GEOPOLITICS

MODI GOES TO MANILA: TRADE, MYANMAR AND AN UNCONFIRMED QUAD

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 14 November 2026*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi leaves for Manila on Monday, 16 November. Rudrendra Tandon, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, announced the trip at a briefing in New Delhi on Thursday. "Prime Minister Modi will be travelling to Manila, in the Philippines, to attend the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit and the 21st meeting of the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit process," he said, according to ANI. "The visit will take place from the 16th to the 18th of this month."

The programme begins with a dinner hosted by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The two summits follow the next day, and Tandon said bilateral meetings with other leaders would be fitted in between. The Philippines chairs ASEAN this year, which is why the meetings are in Manila. Tandon also said there is "a very strong demand from the Indian community to meet the Prime Minister", according to IANS.

One item on the schedule is still not official. ThePrint reported, citing sources, that a Quad leaders' summit is likely on 17 November. India has not confirmed it. Tandon said no confirmed schedule was available, according to StratNews Global. On the American side, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was more direct on 31 October, on the sidelines of a G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Atlanta. "We will have a Quad leaders' meeting in Manila," he said, as reported by The Philippine Star.

A Quad meeting in someone else's capital

If the meeting happens, it will be the first leaders' level Quad summit in two years. The last one was in September 2024. ThePrint also reported a detail that I find telling: the summit in Manila would be hosted by the United States, even though India is the current chair of the grouping.

A meeting held on the margins of ASEAN, hosted by Washington in a third country, looks to me like a practical fix after a long gap, and I read it as better than no meeting at all. It also suggests to me that the Quad is now being run around the American president's travel calendar. ThePrint added that an official bilateral meeting between Modi and President Donald Trump is unlikely.

For Bharat, in my view, the value of the Quad has always been at sea: shared awareness of what moves in the Indo-Pacific, and partners who agree that sea lanes must stay open. Tandon restated India's position that the South China Sea must remain open to international trade and commerce, StratNews Global reported. Nikkei Asia's preview of the Manila summits described ASEAN as hopeful on digital and energy frameworks but less so on the South China Sea. Whatever the Quad says in Manila, the leaders of Southeast Asia will be in the same city to hear it.

The trade problem India brings to Manila

I expect the Quad to get the headlines, but I think the ASEAN-India Summit matters more to Indian businesses, because of one number.

"Our trade is (worth) approximately $122 billion," Tandon said, according to ThePrint. The same report sets out the other side of that figure. Since the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) came into force, India's trade deficit with the ten-member grouping has grown from $7.5 billion in 2011 to $44 billion in 2023. India and ASEAN have been reviewing the agreement since 2020, and the review is not finished.

Tandon was candid about the pace. He described the review as complex, and ThePrint quoted him saying that completing it depends on "developing a consensus" among the members. He also said: "At a bilateral level, we are holding discussions on trade facilitation." ThePrint reported that India wants better market access in countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia. According to StratNews Global, new areas of cooperation include digital public infrastructure, telecommunications, digital payments and electricity grid integration.

In my view, this is where New Delhi should spend its time in Manila. A deficit that has grown about six times over is hard to call balanced. Digital public infrastructure and digital payments are already on the list of new areas, and I think that gives our negotiators something to offer in return for access for Indian goods. The bilateral route Tandon described may move faster than a review that needs all ten members to agree.

Myanmar: India's case for engagement

The sharpest words at the briefing were about Myanmar. "Isolating Myanmar is not the right approach, because if we do, someone else will fill that vacuum," Tandon said, according to ThePrint. "There is no alternative to engagement." He added: "We strongly support ASEAN engagement with Myanmar."

I think this is the right position for India. Myanmar is our neighbour, and in my reading a Myanmar cut off by the region would lean further on China. That is the vacuum Tandon seemed to have in mind. ThePrint noted that Min Aung Hlaing, the former armed forces chief whom it describes as Myanmar's newly elected President, visited New Delhi earlier this year.

Myanmar's place in ASEAN is still unsettled. According to StratNews Global, Myanmar was next in line to take the ASEAN chair after Malaysia under the alphabetical rotation, but did not take over in 2026. The Philippines holds the chair instead.

What to watch next

The first thing to watch is whether the Quad summit is confirmed, and whether its statement says anything concrete on maritime cooperation beyond the usual language. The second is the ASEAN-India Summit outcome: any date for finishing the AITIGA review, or any bilateral trade facilitation steps with individual members. The third is Myanmar, and whether ASEAN's final documents move closer to India's view that engagement works better than isolation.

Sources

- ThePrint: Modi to visit Philippines next week to attend ASEAN-India summit, Quad leaders' meet also likely
- The Tribune (ANI): PM Modi to attend 49th ASEAN-India and East Asia Summits in Manila from Nov 16 to 18
- The Hans India (IANS): PM Modi to visit Philippines next week for ASEAN-India Summit
- StratNews Global: Quad, ASEAN, Myanmar Shape Modi's Manila Visit
- The Philippine Star: Philippines to host Quad leaders' summit during ASEAN meet
- Nikkei Asia: ASEAN, Quad leaders meet at Manila summits: 5 things to watch



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