

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WORKING VISIT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN TO INDIA

12-15 FEBRUARY 2024

1. At the invitation of the Government of the Republic of India, H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN, paid a working visit to India, on 12-15 February 2024. The visit sought to further advance the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), by re-energising engagements across the spectrum of the three Community pillars of ASEAN, and promoting ASEAN diplomacy and visibility in India.
2. Rooted in centuries of civilisational linkages, maritime connectivity and cross-cultural exchanges, ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership continued to gain momentum. Throughout the visit, India reaffirmed to the Secretary-General of ASEAN its commitment to working with ASEAN and its partner in support of the region's peace, stability and prosperity. India conveyed its unwavering support for ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (AOIP) as the underlying principle and framework for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.
3. The visit highlighted India's position as the 8th largest ASEAN's trade partner among the ASEAN Dialogue Partners with the total trade amounting to USD 113.08 billion, which makes 2.94% of total ASEAN trade. Meanwhile, the Foreign Direct Investment flows from India into ASEAN stood at USD 0.68 billion in 2022. To further maximise the potential of ASEAN-India economic cooperation while navigating the geo-economic uncertainties, the Secretary-General of ASEAN conveyed to India the need for both sides to further boost trade and investment, including through the full and effective utilisation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), prompt conclusion of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) review negotiations and India's potential participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
4. Meanwhile, in the tourism sector, the discussions during the visit noted the significant increase in the number of visitor arrivals from India to ASEAN, which stood at 2.38 million in 2022. This reflects the positive signs of a post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, which is expected to bring further benefits to both sides through the development of sustainable tourism, and collaboration on marketing initiatives to showcase ASEAN as a single tourism destination to the Indian market.
5. The Secretary-General of ASEAN met with H.E. Dr. S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India, and discussed the progress of ASEAN-India dialogue

relations and ways to further strengthen the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which includes intensifying collaboration in the areas of cybersecurity; digital economy; science, technology, and innovation; energy; fintech; tourism; agriculture; sustainable development; traditional medicines; disaster management and humanitarian assistance; people-to-people contacts, among others. Minister Jaishankar affirmed India's support for Lao PDR's Chairmanship of ASEAN this year, under the theme "ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience." In this connection, the Meeting encouraged timely completion and operationalisation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and its possible extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. In addition, the Secretary-General of ASEAN encouraged India to enhance sectoral dialogues and consultations between ASEAN and India by actively participating in all ASEAN-India cooperation mechanisms.

6. H.E. Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs of India hosted a luncheon meeting for the Secretary-General of ASEAN. The Secretary-General of ASEAN took the opportunity to encourage India to further support the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) by exerting efforts to implement *the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region* and *the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation*. He also encouraged India's continued commitment to working closely with ASEAN through ASEAN-led mechanisms and fora, and to continue utilising these mechanisms to effectively and jointly respond to traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. H.E. Dr. Rajkumar extended India's full support towards the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus to address the political and humanitarian situation in Myanmar.
7. The Secretary-General of ASEAN had a meeting with H.E. Piyush Goyal, Minister of Commerce and Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution, and Textiles of India, and discussed the benefits of strong and mutually beneficial economic cooperation between ASEAN and India, with a focus on trade, digital transformation, sustainability, and regional and multilateral cooperation. In view of advancing the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the Meeting noted the importance to broaden ASEAN-India economic cooperation and support a rules-based, non-discriminatory, open, inclusive, equitable and transparent multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization (WTO) at its core. Minister Goyal called for the expedited review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). He also expressed hope for further collaboration in new production networks in ASEAN, particularly in digital economy, agrifood sustainability, pharmaceuticals and health resilience. The Secretary-General of

ASEAN highlighted the launch of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) negotiations and sought India's expertise on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), cybersecurity, and data transfer as part of the ASEAN-India 2024 Digital Work Plan, and encouraged the facilitation of knowledge exchange and technological advancements.

