariff track. The remaining 489 items are on the 'negative list' and not subject to any tariff cuts.<sup>25</sup> Negotiations were also delayed by some ASEAN countries. For instance, Indonesia, the world's largest palm oil producer, raised a last minute demand for tariff reductions on crude and refined palm oil just as the deal was about to be sealed, before later revising its offer.<sup>26</sup>

India and ASEAN have both faced similar outbursts of discontent before as they pursued, or thought of pursuing, trade liberalization with countries such as China,<sup>27</sup> and will likely continue to do so in the future. In order to overcome fierce protectionist sentiment, leaders from both sides must display a combination of vision, determination, and deftness. This will be particularly important as ASEAN and India pursue future agreements in the field of services and investments (the present agreement covers only trade in merchandise).

The lack of state and economic structural reforms in India and ASEAN could also limit prospects for future cooperation. India's economy has grown at a blistering pace over the last few years, and the Indian government claims it could surpass China in 2010 as the world's fastest growing economy (*The Economist* says it will do so by 2018).<sup>28</sup> However, sustaining the robust economic growth needed for bilateral cooperation will require both major institutional fixes and bold policy changes to enhance Indian economic resilience and boost export competitiveness, as well as improve the business environment for ASEAN investment. Infrastructure programs must be improved or revamped to boost foreign interest in investing (which is currently negligible), while caps on foreign investment in certain sectors like defense should be increased.<sup>29</sup> Reforms must also eventually tackle the deep-seated problems within the Indian bureaucracy, which remains notoriously bloated, corrupt and inefficient. While enacting such reforms is challenging, due to the parliamentary nature of India's politics and the political differences within the United Progressive Alliance,<sup>30</sup> they are critical to enhancing both the domestic economy and the prospects for further ASEAN-India economic cooperation.



ASEAN countries also need to do their part. Each ASEAN member state, and ASEAN as an organization collectively, must strengthen regulatory frameworks and enact trade facilitation measures to reduce costs and risks to investors. One 2010 World Bank survey, which ranked 183 countries in terms of the ease of doing business there, revealed dismal performances for several ASEAN states (The Philippines ranked 140, and Laos ranked 165).<sup>31</sup> In addition to this, ASEAN as a grouping should continue to undertake measures designed to harmonize frameworks governing regional trade, such as the plan to develop an ASEAN Trade Repository, which will be single reference point for information about tariff and non-tariff measures on goods for all ASEAN states.<sup>32</sup> While they will require immense coordination and political will, structural reforms will go a long way in helping to trim unnecessary costs, reduce risk, and enhance the ease of entry into markets in the region. The organization should also draw on best practices from groups like APEC and the OECD when identifying and prioritizing structural reform initiatives.

#### Ease of Doing Business in ASEAN Countries (World Bank Rankings)

ASEAN State	Ease of Doing Business Rank
Brunei Darussalam	96
Cambodia	145
Indonesia	122
Lao PDR	167
Malaysia	23
The Philippines	144
Singapore	1
Thailand	12
Vietnam	93

\*Data for Myanmar was not included. Raw data drawn from: World Bank. "Doing Business 2010: Economy Rankings". 2010.

The third challenge is the relative lack of development in the human dimension compared to other aspects of the relationship. Without robust people-to-people interactions at the grassroots level, it will be difficult to develop the consciousness necessary for creating a strong and lasting bond between ASEAN and India. Addressing this requires not just developing people-to-people exchanges through traditional methods such as business exchanges, trade fairs, media, entertainment and sports contacts as is currently enshrined in the ASEAN-India Plan of Action.<sup>33</sup> As ASEAN Secretary General Ong Keng Yong himself has previously noted, it also means more measures like exchange programs involving youth, academics, artists and literati, initiating dialogue among civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations on issues such as public health, and twinning

programs involving cities and universities. Bolstering the human dimension of the relationship will provide a firmer foundation critical for its development in the long run.

## Taking the Next Steps in ASEAN-India Cooperation

Forging a strong bilateral relationship requires not only addressing future challenges, but also seizing new opportunities and proactively initiating new ideas for future cooperation.

ASEAN, for its part, could start by seriously consider joining the United States, Japan and Australia in supporting India's bid for entry into the Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) when APEC leaders convene in Singapore in November this year and a decade-long moratorium on inducting new members expires. Practically speaking, India is the fourth largest economy in the APEC region (after China, Japan and the United States) and, as others have argued, it makes no sense for it to be excluded when it is already a member of important institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the G-20. Including New Delhi would also both reward it for its tireless efforts over the last few years to try integrating with other Asian countries despite its less open economy, as well as provide more encouragement to undertake further reforms to increase its economic role in the region.<sup>34</sup>

ASEAN should also gradually welcome countries like India into the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization agreement (CMIM), which came into effect in late March 2010. While CMIM helped organize the dense network of bilateral swap agreements (BSAs) into a single mechanism to help manage future regional financial crises, its restricted membership (ASEAN countries plus China, South Korea and Japan) means there is both a lack of resources to avert a potential crisis and fierce Sino-Japanese competition over leadership. Bringing in countries such as India into the fold could increase the number of potential lenders within CMIM and also help lower the political stake for both China and Japan, thereby hopefully smoothening out existing tensions.<sup>35</sup>



