India, Asean Focus on Freedom of Navigation in South China Sea

Improving physical, economic, social, digital, financial & maritime connectivity top priority: PM

DipanjanRoy.Chaudhury@timesgroup.com

New Delhi:

India and the Asean states on Thursday discussed the prevailing situation in the South China Sea and affirmed the necessity of freedom of navigation amid Beijing’s aggressive posturing in the vital sea lane.

The discussions at the 17th Asean-India summit held virtually covered regional and international issues of common interest and concern, including South China Sea and terrorism, officials said. Both sides noted the importance of promoting a rules-based order in the region, especially UNCLOS, officials said.

Earlier, in his opening address PM Narendra Modi said connectivity initiatives would contribute to the Indo-Pacific visions of both sides.

"India and Asean’s strategic partnership is based on our shared rich historical, geographical and cultural heritage. Asean is the nodal centre of our ‘act east policy’ since the very beginning. There is ample closeness between India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and Asean’s Outlook on Indo Pacific. We firmly believe that a cohesive and responsive Asean is essential for security and growth for all in the region," Modi said.

Speeding up physical, economic, social, digital, financial and maritime connectivity initiatives was the top priority, Modi said. "We have come very close in all these areas in the last few years. I believe that today’s interaction, even if it is happening via virtual medium, will be advantageous in further reducing our differences."

The foreign ministry had on Wednesday said that the summit would review the status of Asean-India strategic partnership and look at the progress in key sectors such as maritime cooperation, connectivity, trade and commerce, capacity building and education. India recognises connectivity in its broadest sense as the key, officials said.