CONCLUSIONS

The study has begun with the proposition that India and the ASEAN region since 1991 have been moving from indifference towards positive interdependence. Accordingly, the purpose of the work is to describe how and attempt to explain why they have embarked upon a process of forging a multidimensional partnership in political-strategic, economic, scientific & technological, and socio-cultural fields.

The general hypothesis of the study is that the change in the relationship between India and the ASEAN is caused by a combination of political-strategic, economic, and socio-cultural factors operating in the internal and external spheres. The specific hypotheses advanced by the study are that with the end of the Cold War political environment conducive to the development of a positive relationship between India and the ASEAN has evolved; that the presence of common conventional and non-military threats to the security of India and the ASEAN states has led to greater convergence in their strategic perceptions and policies; that the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the regionalisation drive of the ASEAN economies have facilitated greater interaction in various sectors; and that conscious efforts of the governments of India and the ASEAN countries to create and strengthen societal linkages have broadened and deepened their relationship.

Southeast Asia was neglected long enough to the detriment of India’s political and economic interests in what can accurately be termed as its ‘Near East’. It was since 1991 that India embarked on a 'Look East' policy to forge a new relationship with East Asia, with special focus on ASEAN. India, instead of
persisting exclusively with an association in its immediate neighbourhood, SAARC, that has severe limitations, has embarked upon a quest for integrating itself with the wider Asian region. The 'Look East' policy was formulated to realise this vision. The term 'East' referred to the members of the Communist bloc during the Cold World era. Now, with the end of the Cold War, the usage is reverted to its traditional meaning, that is, the eastern part of the world. While Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan form India’s ‘Far Eastern’ neighbourhood, the ASEAN region along with Bangladesh can be termed as India’s ‘Near Eastern’ neighbourhood. China, India’s immediate neighbour to its North with a long frontier, falls into an entirely different category.

The ASEAN states over the years have together crafted a policy of engaging all the major external actors. They have largely succeeded in the task of creating stakes for all the significant extra-regional powers to continuously ensure the peace and stability in their region. The institution of ‘dialogue partnership’ was an ingenious effort by the ASEAN countries to collectively engage extra-regional powers on a regular and proactive basis. Even though ASEAN governments have not come anywhere close to adopting a common foreign and security policy, one can discern a high level of coordination among them while dealing with the external world. They normally adopt a common approach towards major international political and economic issues and extra-regional powers.

India has realised the intrinsic worth of the ASEAN region itself and gave importance to it and vice versa. This signalled a significant shift from
India’s previous neglect of its eastern neighbourhood in its foreign policy agenda and ASEAN earnestly responded to India’s initiative. The personality factor played an important role in bringing India and ASEAN closer. The leaders have laid a firm political foundation for the relationship to flourish. The nature of the relationship has undergone a transformation to a large extent from being a derived one to direct. In other words, India’s interest in the ASEAN region is now more direct and not so much derived from either China or the US. Same is the case with the interest of ASEAN in India.

With Myanmar becoming part of the ASEAN, India and ASEAN now share land boundary. India also shares maritime boundaries with Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand. Thus India’s security and prosperity are invariably linked to the well being of the ASEAN region. India has to ensure Myanmar has more leeway to conduct its affairs and lessen its dependence on China. In this regard, it may coordinate its Myanmar policy with that of Thailand and other ASEAN states.

India and ASEAN share the objective of protecting and enhancing their political autonomy. They can help each other in attaining this common objective by enhancing mutual cooperation in the economic sphere. While common concerns vis-à-vis China have brought India and ASEAN together, it is the capability to contribute to each other’s development needs that would provide the sustenance to their partnership. Only by attaining greater economic strength, India and ASEAN can help each other deal confidently with the rising China.
India and the ASEAN region are also beset with serious threats originating from non-military sources. Any unilateral effort to tackle them will prove to be inadequate and hence ineffective. Hence the immediate need of the hour is to pool their scarce resources and jointly combat these threats. It is clear that maritime piracy and drug trafficking are not imaginary threats but clear and present dangers that need to be tackled effectively on an urgent basis. A multi-lateral approach to combat maritime piracy and drug trafficking may be useful in expanding the scope of defence linkages between India and the ASEAN region. Such an arrangement will be a relatively less controversial building bloc for more elaborate forms of defence cooperation. Indeed, these two security concerns provide India with an excellent opportunity to contribute to peace and stability of ASEAN countries in a constructive manner.

India and ASEAN have taken note of the potential mutual economic development benefits from their partnership. On the one hand, the rising prominence of the ASEAN region in the world economy prompted India to reorient its foreign policy and accord it a higher priority than was the case earlier. On the other hand, the ASEAN recognised the potential of India to emerge as a major economic partner. India's economic liberalisation coupled with the regionalisation drive of ASEAN economies held great promise for developing closer ties. The emergence of foreign economic policy as a federal issue in India has proved to be an additional cementing factor in the economic partnership. It is remarkable that within a short span of six years, the volume of trade between India and ASEAN countries increased by more than three times. The ASEAN members, primarily being trading states, expect
India to focus more on economic issues in its bilateral dealings with them. They like to derive economic benefits out of their partnership with India. India’s economic strength, in their opinion, would positively contribute to their own development. India’s greatest utility, according to them, lies in its ability to offer market for their goods and as a source of investment and technology.