8. The Secretary-General of ASEAN met with H.E. Arjun Munda, Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare of India and discussed the importance of strengthening ASEAN-India cooperation in food, agriculture and forestry towards jointly exploring the opportunities and addressing social, economic and environmental challenges faced by both regions in achieving sustainable and resilient agri-food systems.
9. During the Interactive Session with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the Secretary-General of ASEAN discussed the importance of ASEAN-India economic relations and the potential for further growth and development across the region. He underscored how ASEAN's thriving manufacturing base, abundant natural resources, and strategic trade connectivity, and India's expertise in information technology, pharmaceuticals, engineering, and large skilled workforce can be combined to boost growth across sectors. He emphasised the need for ASEAN and India to work together in diversifying supply chains by reducing the dependence on single sources and by applying digital technology to make the economy more resilient to shocks. He called upon CII to support ASEAN's economic integration activities and to work closely with the ASEAN-India Business Council to support the leadership of Lao PDR of the ASEAN Business Advisory Council in 2024 and encouraged investment in renewable and green technologies to achieve sustainable development in both regions.
10. The Secretary-General of ASEAN engaged in discussion with H.E. Dharmendra Pradhan, Minister of Education and Skill Development & Entrepreneurship of India, covering the areas of mutual interest. He emphasised the significance of higher education in accelerating ASEAN's economic, political, and socio-cultural development, underscoring the region's academic contribution on the global stage. He expressed appreciation for India's support to the ASEAN higher education sector, particularly the scholarships at Nalanda University, benefitting 166 ASEAN scholars, and expressed eagerness to sustain such collaborative initiatives. Highlighting the adoption of the Declaration on Digital Transformation of Education System in ASEAN, the Secretary-General of ASEAN underscored its potential for facilitating greater people-to-people connectivity and knowledge exchanges across ASEAN and beyond. Furthermore, he delved into potential collaborations,

including the rebranding of existing scholarship or the establishment of an ASEAN-India Scholarship scheme, as well as digital skills and literacy development.

11. The Secretary-General of ASEAN met members of the ASEAN New Delhi Committee (ANDC), led by the current Chair, H.E. Mr. Koy Kuong, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Cambodia to India. He updated the ANDC on key developments in ASEAN and ASEAN-India relations, and expressed his appreciation for ANDC's important contribution to strengthening ASEAN-India partnership. Acknowledging the potential contribution of the ASEAN Committee in Third Countries and International Organisations in promoting mutually beneficial relations between ASEAN and its partners, he encouraged the ANDC to actively organise activities and undertake collaborative initiatives with various stakeholders to further raise the profile of ASEAN in India.
12. During the course of the Working Visit, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) hosted the 48th Sapru House Lecture by the Secretary-General of ASEAN, entitled "*The ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Evolving Regional Architecture.*" At the lecture, the Secretary-General of ASEAN highlighted the initiatives of ASEAN in maintaining peace, security, stability and prosperity in the region and beyond. He also reviewed ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and discussed ideas on how ASEAN and India could further elevate their partnership to greater heights, thus playing a greater role in the Indo-Pacific amidst the growing geostrategic and geo-economics challenges that the world is facing with.
13. The Secretary-General of ASEAN delivered a lecture on "*The Future of ASEAN: ASEAN's Relevance and Resilience in the Evolving Strategic Environment*" at Nalanda University in the State of Bihar in India. He emphasised the continuing relevance of ASEAN Centrality as well as the AOIP as the guide in ASEAN's external engagement in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. He illustrated ASEAN's convening power to influence regional affairs and diplomacy, which has enabled ASEAN to shape the regional architecture and serve as the centripetal force by bringing various players together in an inclusive manner and with the spirit of cooperation. He also discussed the ongoing work on the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which upon its finalisation, will mark the next phase of the ASEAN Community building process beyond 2025. He also acknowledged and thanked Nalanda University for hosting ASEAN students through the existing scholarship programmes and for initiating the Network of Universities between ASEAN and India.

14. The Secretary-General of ASEAN's visit reaffirmed the growing relations as well as the depth and breadth of the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. India expressed commitment to further advance the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that is meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial.

15. The Secretary-General of ASEAN expressed his sincere appreciation to the Government of India, especially the Ministry of External Affairs of India and the Indian Mission to ASEAN for the hospitality and the excellent arrangements of the entire programme to ensure a productive and fruitful visit to further strengthen relations, cooperation and partnership between ASEAN and India.