

Admiral Arun Prakash on

A strategy for the sea

“India needs to mark 25 years of Indo-ASEAN engagement by breaking diplomatic stasis, broadening horizons.”



“But India is not performing!” was the remark of a panelist at a recent conference of the CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific) held in Thailand. He was responding to a query about ASEAN’s subtle resistance to the concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’, and preference for ‘Asia-Pacific’, which, by definition,

seems to exclude India. The scholar went on to add; “First, you had a ‘Look East’ and then an ‘Act East’ policy, but to us it seems that you are simply ‘At ease’ !”

Valid or not, such views need to be addressed by our foreign policy establishment, because we are at a defining moment in the Indo-ASEAN relationship. Not only was

2017 the golden jubilee year of ASEAN’s founding, it also happens to mark 25 years of Indo-ASEAN engagement, and 15 years of summit-level meetings. Most importantly, 10 ASEAN leaders were the guests of honour at India’s 2018 Republic Day celebrations, and their confabulations could decide the future course of this relationship.

The CSCAP is the Track II organ of ASEAN’s security-related bodies, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Minister Plus Forum. India was accorded CSCAP membership in 2000 and participates in periodic conferences that act as a forum for regional scholars and experts to exchange

views and often provide useful policy option inputs for Track I.

In keeping with Asian cultural norms, a unique *modus operandi*, known as “the ASEAN way”, has emerged over the years. By the continuous employment of consensus and compromise, ASEAN has largely managed to avoid overt shows of

disagreement, and rarely is any nation seen to “lose face”. While the ‘ASEAN Way’ has ensured an appearance of cohesion, some detractors blame it for having engendered a false sense of complacency and for sidestepping hard security issues. The 2012 ASEAN Summit saw emerging fissures, with the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos breaking ranks, under Chinese pressure, on South China Sea issues.

There is also criticism that having painstakingly built a set of multilateral processes in the security arena, ASEAN has failed to develop proactive agendas that would take the grouping beyond trade and commerce, towards collegiate diplomacy and collective conflict management.

In addition to the acerbic comment about India, the December 2017 CSCAP General Conference, that included representatives of the US, China, Russia, Japan and India, saw numerous tell-tale signs of barely suppressed tensions. In an unusual departure from the “ASEAN Way”, the keynote speaker, a former ASEAN minister, offered his blunt view that an “emerging China” had transmuted into an “erupting China”, an alarming phenomenon that, he felt, called for multi-lateral efforts to “bring under control”. Subsequent speakers repeatedly expressed the fervent hope that a “rules-based order” would be resolutely upheld to ensure the peaceful rise of China.

In his response the following day, a former Chinese diplomat delivered a strong riposte, expressing displeasure that such “uncomplimentary and unwarranted” remarks should have come from the representative of a friendly nation. Other Chinese speakers unambiguously declared that rules were not immutable, and that changed circumstances definitely demanded the drawing up of new rules. They left little doubt, amongst the gathering, that China would avail the earliest opportunity to create a new “rules-based order”, framing international laws and rules that not only provide retrospective endorsement of its conduct, but also facilitate its vision of the new “China Dream”.

For over six decades, peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific had been underwritten by a *Pax Americana*, sustained by US naval presence. This utopia having been shattered by China’s assertive behaviour, neither the US “pivot to Asia” nor the subsequent “rebalance