They are not alarmed by the growing economic power of India in the way they are worried by the rise of an economically powerful China. While they approach China cautiously in strategic matters as they are apprehensive of the destabilising potential of China, as for instance, in the South China Sea disputes, India is viewed as a factor of stability in their region as India does not have any sort of territorial disputes with any of the members of the ASEAN. An economically weaker India would only serve to hasten their dependence on China and to increase their sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis China and thereby making them more susceptible to the manipulations of the China. 1997 turned out be a watershed year in the contemporary history of ASEAN. Till the Asian Economic Crisis hit the ASEAN region, it was experiencing the most dramatic growth rates in the developing world. Since then ASEAN has been looking at India as a viable long-term economic partner so as to reduce its dependence on other extra-regional powers.

India need not participate in deliberations in the ARF and other ASEAN forums with the negative agenda of scuttling Pakistan’s bid to become a full dialogue partner of the ASEAN or a member of the ARF. In any case, ASEAN always makes decisions that best serve the interests of its member states. Whether it is in the matter of admitting Myanmar into the ASEAN or of
according the status of a sectoral dialogue partner to Pakistan, ASEAN is solely guided by its own interests. For instance, no amount of pressure from the EU and the US could prevent the ASEAN from extending its membership to Myanmar.

India, similarly, need not campaign for the membership of the APEC or ASEM, or ASEAN+3. Whenever the importance of India is realised by the ASEAN, the membership will naturally follow. However the bargaining power of India is derived from its economic strength. The ASEAN would certainly enhance its engagement with an economically powerful India. Being a pro-active association, the ASEAN itself would take the initiative to do so.

India's diplomatic energies are better invested in consolidating its dialogue partnership and enhancing the bilateral ties with all the member states especially in the economic sphere. An important aspect to be noticed is that China has rapidly emerged as one of the largest trading partners of the ASEAN economies in the 1990s.

It is important that mutual media coverage, especially of positive variety, is increased. The media, instead of reinforcing the existing negative images and stereotypes, should play a constructive role by highlighting the achievements of each other. The respective media organisations ought to directly observe events in each other without taking recourse to western prisms of analysis.

As India is cut off from the West owing to disputes with Pakistan, it should integrate itself with the East. Otherwise it faces the prospect of getting isolated from the eastern neighbourhood as well. Chief Ministers and state
government officials of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland may be invited to actively take part in the discussions on external policy matters with Myanmar. They may be invited in their ex-officio capacity so that party differences do not pose obstacles.

India has to take more interest in its near eastern neighbourhood. Indian traders and investors can focus on these countries as they are closer to home and also those with which India does not have dispute of any sort, with the sole exception of Bangladesh. On a parallel front, both sides have to forge partnerships among persons from fields of policy-making, academia, media, and the NGOs.

The North East, the states on the East coast (West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) and the territories of Andaman & Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal should be brought closer to Southeast Asia on a priority basis through improving the existing and establishing new land, maritime, and air transport linkages.

The economies of India and most ASEAN states are dominated by small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As they are hugely populated, it is essential to focus on labour-intensive and low- and medium-technology enterprises so as to generate employment, especially in rural areas. So there is a vast scope for collaborative efforts.

The existing level of cooperation between India and ASEAN is well below the potential as the partnership suffers from certain limitations. Being an evolving partnership, it is therefore difficult to pass a definitive judgement. India’s slow economic decision-making process and ASEAN’s economic crisis
hindered economic ties. India has evinced keen interest in the ASEAN affairs since 1991. But it continues to figure only in the margins of strategic and economic calculations of ASEAN. We can, for instance, observe a profusion of writings by Indians on India-ASEAN relations. But the references to India in the writings of scholars from the ASEAN countries are minimal and one can hardly find India specialists in the ASEAN countries.

The move by the ASEAN to hold an ASEAN-India summit is a reflection of the growing maturity in its relationship with India. The ASEAN leaders regularly meet leaders of Asia-Pacific and Europe through the forums of APEC and ASEM respectively. ASEAN-India summit provides a regular opportunity to the leaders of both sides to engage at the highest level. The summit-level meeting may be utilised to infuse more substance into the partnership. India has to be represented by the Prime Minister to convey its seriousness about engaging the region. India's inability to send the foreign minister every year to the annual ASEAN post-ministerial conferences is perceived by some as its lack of interest in the region.

Table 1: Human Development Index Rank of India and ASEAN states

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<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
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Source: UNDP, HDR 2002

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As per the Human Development Report 2002 of the UNDP, India and all the ASEAN states, with the exception of Brunei and Singapore, figure in the medium and low human development category. As various developmental challenges of identical nature are staring both sides in the face, they would benefit immensely by sharing their developmental experiences and expertise in diverse fields such as science & technology, human resources development, family planning, distance education, urbanisation, local governance, and so on.

Having come together, India and ASEAN have to seriously engage in cooperative ventures to add substance their 'dialogue partnership' by moving beyond their pious declarations or else it will remain a mere 'dialogue' devoid of any meaningful 'partnership'. The period ahead offers several opportunities to fulfill common aspirations. It will require a willingness to break out of mindsets of the past in order to see the vast opportunities available for achieving peace and development for the peoples of India and the ASEAN region.