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Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister at the Delhi Dialogue IX (Charting the Course for India – ASEAN Relations for the Next 25 Years)

July 04, 2017

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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all today, to the ninth edition of the Delhi Dialogue.

The presence of so many Ministers, senior officials & leaders from ASEAN countries and our Chief Minister from Assam, Home Minister from Nagaland and Deputy Chief Minister from Arunachal Pradesh is a tribute to ASEAN-India relations.

It signifies the importance we all attach to this relationship.

Over the years, the Delhi Dialogue has emerged as India's foremost ASEAN-centred Track 1.5 Forum.

Policy makers, eminent academicians, think tanks & the business community of India and ASEAN member-states

have used this platform to share their views to deepen and develop our unique relationship. This forum has yielded rich dividend of ideas for us.

This year's Delhi Dialogue holds a special significance for us, as we celebrate 50 years of ASEAN and 25 years of ASEAN- India relationship. Our discussions, therefore, take on a special relevance for it provides us, an opportunity to reflect on our past as well as to focus on better harnessing the immense potential for our regional cooperation and bringing stability, peace and prosperity to our people.

ASEAN and India are natural partners that share geographical, historical and civilisational ties. The cultural highway that linked the rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna, Irrawady and Mekong and those who dwelt on their banks, enriched our shared civilizational ethos in a two way process. It is important to note that this inter-mingling happened without any 'conquest or colonization'.

The ancient Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata are embedded in the cultural matrix of South East Asia. Our contacts are also evident in the spread of other religions, notably Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, which came to the region from India. Ancient trade routes have linked India with Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia. The close ethnic and cultural links between the North Eastern states of India with South East Asia are still alive.

Our shared legacy is reflected in our living religious and cultural traditions, the beautiful temples and architectural sites, common ethos for caring of fellow human beings as well as for our environment, hospitality of guests, respect for elderly, and the belief in universal brotherhood and peace.

We recognize that our economic progress and well being is intimately linked to the growth and prosperity of the entire Asian continent, especially of our friends in ASEAN, with whom we share both maritime and land borders. It is a partnership based on a shared heritage, a pragmatic appraisal of economic growth and prosperity; and peace and stability.

Since the commencement of the dialogue relationship with ASEAN in 1992, the potential of this partnership has grown commensurate to the increase in our collective capacities, our growing economic integration and the ongoing evolution of the political and security architecture in South and East Asia.

The up-gradation of the ASEAN-India relationship into a Strategic Partnership in 2012 was a natural progression in this relationship. Ever since our government assumed office in 2014, we have enhanced our engagement in South-East Asia. This was reflected in PM Narendra Modi's remarks in 2014 at the India—ASEAN summit in Myanmar, where he declared that India's 'Look East Policy' has become 'Act East Policy'.

We place ASEAN at the heart of our 'Act East Policy' and at the centre of our dream of an Asian century. There is a special emphasis on India-ASEAN cooperation in our domestic agenda on infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, skills, urban renewal, smart cities and Make in India programmes, particularly as they manifest in the North-Eastern region of our country, which we envisage as a land-bridge connecting us with the larger ASEAN region.

Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen

The future focus areas of cooperation between ASEAN member States and India can thus be described in terms of three Cs- Commerce, Connectivity and Culture. This triumvirate, of course, rests on the platform of stability and security.

India and ASEAN share a common geographical space, where we face common traditional and non-traditional security challenges. We have consciously forged collaborations, bilaterally and through ASEAN-led fora such as East Asia Summit, ADMM+ and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, to ensure regional peace and security.

Freedom of navigation and respect for international law, notably UNCLOS is therefore imperative in this context. Equally, we remain committed with ASEAN to enhance our maritime cooperation, to realise the full potential of our ocean economy. We will continue to step up cooperation in countering terrorism, cyber security, anti-piracy and other transnational crimes.

Our economic relations have grown over the years. Trade is back on track and registered an 8% increase in 2016-17 as compared to the previous year. The ASEAN- India FTA has given a major boost to trade in goods and services. Its review meeting in Cebu next week will explore means to further enhance our trade and investments flows.

We are also actively engaged in negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). We look forward to a positive outcome of the next round of negotiations that will commence in Hyderabad later this month. When finalized, RCEP offers immense possibilities as the largest regional trading arrangement, accounting for about 40 percent of world trade.