Asian Leaders Reach The CMIM Agreement in May 2009

Meanwhile, India should focus on renovating and reinvigorating existing sub-regional initiatives that have not lived up to their promise. Despite some early successes, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI), an agreement inked in 2000 that advocates expanding Indian cooperation with the Greater Mekong Sub-region states – Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar – in the fields of tourism, culture and development, has been bogged down by multi-year meeting delays, petty arguments over acronyms and ad hoc projects that lack any sort of vision.<sup>36</sup> This is despite the fact that India's close cultural and civilizational links with the sub-region afford it a great opportunity for cooperation, and that strengthening bilateral ties helps serves key Indian interests from developing its poorer northeastern region to balancing China's influence in the Mekong.<sup>37</sup>

New Delhi should deepen its regional engagement via MGCI. Diplomatically, India must organize more high-level visits to the Mekong states and make MGCI a priority in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs so that adequate resources are devoted to it. Initiatives should also be broader in scope and fit into a coherent framework for cooperation. In the field of education, for instance, offering courses that emphasize the common cultural heritage of South and Southeast Asia would be a more effective method of creating affinity rather than existing initiatives that merely dole out scholarships.<sup>38</sup> Finally, India should also try to find fresh ways to provide expertise to GMS countries in areas like quality training for human capital, since these nations face serious constraints in this realm.<sup>39</sup>

India's other sub-regional initiative with ASEAN – the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which covers India, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka and was established in 1997, also needs renovation. BIMSTEC certainly has had its fair share of successes. Despite meeting delays and implementation drags, priority areas of cooperation have broadened from six in 1997 to thirteen in 2006 and fourteen in 2009, while the grouping has signed agreements to set up an energy center in India to promote grid interconnection in March 2010 and cooperate in combating international terrorism, transnational crime and illicit drug trafficking in 2009.<sup>40</sup> But other measures have not been realized, including a free trade pact despite the fact that a framework agreement was inked in 2004.

But this checkered record of cooperation hides the fundamental problem with BIMSTEC. No matter how many areas of cooperation exist or how much time is invested in negotiating agreements, BIMSTEC's future is bleak unless countries focus on increasing the paltry trade within the sub-region. The openness of BIMSTEC countries to the sub-region is very low compared with their openness to the outside world, according to World Bank and IMF statistics,<sup>41</sup> while intra-regional trade stands at a small \$18.14 billion and is easily dwarfed by other regions like NAFTA, EU and ASEAN.<sup>42</sup> As long as trade intensity remains limited, sub-regional economic cooperation and integration proposals will probably not gain a lot of traction. Energy should thus be devoted toward facilitating intra-sub-regional trade first. This, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia Pacific (UNESCAP), will require developing a better "enabling environment" for trade and business to occur, which includes measures such as better product standards, tighter law enforcement, and more robust infrastructure and software development.<sup>43</sup> BIMSTEC countries

should also invite institutions like the ADB, World Bank, IMF and UNESCAP to play an even more active role in promoting development and connectivity in the region to facilitate trade, since donor assistance remains far short of what is needed.<sup>44</sup>

India also needs to think strategically about long-term avenues for boosting cooperation beyond BIMSTEC and MGCI. Since most of the future common challenges ASEAN and India will face – from climate change to piracy to China’s naval buildup – have a strong maritime component, maritime security would be a good place to start. For instance, given the somewhat positive signals that littoral states along the Straits of Malacca have been giving off recently, as well as the terrorism threats that have surfaced there of late,<sup>45</sup> New Delhi could consider taking an even more robust role in helping maintain security along the waterway, particularly in terms of joint policing with neighboring countries.



A Visiting Ship During India’s Milan Exercise in 2010

India should also accelerate the process of converting the annual 13-nation Milan joint naval exercise it hosts – which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam<sup>46</sup> – into a full-fledged joint taskforce for the Asia-Pacific region. The move would help further enhance interoperability between navies in the region on issues such as piracy and disaster relief, as well as boost India’s leadership role in the maritime domain.

## Conclusion

The robust cultural and civilizational connections between ASEAN and India in the past and the common interests that both parties share today means that there is significant potential for the development of a strong partnership for tomorrow. But an agenda for a future partnership is not forged by common interests alone. It will require bold decisions, innovative policies, and smart politics on the part of ASEAN and Indian leaders in order to both get past potential obstacles as well as push through initiatives that provide opportunities for enhancing the relationship. Only then can both parties get to a strong ASEAN-Indian partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an outcome that is beneficial not only to India and Southeast Asia, but the wider Asia-Pacific region as well.

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- <sup>44</sup> In 2005, for instance, donor assistance from governments, the private sector, and international institutions only met 20 percent of the sub-region’s needs. See: Masato Abe. “Emergence of Global Value Chains and SMEs’ Challenges/Opportunities in the GMS.” UNESCAP Trade and Investment Division, 7 March 2006.
- <sup>45</sup> *Xinhua*. “Indonesia Asks India to Help Maintain Malacca Strait Security.” *Thaindian News*, 5 March 2009. Neil Chatterjee. “Singapore Raises Security Alert After Malacca Threat.” *Reuters*, 5 March 2010.
- <sup>46</sup> MarineBuzz.com. “Indian Navy Hosts Milan 2010.” 6 February 2010.

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