

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

Significance of ASEAN for India

1) Introduction

- South-east Asia is a diverse and complex region where every major culture and civilisation of the world finds a place.
- Since 1992, ASEAN-India partnership has evolved from sectoral dialogue to strategic partnership.
- Recently Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the 16th ASEAN-India Summit and 13th East Asia Summit (EAS) at Singapore.

2) India - ASEAN Relationship

- India's relationship with ASEAN is a key pillar of its foreign policy.
- India has repeatedly underscored the centrality of the ASEAN in its Indo-Pacific vision.
- Since 2005, the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) has been the nucleus and nexus of our partnership.
- India contributes actively to ASEAN-led fora such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, and ASEAN Regional Forum.
- ASEAN-India and East Asia summits symbolised India's "continued commitment" to strengthen its engagement with ASEAN members.
- This year the leaders of the ASEAN countries were the chief guests at the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi.
- We celebrated 25 years of dialogue partnership under the theme of "Shared Values, Common Destiny", 15 years of summit-level interaction and five years of strategic partnership.
- Economic relations with respect to India-ASEAN trade and investment relations have been growing steadily.
- We are also witnessing rise in investment flows, particularly quality of FDI Investments from ASEAN.

3) ASEAN Significance for India

- **Economic Significance**
 - a) 3 Cs—Culture, Connectivity and Commerce— will shape India's ties with the ASEAN bloc.
 - b) Connecting India's North-eastern states with ASEAN.
 - c) India is part of ASEAN led RCEP which aims to create the world's largest free trade area with more than a third of the global GDP and commerce.
 - d) For the first time, bilateral trade between ASEAN and India has crossed US\$ 80 billion mark.
 - e) Singapore has become India's investment and trading hub in the East.
- **Security Significance**
 - a) ASEAN occupies a central place in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region
 - b) Maritime cooperation in terms of connectivity, safety and security has gained high attention.
 - c) India and ASEAN can collaborate to combat terror financing, cyber security threats, tax evasions and many more.
 - d) India needs ASEAN support in achieving a rules-based regional security architecture.
- **Geo-Strategic Significance**
 - a) Partnership with ASEAN nations might help India counter the growing presence of Beijing.
 - b) ASEAN is seen as the most successful regional organisation next only to the EU

- c) To develop connectivity through water, ASEAN and India are working on the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project.
- d) ASEAN-India cooperation in maritime domain is one of the key focus areas for growth and development of the Indo-Pacific region.

4) India's Role

- Under New Delhi's 'Act East Policy', India has been increasing its engagements with the ASEAN.
- South East Asian nations are looking at India to take on a greater role for the economic integration of the region and for ensuring an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.
- Many of the members of the ASEAN perceive India as a much-needed counter-balance to China.
- Strengthening land, air, and sea linkages with India will enhance people-to-people flows, as well as boost business, investment, and tourism.
- In recent years, our leaders visited all the ASEAN countries multiple times. This shows the level of seriousness that India attach to ASEAN.
- India has proposed setting up of an ASEAN-India Network of Universities (AINU) to enhance our educational ties.

5) Way Forward

- Need for maritime cooperation and centrality of trade for the prosperity of the strategic Indo-Pacific region.
- India must speed up work on connectivity projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, and building new trade and transport linkages with all the ASEAN Nations.
- Stronger strategic and security relations with equally strong economic ties will create greater inter-dependence between India and the ASEAN members.
- This will serve as an effective counter to China's growing clout in the region.
- There are tremendous opportunities in enhancing physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN.
- There is still much room to expand air links to support growing business and tourism.
- A robust maritime connectivity between India and ASEAN is crucial for realization of the full potential of the India ASEAN trade.
- An alternative, economic corridor based multimodal connectivity such as Mekong-India Economic Corridor may be promoted, which will connect Indian coast with unexplored Southeast Asian coast and beyond.
- Enhanced maritime connectivity would provide lower logistic costs, and motivate increased trade in goods and services.

6) 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.