In order to improve market access, a Project Development Fund has been created to facilitate Indian companies to set up businesses & investments in the CLMV countries. At the same time, we have extended preferential treatment to the Least Developed Countries of ASEAN.

Connectivity between India and ASEAN and within ASEAN is a core focus area for us. Development of infrastructure to enhance connectivity, both within India and in the North-Eastern region of India in particular and extension of these connectivity linkages into ASEAN is a priority for us.

We are making substantial progress on all fronts to enhance, physical & digital connectivity.

These corridors of connectivity can be transferred into corridors of economic cooperation. We expect to see substantial progress in this area as part of our Act East Policy.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The economic and geo-political centre of gravity of the world is shifting towards our region. India and ASEAN represent a combined population of 1.85 billion (a quarter of the global population) with a GDP of over US\$ 3.8 trillion, creating one of the largest economic spaces in the world.

Our region is witnessing unparalleled dynamism in political, security, economic and demographic terms. This brings immense opportunities for India and ASEAN member countries.

Today, India is one of the fastest growing major economies in the world. In the last three years, Government of India has undertaken a number of initiatives and introduced a series of reforms to improve the business environment in India.

Most recently, our Government launched the Goods and Services Tax on June 30, the biggest tax reform since our independence. These steps have opened new opportunities for trade and investments into India.

I invite companies from ASEAN countries to take advantage of these opportunities for investments in India in numerous sectors such as smart cities, roads, highways, ports, railways, power and urban infrastructure.

The implementation of Quick Impact Projects in the CLMV countries and the Mekong Ganga sub regional corporation are successful examples of our development cooperation. While we have together executed several other projects under the ASEAN India Fund, ASEAN Green Fund and ASEAN India Science & Technology Development Fund, there is scope for doing much better.

Today's Delhi Dialogue provides us an opportunity to consider changing the narrative for better utilisation of these funds. To celebrate this partnership, we have planned a number of activities to commemorate our silver jubilee. One

year long celebrations are being held under the theme "Shared Values, Common Destiny." It will culminate in a Commemorative Summit in New Delhi, when our Leaders will reflect on our achievements and define the future roadmap.

Our cooperation includes exchange programs, capacity building training programs, establishing formal and informal networks, cultural exchanges and celebration of our cultural affinities. Last week, we hosted a segment on ASEAN during the Textiles India 2017, in Gandhinagar, to showcase the immense possibilities of building regional value chains in the textiles and apparels sector.

I am delighted that very shortly we will launch the India-ASEAN Women Business Forum, which will establish a network of women entrepreneurs and professionals, thereby facilitating regular engagement and contribution of women leaders in enhancing trade and investments.

An important component of our celebrations will be to connect the youth of our region. They are the future leaders, and hold the key to our relationship in the years to come. We have planned a Youth Summit in Bhopal in, August to bring our young leaders together.

The first ever India-ASEAN Band Festival and an Artists' Retreat are also planned to build cultural connections among the younger generation. Other projects include a regional diaspora meeting in Singapore, a car rally, a sailing expedition, cultural events, conferences and seminars.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Our national poet, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, while visiting the region in 1927, was so touched by our Cultural affinities that he spoke about journeys by 'our ancestors' that resulted in the two lands becoming 'companion souls.' Citing the tragic divide created by foreign rule, he urged a renewal of age-old ties, urging "That old that has been lost, to be regained and made new".

Today, as ASEAN and India stand at the dawn of a new era, time has come perhaps to reclaim our past heritage. The rationale for a strong ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership is clearer than ever. This makes it incumbent on us to delineate precisely the contours of our relationship in the coming years.

The theme for the 9th Delhi Dialogue, 'Charting the Course for India – ASEAN Relations for the Next 25 Years', therefore, is very very apt.

While we have come a long way in the last 25 years, I am confident that we can do much more, to reorient our partnership in the 21st century, make it more pragmatic, action-driven and result-oriented.

The momentum generated by the commemorative activities during this year will help to carve a new vision for ASEAN-India relationship in the coming years.

Excellencies,

I therefore look forward to working earnestly with all of you in order to turn this vision into a reality. I wish the Ninth edition of Delhi Dialogue all success, and look forward to hearing your views on the future of our strategic partnership.

Long Live India-ASEAN Friendship

Thank You

