



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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INDIA- ASEAN RELATIONS

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Introduction:

Rooted in shared civilizational heritage yet shaped by modern strategic imperatives, this partnership has emerged as a key pillar of **India's Act East Policy and ASEAN's vision of an open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific**. In recent years, a surge of collaborative initiatives has sought to convert these historical bonds into actionable frameworks for trade, security, connectivity, and people-to-people contact—signalling that the relationship is not just about shared pasts, but about co-creating the future.

Historical context

Ancient & Pre-Colonial Civilizational Links

1.Cultural and religious influence:

From 1st century CE onwards, Indian traders, scholars, and monks travelled to Southeast Asia, spreading Hinduism, Buddhism, Sanskrit language, art, and architecture.

Trade routes:

2Indian Ocean maritime routes connected Tamil kingdoms, Bengal, and Gujarat ports with Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Khmer empires.

Colonial Era (16th–20th Century)

1.European colonial powers (British, Dutch, French) disrupted direct Indo–Southeast Asian trade.

2.Parts of Southeast Asia and India came under common colonial administration:

3.British India administered Burma (till 1937), the Andaman–Nicobar islands were used for Southeast Asian trade control.

4.Indian diaspora migrated to Southeast Asia as labourers, traders, and professionals (notably in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore).

Post-Independence & Cold War (1947–1991)

1.Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): India and some ASEAN founding members (e.g., Indonesia) shared anti-colonial and neutralist positions.

2.ASEAN formation (1967):

IMembers viewed India's socialist-leaning, USSR-friendly policies with caution.

IIIndia initially prioritized relations with socialist countries and immediate neighbourhood.

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Limited engagement: Political differences, India's inward-looking economic policies, and Cold War blocs reduced deep cooperation.

Post–Cold War Re-engagement (1991–2001)

Economic liberalization (1991) prompted India to adopt the “Look East Policy” under PM P.V. Narasimha Rao.

India became ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner (1992) and Full Dialogue Partner (1996).

Greater economic, cultural, and security engagement, with focus on trade and connectivity.

Strategic & Comprehensive Partnership Era (2001–Present)

2002 – India joined ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

2012 – India–ASEAN Commemorative Summit upgraded ties to Strategic Partnership.

2014 onwards – “Look East” transformed into “Act East Policy” under PM Narendra Modi, emphasising connectivity, maritime security, and people-to-people ties.

2022 – 30th anniversary of dialogue relations & 10th anniversary of Strategic Partnership; both sides agreed on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Areas of cooperation :

Trade & Economic Integration

-ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) in goods (2010) and services (2015).

-2023–24: Bilateral trade crossed US\$ 131 billion, making ASEAN India's second-largest trading partner after the EU.

-Negotiations underway to review AIFTA for more balanced market access.

Connectivity (Physical, Digital, and Maritime)

-India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway project; extension planned to Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam.

-Digital partnerships under India–ASEAN Digital Work Plan 2025 to enhance e-commerce and cybersecurity cooperation.

Maritime Security & Freedom of Navigation

-Joint naval exercises like SIMBEX (with Singapore) and AIME 2023 (ASEAN–India Maritime Exercise) in the South China Sea.

-Cooperation against piracy, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR).

Defence Cooperation

-Defence Ministers' Meetings and ADMM-Plus participation.

-Joint training of armed forces and capacity building; 2024 saw enhanced military medical cooperation in disaster zones.

Tourism & Cultural Exchange

-ASEAN–India Cultural Exchange Year 2023 with events highlighting shared heritage like Ramayana festivals.

-Promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage circuits linking Bodh Gaya (India) with Southeast Asian heritage sites.

Education & Skill Development

-ASEAN–India Network of Universities (AINU) launched for academic collaboration.

-Scholarships for ASEAN students under ICCR programs; India’s IITs and IIMs attracting more Southeast Asian students.

Space & Technology Cooperation

-ISRO offering satellite data and navigation services (NavIC) for disaster management in ASEAN.

-2024: Collaboration with Vietnam on remote sensing applications for agriculture and flood monitoring.

Climate Change & Environment

-Joint projects on blue economy and mangrove restoration in the Sundarbans–Mekong Delta regions.

-India–ASEAN Renewable Energy Cooperation Initiative focusing on solar and biofuel technology transfer.

Areas of differences between India and ASEAN :

1.Trade Imbalance & FTA Concerns

India faces a persistent trade deficit with ASEAN and seeks revisions to the ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement due to tariff asymmetry and non-tariff barriers.

2.Withdrawal from RCEP

India’s decision to exit the RCEP deal in 2019, while ASEAN participated, has reduced its economic integration and influence in regional trade dynamics.

3.Slow Implementation of Connectivity Projects

Infrastructure initiatives like the **India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Project** have suffered delays due to security issues and bureaucratic hurdles.

4.Divergent Indo-Pacific Strategies

While India advocates for a free, rules-based Indo-Pacific, ASEAN remains wary and divided; some members prioritize neutrality over aligning with India’s stance.

Example: Vietnam and the Philippines back India, but Cambodia opts for neutrality.

5.Varying Stances on South China Sea Disputes

India takes a firm position supporting freedom of navigation and UNCLOS, while ASEAN's responses remain inconsistent due to internal divisions and differing relations with China.

6. Insufficient Security Coordination

Although joint exercises occur (e.g., AIME, ADMM-Plus), ASEAN's dependence on China and reluctance to confront it directly limit deeper defense integration with India.

Initiatives to strengthen ties :

nNew ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2026–2030)

At the July 2025 Foreign Ministers' meeting, India and ASEAN adopted a forward-looking roadmap—including commitments on digital cooperation, disaster preparedness, defense and maritime security, economic integration via AITIGA review, and health collaboration.

nBay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

Bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia: BIMSTEC fosters collaboration between SAARC and ASEAN nations, enhancing intra-regional connectivity and cooperation across South and Southeast Asia.

nReview of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA)

Responding to India's concerns over trade imbalances, both sides have recommitted (July 2025) to modernizing and making the FTA more equitable and trade-efficient.

n10-Point Plan Launched at 21st ASEAN-India Summit (2024)

Prime Minister Modi unveiled a comprehensive 10-point agenda aimed at enhancing connectivity, economy, culture, and resilience. This includes declaring 2025 as the ASEAN-India Year of Tourism (with ₹5 million funding), hosting people-centric events (Youth Summit, Start-up Festival, Music Festival), doubling scholarships at Nalanda University, women scientists' conclave, cyber dialogues, green hydrogen workshops, disaster and health resilience, and a climate campaign "Plant a Tree for Mother."

nDefense and Digital Cooperation with Indonesia

During President Prabowo's visit to New Delhi (January 2025), several MoUs were signed—spanning defense production, maritime and cyber security, digital technology, and health sectors.

Conclusion

The recent flurry of initiatives—from high-level strategic partnerships and defense cooperation to cultural diplomacy and humanitarian assistance—reflects India's clear intent to move from a transactional engagement with ASEAN to a comprehensive and future-oriented partnership. These efforts are firmly anchored in the Act East Policy and the shared vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. However, sustained success will depend on timely execution of connectivity projects, balanced trade reforms, and maintaining strategic convergence amid ASEAN's internal diversity. If implemented effectively, these initiatives can transform India-ASEAN relations into a cornerstone of regional stability, prosperity, and cultural solidarity.