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Opening remarks by the PM at the Plenary Session of the INDIA- ASEAN Commemorative Summit (January 25, 2018)

January 26, 2018

Your Excellency Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
Your Majesty,

Excellencies,

I am delighted to welcome you all to the ASEAN India Commemorative Summit. Though we are celebrating 25 years of our partnership, our shared voyage goes back thousands of years.

It is a privilege for India to host all the ASEAN Leaders for the second time in five years. Tomorrow, you will be our honoured Guests at our Republic Day celebrations. The presence of my brothers and sisters from all our ASEAN partners at this joyous celebration is unprecedented.

Your collective presence here has also touched the hearts of my 1.25 billion fellow Indians. It highlights the importance of our Strategic Partnership, placing ASEAN at the centre of India's Act East Policy.

Our friendship has been nurtured by our shared cultural and civilizational linkages. The Ramayana, the ancient Indian epic, continues to be a valuable shared legacy in ASEAN and the Indian subcontinent.

We have organised a Ramayana Festival with troupes from ASEAN countries, to showcase our common cultural treasure through this great epic. Other major religions, including Buddhism, also bind us closely. Islam, in many parts of South East Asia has distinctive Indian connections going back several centuries. We have also jointly released a set of commemorative stamps, to celebrate our common heritage.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

This Summit is the grand finale of our joint year-long commemorative activities, organized in India and in ASEAN countries, which provides us a valuable opportunity to review our journey so far and chart our future path. This objective, in my view, is best served through free and friendly discussion among us.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

Since 1992, our partnership has evolved from sectoral dialogue to strategic partnership. Today, we have thirty sectoral dialogue mechanisms and seven ministerial level interactions, in addition to annual Summit meetings. We have made excellent progress in implementing the objectives of the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity, through five year plans of action.

The progress in implementing our third Action Plan for the period 2016-2020 is commendable. Capacity building projects have been undertaken through the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund, the ASEAN-India Green Fund, and ASEAN-India Science and Technology Fund.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

India shares ASEAN's vision of peace and prosperity through a rules-based order for the oceans and seas. Respect for international law, notably UNCLOS is critical for this. We remain committed to work with ASEAN to enhance practical cooperation and collaboration in our shared maritime domain.

During the Retreat Session, we had an opportunity to discuss ASEAN-India cooperation in maritime domain, as one of the key focus areas for growth and development of the Indo-Pacific region. Indeed, Maritime cooperation has been an integral part of our discourse throughout our commemorative activities, with the theme resonating in the ASEAN India Connectivity Summit, in the Workshop on Blue Economy, as well as in regular dialogue mechanisms.

Humanitarian and Disaster Relief efforts, Security cooperation, and Freedom of Navigation will be key focus areas for our Maritime cooperation. The Connectivity Summit was also an affirmation of the linkages that India shares with ASEAN through land, air, maritime, cultural, civilizational and people-to-people relations that date back centuries.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

Information and Communications Technology will forge new bonds of digital connectivity among us. These could include new areas of cooperation in a regional high-capacity fiber optic network, and a national rural broadband networks to digitally connect remote areas.

India offers to undertake a pilot project on rural connectivity, which would create digital villages in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam. Success of this project could be replicated in other ASEAN countries.

We also offer a training programme on Telecom and Networking Technologies, to share best practices in Policy, Regulation and Technological Development for Information and Communication Technology professionals from ASEAN countries.

In order to deepen our understanding and cooperation in financial matters, I propose a dialogue on digital financial inclusion and investment promotion and infrastructure. Combating terror financing jointly is yet another important area where we could work collectively.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

Our 70 billion dollars trade has grown 25 times over 25 years. Investments from ASEAN and India are robust and growing. We will continue to work with ASEAN to further enhance our trade ties, and facilitate interactions among our business community.

The success of recent events like the Business & Investment Meet and Expo, the ASEAN India Business Council Meeting, the Biznet Conference, the Start-up Festival and Hackathon and an ICT Expo have shown encouraging results. We hope that our Project Development Fund and Quick Impact Projects will help our companies integrate into regional value chains, particularly in textiles and garments, pharmaceuticals agro-processing and electronics.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

People to people connectivity have been the foundation of our close ties for hundreds of years. The Indian Diaspora has settled far and wide in Southeast Asia. They are warmly accepted in the local community. Earlier this month, the ASEAN-India Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Singapore recognised their contribution in forging closer ties between us.

Held at the same time in New Delhi, in the first Conference of Members of Parliament and Mayors with Indian heritage, there was a large representation from ASEAN countries. To build on our historical bonds, I propose that we declare 2019 as the ASEAN-India Year of Tourism. We could set up tangible and intangible cultural heritage circuits to further promote tourism. The Buddhist Tourism circuit could be an important part of this to attract tourists and pilgrims from our region.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

India has participated in restoration works to historical structures which attest our enduring civilizational bonds. It was a privilege for India to play a role in conservation works of temples in Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam. A virtual knowledge portal of ASEAN India network of Museums could curate this shared heritage.

An important focus of our commemorative events celebrates the power of our youth, our future. The Youth Summit, the Artist Residency, the Music Festival, and the Start Up Festival for digital commerce among our youth were intended for this. We have given a boost to their spirit by giving Youth Awards on 24th January.

To further empower our youth in our region, I have the pleasure to announce 1000 Fellowships to students and researchers from ASEAN countries for studying integrated PhD programmes in Indian Institutes of Technology, India's premier institutions of imparting knowledge. We would also like to offer dedicated training courses at the Indian Academy of Highway Engineers for ASEAN Highway Professionals. I also propose that we set up a network of Universities to encourage greater inter-university exchanges.

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

In conclusion, let me again join my people in expressing our profound appreciation to each one of you for

kindly accepting my invitation and for joining us at this Commemorative Summit. I now invite Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore, His Excellency Lee Hsein Loong to please deliver the Opening Remarks in Singapore's capacity as the ASEAN Chair for 2018 and the Co-Chair for this Plenary Session.



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