

General Studies – 2; Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests

India-ASEAN Relations

1) Introduction

- India started engaging with ASEAN in 1992 through sectoral dialogue partnership.
- It also joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), and several other platforms commonly shared with ASEAN.
- The relationship was further elevated with the ASEAN-India Summit in 2002 and since then the Summit has been held annually.
- Both sides celebrated the 25th anniversary of their dialogue partnership recently.

2) India's relations with ASEAN

- India's two-way trade with ASEAN stands at about \$76 billion
- India is also a part of the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)
- ASEAN occupies a central place in the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region
- ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner
- India and ASEAN account for almost one-third of the global population
- Together they would form the third largest economy in the world.
- The common areas include space technology, counterterrorism and anti-insurgency operations, trade and investment, connectivity, and maritime security.
- ASEAN leaders welcomed India's 'Act East Policy' and 'Make in India' initiative and encouraged New Delhi to work with the bloc.
- India's growing relations with ASEAN should also be looked at in the light of Beijing's boundary disputes with a number of ASEAN countries
- A growing partnership with ASEAN nations might help India counter the growing presence of Beijing.
- The soft power aspects of India's Act East Policy play the role of a bridge connecting the two regions.

3) Challenges

- Following the uncertain behaviour of China, Indian Ocean has become unpredictable and it might become the next battle ground.
- Problems in the implementation of India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multimodal Transit and Transport Project
- China's territorial claims in the oil and gas-rich South China Sea, which is also a major international maritime trade route.

4) Way Forward

- Transforming "corridors of connectivity" to "corridors of trade" needs to be fast-tracked to realise their full business potential
- Enhancing utilisation of the Free Trade Agreement
- ASEAN nations want India to take and play leadership role in improving commerce, connectivity and security in the region.

- Terrorism, religious extremism and the ISIS are dangers to the region and both India and ASEAN should work closer to check these menaces.
- Cooperation in the nuclear energy and cooperation in cyber security which has become more vital.
- Improving India-ASEAN connectivity is important for Asia-Pacific connectivity as well.
- India has offered huge fund of one billion for improving connectivity, mechanism to spend such a fund needs to be created.
- Focussing on potential of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) for boosting economic cooperation, due to the large roles SMEs play in Vietnam and the Philippines.
- Enhancing people-to-people connectivity and nourishing the civilizational linkages within the region.
- Cultivate intraregional tourism, educational cooperation, and the potential of Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia.
- India needs to evolve into a robust security provider in the region.
- Culturally, India needs to build on the shared cultural linkages.

5) Conclusion

- India's geostrategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region depend on India's bilateral and multilateral engagements with the countries in the region.
- Maintaining cordiality with ASEAN as an organisation and with the individual Southeast Asian countries remains crucial for India.

