

ASEAN wants India to play leadership role in the region

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NEW DELHI: Amidst the aggressive behaviour of China, ASEAN nations want India to take and play leadership role in improving commerce, connectivity and security in the region.

This was the common viewpoint expressed by speakers from the ASEAN nations at the academic session on the second day of the two-day Delhi Dialogue on Wednesday.

The Dialogue is organised by the Ministry of External Affairs in collaboration with Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). While ORF organised the academic sessions, FICCI organised the business sessions.

This year, the Dialogue is themed on "ASEAN-India Relations: Charting the Course for the Next 25 Years". It is being held annually since 2009 and is a premier annual track 1.5 event to discuss politico-security, economic and socio-cultural engagement between ASEAN and India.

Speaking in the session "Regional geo-politics: Great power politics in the Asia-Pacific", Dr. Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, Professor, School of International Relations, President University, Indonesia, said following the uncertain behaviour of China, Indian Ocean has become unpredictable and it might become the next battle ground.

He said the new political leadership in both India and Indonesia are quite strong in taking firm decisions and they can play a vital role in checking Chinese behaviour.

Prof. Perwita even suggested that Indonesia can play the role of "power broker" between India and China if required.

Prof. Nguyen Thai Yen Huong, Vice President, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, said most ASEAN countries still expect the US to play the major role it had been playing since World War II. Saying Asia Pacific is "beyond tranquillity", Prof. Huong said the challenge is to maintain status quo in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

She said India should assist ASEAN mechanisms to help maintain status quo and stability in the region.

Mr Bunn Nagara, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia, said it was “a historic mistake by China” to stir South China Sea as the ASEAN had good relations with China. He said China should not have done that.

He also said the ASEAN nations are looking towards India for initiatives and new ideas to improve the relations, wondering “why can’t the relations be better?”.

Mr. Rajiv Bhatia, a former ambassador and now Distinguished Fellow of Gateway House, suggested the need for the ASEAN nations to be united to be the centrality of the geo-strategic politics of the region.

Doubting the launching of the already delayed RCEP even next year, Mr Bhatia said India and ASEAN should plan first short term of maximum five years, then mid-term and last long term instead of trying to work out a vision for 25 years.

The speakers unanimously agreed that terrorism, religious extremism and the ISIS are dangers to the region and both India and ASEAN should work closer to check these menaces.

Speaking on the session on “New connectivity paradigms in the Asia Pacific”, Dr Deth Sok Udom, Rector of President Zaman University, Cambodia, hoped next 25 years would bring better connectivity, physical and digital, between India and ASEAN nations. He suggested cooperation in the nuclear energy and cooperation in cyber security which has become more vital because of the digitalisation of economies.

Ms Anita Prakash, Director General of Policy Department, ERIA, Indonesia, said national boundaries and interests should be reconciled for larger interest of the region and India should take the lead in improving India-ASEAN connectivity. She noted that this is important for Asia-Pacific connectivity as well.

Being at the core of the Asia-Pacific narratives, India should take full leverage with strengthening first domestic connectivity, she said, otherwise nobody would take it seriously.

Prof. Prabir De, Coordinator, ASEAN-India Centre, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, India, said while the Indian prime minister has offered huge fund of one billion for improving connectivity, mechanism to spend such a fund needs to be created.

Dr. Joefe B. Santarita, Dean of Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, wanted India to play a bigger role in its engagement with blue economy. “Right now it is unfortunately very limited,” he remarked. He suggested that India can take assistance of Philippines in the sea-bed mapping and mining.

Political leaders, policy makers, senior officials, diplomats, business leaders, think tanks and academicians from both India and ASEAN participated in the discussions.

Source: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/asean-wants-india-to-play-leadership-role-in-the-region/printarticle/59471603.cms>